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History in Layers

The Sense of the Past in Thomas Hardy's Poetry

Keiko Harada

Thomas Hardy's awareness of the past is dominated by the poet's extraordinary powers of perception. What is merely seen visually is not the same as what is perceived in Hardy's mind. In 1865, Hardy remarked that 'the poetry of a scene varies with the minds of the perceivers. Indeed, it does not lie in the scene at all'.¹⁾ This sceptical attitude towards what is around him forms a coherent characteristic in Hardy's poetry throughout his career. Thirty years later, Hardy was still preoccupied with the same idea, for in *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, we find him saying again.

... I don't want to see landscape, *i.e.*, scenic paintings as optical effects, that is. I want to see the deeper reality underlying the scenic, the expression of what are sometimes called abstract imagings.²⁾

The 'deeper reality' Hardy sees in the landscape and scenes around him is formed by the images from the past, which are only visible to the mind endowed with a power of perceiving. In "The House of Silence", Hardy fully explains what it means to have a penetrating mind. The setting of the poem is Max Gate where Hardy lived from 1885 until he died in 1928. Hardy describes the house from outside in the voices of two men, one of whom is apparently Hardy himself. Looking through trees Hardy had planted around the house, the two men discuss what they see in the house. One of them says that

'That is a quiet place —
That house in the trees with the shady lawn'.

But the other man, Hardy, sees it differently:

'— If, child, you knew what there goes on
You would not call it a quiet place.
Why, a phantom abides there, the last of its race,
And a brain spins there till dawn.'

The first man, who cannot see anything, continues:

‘But I see nobody there, —
Nobody moves about the green,
Or wanders the heavy trees between.’

Hardy tells him why he cannot see:

‘Ah, that’s because you do not bear
The visioning powers of souls who dare
To pierce the material screen.

Hardy, who is given a special visual power to pierce the ‘material screen’, sees the past images of the inhabitants still lingering in the house. With penetrating perceiving eyes, what Hardy captures in his surroundings is what is preserved from time: the true, deeper reality transcending temporality. The awareness that there is an eternal realm behind the ‘material screen’ of reality enables Hardy to give life to everything around him. Seen through Hardy’s eyes, things become animated, ceasing to be merely material objects; they are given a historical meaning.

Hillis Miller, in his examination of Hardy’s sense of the past, has remarked that Hardy’s fascination with the past is ‘not an antiquarian interest in its mysterious distance, but rather a recognition of its proximity and tangible presence’.³⁾ To see the past still hovering in the present is not the result of mere nostalgia Hardy has been often claimed for. It presupposes a fuller, deeper understanding of the present moment of change and transformation. By perceiving the past to be still tangible, Hardy succeeded in diminishing the absolute, inimical, exterminating power of Time and in representing to us an eternal vision of human history and personal memory. In this essay, I will examine how Hardy uses his powers of imaginative insight to clarify and order his view of the process of human history.

At the turn of the century, the new awareness of the vastness of the universe and the real age of the earth — the age of the earth which had ‘oscillated from the cramped temporal estimates of biblical chronology to the almost unlimited time scale of Lyell, down to Kelvin’s meager twenty million years, and then back up to hundreds of millions of years’⁴⁾ — upset

all the traditional concepts and ways of perceiving to a great extent. "In Vision I Roamed", for instance, shows how Hardy's poetic imagination was influenced by the scientific knowledge of the time.

In the poem, the narrator has been lamenting the cruel distance which separates him from his lover, but when he suddenly thinks of the incredible distance between the earth and the other planets, the narrator feels comfortable with his lover only some miles away:

In vision I roamed the flashing Firmanent,
So fierce in blazon that the Night waxed wan,
As though with awe at orbs of such ostent;
And as I thought my spirit ranged on and on
In footless traverse through ghastr heights of sky,
To the last chambers of the monstrous Dome,
Where stars the brightest here are lost to the eye:
Then, any spot on our own Earth seemed Home!

And the sick grief that you were far away
Grew pleasant thankfulness that you were near,
Who might have been, set on some foreign Sphere,
Less than a Want to me, as day by day
I lived unaware, uncaring all that lay
Locked in that Universe taciturn and drear.

The distance between the speaker and his lover, which caused such grief, is now observed to be a trifle compared with the vastness of the 'monstrous Dome'. The fear and awe of what is unknown, the 'Universe taciturn and drear,' contrasts sharply with the warm feeling of togetherness of the people living on earth. The 'sick grief' becomes 'pleasant thankfulness', as the distance between the narrator and his lover shrinks to infinitesimal shortness.

