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## The Intensity of the Moment in Hardy's Poems

Miho Nishimura

Critics have already discussed outstanding aspects of Hardy's poems: his regretful feeling for the life with his wife, Emma; his concepts of God, Time, Nature, and so on; his technical merits — simplicity of his language and style which constitutes Hardy's strength in elegiac power<sup>1)</sup> for example. They are important elements which are interwoven into the texture of his poems and support them, and when we consider the source of the poems' attraction, the moving power in his poems, the above aspects need to be more examined; or however far the examination proceeded, they might remain something skimmed from the text. For it is neither his sentiment nor his thought itself but their subtleness and depth represented by simple language that captures our mind.

In his many poems, Hardy depicts the various moments of the past and the present, as other poets do; but so far as I can tell, no other poet makes us realize the significance of the moment more keenly than he. In this thesis, therefore, examining the way in which the moment is treated by the poet in his poems, I hope to illuminate his sensibility for the moment and the aesthetic aspect of his poems.

It is said that "At Castle Boterel" 'presents Hardy's memory in March, 1913, of an event that took place there' and "Castle Boterel" is 'Hardy's name for Boscastle, a small town on the Cornish coast a mile or more from St. Juliot Rectory.'<sup>2)</sup> In "At Castle Boterel", the speaker describes

his revisiting a place that is important to his early romance.

As I drive to the junction of lane and highway,  
 And the drizzle bedrenches the waggonette,  
 I look behind at the fading byway,  
 And see on its slope, now glistening wet,  
 Distinctly yet

Myself and girlish form benighted  
 In dry March weather.<sup>3)</sup>

Hardy properly uses the words which have double-meanings: though the speaker literally looks 'behind at the fading byway' as he departs the place, he looks back to 'a past which fades as his distance in time from it increases'.<sup>4)</sup> The motivation by which he has a vision is poetic in itself. For the speaker, his action itself is the metaphor which makes him associate with its figurative meaning; this is what Paul Zietlow means by the statement that 'the actual, concrete situation presented in the poem is an image of his [Hardy's] spiritual condition'.<sup>5)</sup> The physical distance merges into the mental one; the actual situation does into the spiritual one. The road by which the speaker has passed and will pass symbolizes the path of his life. The phrase 'distinctly yet' is also important because it emphasizes the vividness of his vision and helps the poet to create a tremendous sense of presence.

As for the third stanza, Zietlow offers a partly interesting interpretation.

"What we did as we climbed, and what we talked of /  
 Matters not much, nor to what it led." What matters is  
 the actuality of the experience. Although it lasted only  
 a minute, it was:

Something that life will not be balked of  
 Without rude reason till hope is dead,  
 And feeling fled.

With “rude reason,” in other words, life can be “balked of” the significant moment. Uninformed rational perception would regard it as a commonplace event in the transitory lives of two ordinary people. But for a memory informed with hope and feeling, the moment cannot be denied.<sup>6)</sup>

He seems to think that ‘Something’ suggests the significant moment ‘I’ and the girl spent when they climbed the road. Besides, judging from his mentioning ‘a memory’ it can be easily guessed that he regards ‘life’ as the speaker’s, in spite of that the lines are written as a general statement. If we take it into consideration that ‘life will not be balked of / Without rude reason till hope is dead, / And feeling fled’ is such a statement as can be applied to everyone, isn’t it more natural to take ‘Something’ for the moment of exaltation or of excitement? “What we did as we climbed, and what we talked of / Matters not much” because they are factual things. What matters is how we thought, and how we felt — the quality of the experience, the exaltation of that, rather than ‘the actuality of the experience’.

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

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

For the speaker, though the moment he cannot forget ‘filled but a moment’, it was a time of high quality. The phrase ‘A time of such quality’ makes us remember that time has a

quality. Time, however, is not originally endowed with the quality, which is created by men who spend the moment, though they are under Time's control and are 'the transitory in Earth's long order'. Time makes them wither and decay; in fact, its 'unflinching rigour, / in mindless rote, has ruled from sight / The substance' of the girl. The speaker is not an exception: he is old; he 'looks back at' her phantom figure 'amid the rain for the very last time', which is because he knows that the 'sand' of his life is sinking and he 'shall traverse old love's domain / Never again'. Thus fully realizing Time's control, the speaker does not feel hopeless at all in the poem. He cannot see the girl's substance in the world, but he can see on the slope 'distinctly yet' her phantom figure 'as when that night / Saw us [them] alight', or more vividly than before. The flesh cannot escape from Time's rule, but the soul can be beyond it; the latter can remain alive in someone's mind as a phantom. What the speaker sees is a vision, which he himself recognizes, but he also feels it as a reality: his vision is his private reality.<sup>7)</sup> At least while he sees the vision, he forgets the rule of Time which he himself is subject to.

It is not only the flesh but a place and time itself that does not remain the same. The place to which the speaker refers does not present the same scenery as he saw with the girl, but it can remain the same in his vision. That is true of Time, too.

Actually, the waggonette which he gets on is moving on and Time is going by, but while he sees the vision, the poem gives us an impression as if the actual time in the poem stopped by the tense used properly. Though time is passing away both when the poet writes the poem and we read it, we can guess that writing the poem, he felt as if time had stopped as we feel it reading the poem. The speaker of the

poem, the poet, and we, readers can go beyond the rule of Time at least for a moment during plunging into each vision. But we know that we cannot escape from Time's control. The more we realize it, the more we want to hold the profoundness of the moment. In "At Castle Boterel", what most appeals to sensitive readers is among others the intensity of the moment. The moment when the speaker looks behind and sees the girl's phantom on the slope, that moment he remembered, and the very moment when he looks back at the shrinking phantom, feeling his own sinking sand — they take on a kind of intensity and profoundness; each moment conveys us nostalgic sweetness, high satisfaction, and pathos, respectively. It is by the intensity of the moment and the pathos of our mortality that each momentary beauty in both the vision and the poem itself is strengthened.