As space is relatively perceived, so is time. The far distance of the historical past which seems dead and irretrievable suddenly looks familiar and tangible if observed from a different point of view. The mathematical distance between the past and the present is unchangeable, but emotionally one can feel the past very close to the present moment. 'The past of the geologists' seemed to 'rush away from the present' because of the elon-

gated age of the earth's history, but on the other hand, 'the past of human experience seemed to rush toward the present.'⁵⁾

"An Inquiry" exemplifies Hardy's characteristic way of dealing with time to show us that the length of time is not absolutely fixed, but is dependent on human imagination. The poem consists of a dialogue between 'I' and 'It', the speaker of the poem and the Immanent Will, on the theme of death. Answering the question why 'It' 'crowned' Death the 'King of Firmanent', 'It' says that 'It' will think of the question

'... as I go
Across the Universe,
And bear me back in a moment or so
And say, for better or worse.'

'Many years later', 'It' comes back again and says 'that matter an instant back which brought you pain ...' In the concept of 'It', 'many years' is felt only to be 'an instant', while to the narrator, it is 'many years' of his short life.

Observed from a distance, the length of human history seems only a single unit of time in which the past, the present and the future and fused into one. The present moment ceases to be merely a point of transition, and becomes enriched with the vision of the past and the future. The distance between the past and the present becomes shortened just like a telescope being closed. This is well described in "The Clapsed Skeletons".

The poem portrays the skeletons which were found in the neighborhood of Max Gate, Hardy's residential areal. Max Gate was constructed upon various relics from ancient times. Hardy and his wife often saw those past remnants being dug up from the ground when they were excavating for the building of their house. Estimating the 'clapsed skeletons' to date from 1800 B.C., Hardy starts cataloguing all the famous historical lovers, comparing them with the ancient skeletons of a man and a woman, as an emblem of Love. First comes Paris and Helen from Troy, then King David and Bathshiba from 11 B.C., and then Anthony and Cleopatra of 1 B.C., and so on. These famous, historical couples are treated as relatively recent compared with the ancient skeleton lovers, for

So long, beyond Chronology,
Lovers in death as 'twere,
So long in placid dignity
Have you lain here!

The last two stanzas, however, bring us to a new awareness of time. Hardy changes his point of view, diverting the attention of the reader to a set of fossils lying near the skeleton lovers, and says that 'once' there was a time when the fossils 'breathed' the same 'atmosphere' and 'met the gleam / Of day' as the skeletons did. What is more, the life-span and career of the fossils are 'so far earlier' than that of the skeleton lovers that, Hardy fancies at the end of the poem, the fossils might 'style' the skeletons coming there 'of yestertide'.

As Hardy puts it in the poem, time's length is just a dream. The length of time during which the skeleton lovers had been lying together, once surpassed everything. But it is nothing but a trifle when it is observed in a wider perspective of time. The distant past which was symbolised by the clasped skeletons, and which seemed out of reach, has become suddenly familiar and tangible in the present moment. It is not the past any more. It is a part of the elongated present, still animated in the light of the present moment.

Telescoping the past and the present time into one spatial concept, Hardy also reveals to us the unbearable truth that the 'placid dignity' the skeleton lovers seemed to have obtained is turned out to be nothing. The belittlement of human dignity is a negative consequence of the grand view of geological time, which forms one of the regular motifs of Hardy's novels. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, for example, Hardy uses the same visual image of the past and the present juxtaposed in one space in order to capture the length of human history as only a fraction of geological time.

In one of the crucial scenes in the novel, Henry Knight, a scholar who takes Elfride Swancourt away from his close friend Stephen Smith, experiences a sudden revelation of the value of human existence. When Henry Knight falls off from a dangerous cliff and is left suspended at the edge, clutching 'the face of the escarpment' and waiting for Elfride to come back and rescue him, he loses himself in a momentary investigation of the

surface of the cliff.

Knight, a 'fair geologist' in the novel, notices a fossil imbedded in the rock. Although 'separated by millions of years in their lives', Knight becomes aware that he is only one of the fossils sharing the same destiny of life and death. He has to realise that the 'dignity of man' means nothing and that he 'was to be with the small in his death'.

In Knight's meditation, time 'closes up like a fan', and he sees a panoramic view of the earth's history: 'he saw himself at one extremity of the years, face to face with the beginning and all the intermediate centuries simultaneously'. Knight sees 'fierce men' from ancient times and behind them an 'earlier band', 'huge elephantine forms, the mastodon', 'the hippopotamus', 'the tapir', 'antelopes of monstrous size', and other ancient animals 'in juxtaposition'. Knight furthermore observes, in 'the further back' 'overlapped' by these creatures, 'the perched huge-billed birds', 'the sinister crocodilian outlines', 'dragon forms', 'clouds of flying reptiles'. Still underneath those, Knight could trace 'fishy beings of lower development'. Hardy concludes his list of animals with a new realisation that 'the lifetime scenes of the fossil confronting him [Knight] were a present and modern condition of things'.⁶⁾

The formerly acknowledged length of the time the fossil has survived is now diminished by the more powerful, dynamic overview of the geological past of the earth. At the same time, the present moment ceases to be an ungraspable point of change and decay, and is given an eternal substance of historical meanings. The present scene has come to assume more importance than a private story of Knight and Elfride. The past and the present are fused into one to reveal the endless repetition of life and death in the geological history of the earth.

In "Rome: On the Palatine", Hardy also deals with the tangibility of the past in the present moment. The poem is based on a real experience of the poet on his visit to Rome with his first wife, Emma. The first stanza of the poem portrays Hardy and Emma visiting several famous places with a Baedeker in their hands:

We walked where Victor Jove was shrined awhile,
And passed to Livia's rich red mural show,

Whence, thridding cave and Criptoportico,
We gained Caligula's dissolving pile.

What Hardy feels here is the sense of an unbridgeable gap between the glorious past of Rome and the present condition of the ruins. What is past is past and never can be regained, as is made explicit in the next stanza:

And each ranked ruin tended to beguile
The outer sense, and shape itself as though
It wore its marble gleams, its pristine glow
Of scenic frieze and pompous peristyle.

Time is only a destroyer. But in the last two stanzas, a different concept of time is introduced. Hardy's imagination is provoked by a piece of music he hears and it leads him to the new awareness of the fact that the length of time is just an illusion:

When lo, swift hands, on strings nigh overhead,
Began to melodize a waltz by Strauss:
It stirred me as I stood, in Caesar's house,
Raised the old routs Imperial lyres had led,

And blended pulsing life with lives long done,
Till Time seemed fiction, Past and Present one.

The gap between the Roman era and the nineteenth-century is completely dissolved. The Roman era, which had been only observed through a guide book as a historical fact, has now assumed immediacy and familiarity. It is not a 'ruin' any more. It comes to be alive in the poet's eyes.

Hardy's present, therefore, is always haunted by images of the past. In "After the Fair", we can see how Hardy was conscious of the past times lurking even in a commonest event like a festival. Hardy, in the poem, treats a fair as not only meant for the people living in the present, but also for the dead. Just like Henry Knight dreamt of ancient animals appearing one after another, as if reflected in magic mirrors, Hardy sees layers of dead people casting shadows upon the living:

And midnight clears High Street of all but the ghosts
Of its buried burghees,
From the latest far back to those old Roman hosts

Whose remains one yet sees,
Who loved, laughed, and fought, hailed their friends,
drank their toasts
At their meeting-times here, just as these!

The people who came to the fair today are individually different from the ones who enjoyed themselves at a fair long ago, but if looked at from a distance, life seems to be repeating itself again and again without digressions. The present scene of the festival is doubled with the past ones, assuming depth and historical meaning.

What is characteristic in Hardy's sense of history is that Hardy imagines a 'spatial realm' in which all times have been accumulated for years. As Hillis Miller has remarked

Once an event has happened, it not only can never be undone but enters a spacious realm containing all times where it goes on happening over and over again forever.⁷⁾

By telescoping the past and the present, Hardy has come to achieve a deeper realisation of the historical meaning of human activities. In "Embarcation", for example, Hardy points out three different fightings which have taken place in Southampton Docks. In 1899, Hardy visited the place where 'Vespasian's legions struck the sands' in A.D. 43 and 44, and 'Cerdid with his Saxons entered in' in A.D. 495 and 'Henry's army leapt afloat to win' in A.D. 520. In the poem, Hardy portrays the human follies of fighting with each other as something never mended even over years of experience. 'Wives, sisters' still wave their 'white hands' and smile 'as if they knew not that they weep the while' even today.

"Channel Firing" is a comic fantasy, also dealing with the awareness that the present is just one of the layers of time which have been accumulated to form history. The poem was written three months before World War I started in Europe. Hardy imagines dead people being woken up on hearing guns roaring across the channel where the British army were practicing. The poem is written as a dialogue between the dead, who worry that the Last Judgement-day has at last come; and God, who was summoned to pacify them.