"At Castle Boterel" and "The Phantom Horsewoman" resemble each other in their contents: The man who 'withers daily' sees 'a phantom of his own figuring'. To take Hardy's biographical facts into consideration, we may identify the man who sees a vision with Hardy and the phantom with his wife, Emma. If it is permitted to identify the speaker in "At Castle Boterel" with 'a man I know' in "The Phantom Horsewoman", it can be said that the latter is another version of the former; it may represent the same man in his ordinary life. The outstanding difference between the two poems lies in their speakers. In "At Castle Boterel", the speaker is the old man who sees a vision, himself, but in "The Phantom Horsewoman", the speaker is 'I', who observes the man. In the latter, the old man is depicted objectively:

Queer are the ways of a man I know:

He comes and stands

In a careworn craze,

And looks at the sands  
 And the seaward haze  
 With moveless hands  
 And face and gaze,  
 Then turns to go . . .

And what does he see when he gazes so?

Another difference is that in "At Castle Boterel" the moment is deepened, but in "The Phantom Horsewoman" it 'is extended without being deepened'<sup>8)</sup>. A man 'I know' sees a phantom 'as an instant thing' not in a particular place but 'everywhere in his brain — day, night, . . . far from that shore/ Does he carry this vision of heretofore:/A ghost-girl-rider.' The moment he recollects is originally associated with a particular place, but seeing the vision everywhere, at any time, he gives it an extension of space and time.

As far as the moment is concerned, as previously stated, no other poems can make us realize the significance of the moment with such a strong impact than Hardy's poems. In some poems he often depicts the way in which the speaker regrets wasting the past moment without recognizing that it will never come back again. "We Sat At The Window" and "The Self-Unseeing" are representative of such poems.

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

("The Self-Unseeing", 11. 9-12)

We were irked by the scene, by our own selves; yes,  
 For I did not know, nor did she infer  
 How much there was to read and guess  
 By her in me, and to see and crown  
 By me in her.  
 Wasted were two souls in their prime,

And great was the waste, that July time  
When the rain came down.

(“We Sat At The Window”, 11. 9-16)

A suspicious reader would think that the speaker only glorifies the past which was not always ‘glowed with a gleam’. Actually, for the people in the poems who were young and in their prime, the moment to which the speaker refers was not ‘glowed with a gleam’. But the poet himself recognizes it. The speaker in “The Self-Unseeing” is not a child now; he gets aware of the happiness of the past moment to which he and his family had been blind only after he lost it. The speaker in “We Sat At The Window” is already past his prime; he realizes that there was much to read and guess ‘By her in me, and to see and crown / By me in her’, and that they wasted their ‘souls in their prime’ and ‘great was the waste’ only after he knew that they cannot resume their relationship. The poet does not have any suspicion that he glorifies the past; he has no doubt of his idea; he is confident of the truth of his statements. This confidence gives his statements a ring of truth, which appeals to our heart with a strong impact.

We can feel lyrics most beautiful when we see them fully represent the poet’s subtle feeling evoked by a certain moment in the restricted form of poetry. In our actual life, time flows on; objectively seen, reality, which is the continuance of the moment and is fragmentary, is a chaos. But the moment, which we tend to neglect and we can hardly hold, has beauty of momentariness. Art is wonderful partly because it can turn the momentary beauty into the perpetual one. It is difficult for us to distinguish reality from vision or illusion. As we take the same movie in different ways, we grasp the phenomena of our ordinary lives in our own ways.



The reality for one might be the illusion for another. The present moment, which seems to be reality, might become illusion the next moment. The moment Hardy represents in the above lyrics shows such mysterious aspects of it.

The intensity and profoundness of the moment suggested by his poems is not offered by Life, but should be acquired by our effort: each moment can be meaningful only if we appreciate the happiness and preciousness of the moment. In our actual lives, we cannot stop the stream of time, but if we want to, we can stop it only in our spiritual lives. The man who sees a vision lives in the past moment; while seeing it, the actual time stops. It is true of Hardy and his readers. For he creates a kind of vision, by writing a poem; while reading it, his readers live in the vision. Therefore, the quality of the moment is the immediate theme for all of the characters, the poet, and the reader. The immediacy of the theme gives us the sense of oneness.

Through the above poems, we have seen the profoundness of the moment and the way in which the poet suggests it. Both his language and style are simple; the sentiments they represent are subtle; but the poems have an irresistible fascination, which owes to the immediacy and the profoundness both of the theme and the poet's sentiments in the poems. Furthermore, this profoundness of the poems are supported by the poet's confidence of the statements: giving his poems a ring of truth, Hardy further intensifies the impression they leave upon the readers.

## Notes

- 1) Douglas Brown appreciates simplicity in Hardy's style, stating that it 'constitutes Hardy's strength in elegiac poetry, and compensates for apparent deficiencies in skill, . . . ' in 'Hardy's Elegiac Power' in *Thomas Hardy* quoted in A. E. Dyson *Thomas Hardy: Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 162.
- 2) J. O. Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary* (Chapel Hill: The university of North Carolina Press, 1970).
- 3) All quotations from Hardy's poems are from *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1960).
- 4) Paul Zietlow, *Moments Of Vision* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 188.
- 5) Zietlow, p. 187.
- 6) *ibid.*, p. 188.
- 7) Zietlow also states that the vision of the speaker whom he identifies with Hardy himself is real; in his words the vision is 'the partial reincarnation of a magical moment blending hope, feeling, love, and physical actuality.' p. 189.
- 8) Brown, p. 163.