The dead mistake the thunderous noises of the guns for the summoning trumpets of Judgement. The dead start talking to the British army:

That night your great guns, unawares,
Shook all out coffins as we lay,
And broke the chancel window-squares,
We thought it was the Judgement-day.

And we sat upright

Then God appears and says that 'It's gunnery practice out at sea / Just as before you went below'. 'The world is as it used to be'. God points out that civilisation has become no better than at the time when those dead people were alive:

'All nations striving strong to make
Red war yet redder. Mad as hatters
They do no more for Christ's sake
Than you who are helpless in such matters.

People are still involved in killing. They cannot escape their foolish instincts yet. One of the dead wonders whether the world will ever be 'saner', and many a skeleton 'shook his head'. The world nearly repeats what has happened before. Here, the past and the present are juxtaposed again to show the undeniable connection between them.

The poem ends with the image of the sound of the guns roaring through historic places, implying the eternal patterns of civilisation, its rise and fall:

Again the guns disturbed the hour,
Roaring their readiness of avenge,
As far inland as Stourton Tower,
And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge.

These historic and prehistoric places, Stourton Tower, Camelot and Stonehenge, indicate not only the expansion of the space, but also the expansion of time, for they imply different events in history: Stourton Tower symbolises the age of Alfred the Great, Camelot means the age of King Arthur, and Stonehenge stands for prehistoric time of England. The three

different stages of time are juxtaposed in the present, and fused into one by the thundering sound of the gunnery practice.

What Hardy has achieved in his poetry is that he cultivated a sense of history, a sense that something past and influential is hidden behind the present. Hardy sensed the existence of the past not out of nostalgia, but in order to adopt the more constructive view that the past is never obliterated and still functions to determine the present. In order to grasp an overview of the structure of time, Hardy detached himself from the present suffering and pain caused by the inescapable facts of life and death, and looked at the present from quite a distance, putting it in the wider perspective of human history. Through this characteristic position, which W.H. Auden called the "hawk's vision", Hardy was able to face the time's destructive power.

According to Auden's definition, the "hawk's vision" is a way of looking at life from a very great height, ... , to see the individual life related not only to the local social life of its time, but to the whole of human history, life on the earth, the stars'. It 'gives one both humility and self-confidence':

Far from such a perspective the difference between the individual and society is so slight, since both are so insignificant, that the latter ceases to appear as a formidable god with absolute rights, but rather as an equal, subject to the same laws of growth and decay, and therefore one with whom reconciliation is possible.⁸⁾

Though Auden, here, is describing Hardy's position in observing human life such as can be found in *The Dynasts* or in the opening chapter of *The Return of the Native*, the same attitude can also be found in his poetry. With the "hawk's vision", Hardy observed time objectively, and drew a careful map of human history.

The absolute power of Time becomes diminished, if looked at from a distance. In the process of telescoping time, Hardy was successful in giving life to the past, bringing it back to the present. Donald Davie, who has claimed that Hardy was the poet with the greatest influence on 20th British poetry, analysed Hardy's sense of time and remarked that

Hardy appears to have mistrusted, and certainly leads other poets to mistrust, the claims of poetry to transcend the linear unrolling of recorded time. This is at once Hardy's strength and his limitation; and it sets him irreconcilably at odds with for instance Yeats, who exerts himself repeatedly to transcend historical time by seeing it as cyclic so as to leap above it into a realm that is visionary, mythological, and (in some sense or to some degree) *eternal*.⁹⁾

What Hardy perceived, however, is an image of an eternal realm which contains all times, the past and the present and the future in layers. Time becomes an illusion of human perception. The only reality to Hardy is the 'eternal present' where all times exist sharing the same space just like geological strata piled up in the earth. For

... , 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.¹⁰⁾

NOTES

- 1) Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1928* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 50.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- 3) Hillis Miller, "History as Repetition in Thomas Hardy's Poetry", *Victorian Poetry*, ed., Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (India, New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1980), p. 227.
- 4) Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1983), p. 38.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 6) Thomas Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, (London: Penguin Classics, 1986), pp. 271-272.
- 7) Hillis Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 247.
- 8) W.H. Auden, "A Literary Transference", *Twentieth Century Views*. (N.S. Prentice-Hall), pp. 139-140.
- 9) Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 4 [Italics author's].
- 10) Thomas Hardy, "The Absolute Explains"