

Thomas Hardy's Poetry of Transcendence

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AS the growing list of Hardy criticism testifies, his poetic achievement is at last being given the degree of attention which has for so long been accorded almost exclusively to his novels. Donald Davie's *Thomas Hardy and Modern British Poetry* (1973) recognizes Hardy as a major influence on modern English verse and more recently we have had Paul Zietlow's *Moments of Vision: The Poetry of Thomas Hardy* (1974) and Tom Paulin's *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception* (1975). Together these studies mark the beginning of a reevaluation of Hardy's poetic art which is long overdue, and in their concern with the nature of Hardy's poetic imagination and their emphasis on the qualities of compassion and hope in his poetry, Zietlow and Paulin go a long way to redress the balance in Hardy criticism. J. Hillis Miller, for instance, in *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (1970) regarded Hardy primarily as a passive poet trapped in a mechanistic universe; while Geoffrey Thurley in *The Ironic Harvest: English poetry in the twentieth century* (1974) marshalled an apparently strong case against Hardy. For him, because the existentialist's search for meaning can result only in total self-effacement, Hardy "annihilates . . . metaphysics, mythology, transcendence, rhetoric."¹ Thus, in Thurley's view, Hardy marks the degeneration of English verse from the Romantics' pursuit of transcendence and its accompanying rhetoric of the egotistical sublime and what has been lost in Hardy and subsequent poets, he concludes, is "the sense of meaningfulness associated with poetic rhetoric."²

Both Tom Paulin and Paul Zietlow take a more positive view. Although Paulin regards Hardy's imagination as

"imprisoned in a Humean universe of sense-data" he also recognises that Hardy is "somewhere between a utilitarian empiricism and a romantic idealism" and that "he would prefer [his imagination] to have a transcending freedom, though he knows this is impossible."³ And Paul Zietlow affirms that Hardy's idealistic impulse leads him to place his faith in human compassion.⁴ However, both these views of Hardy are limiting. For these critics, too, Hardy's poetry does not achieve transcendence and his optimism is restricted to fighting a rearguard action against human suffering and misery. And as far as the majority of Hardy's poetic output is concerned they are right. But in my view there is a relatively small group of poems, which includes some of Hardy's finest verse, in which his imagination does indeed achieve a transcending freedom, a liberation of the spirit and an abundant "sense of meaningfulness." In them Hardy strives to establish an authentic mode of being predicated on existence itself and on his own capacity to transcend it; but the paradox of his art, at least in those poems which I would argue lie close to the centre of his poetic genius, is that he achieves the finest articulation of his existential statement within the content of the Romantic tradition.

Hardy's achievement, unique I think in modern English poetry, is his attainment of a synthesis of profound disillusion with a vitality and joy that is almost Wordsworthian. It has often been noted that Hardy's poetry shares some features with Wordsworth; he writes in the tradition of Wordsworth's ruralism, displaying the same deep feeling for rustic society and for landscape and, indeed, his suffering, stoical peasantry, wresting significance from their narrow lives, are direct descendants of Wordsworth's Michael. But the affinity between the two poets is, in my view, deeper than this. The major concern of both poets is, in my view, deeper than this. The major concern of both poets is the relation between the human imagination and the natural world, Hardy's belief that poetry

should deal with "*the other side* of common emotions"⁵ echoes Wordsworth's concern in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* with the intensity of emotional experience and with what he called "the fluxes and refluxes of the mind."⁶ More significantly, Hardy's intention to make nature's defects the basis of his art by irradiating them with "the light that never was' on their surface, but is seen to be latent in them by the spiritual eye"⁷ recalls Wordsworth's description of the visionary process in "Tintern Abbey," where the mystical experience is what eye and ear perceive and also what they "half-create." And Hardy amplifies his insistence on the transfiguring power of the imagination:

The "simply natural" is interesting no longer. . . . The exact truth as to material fact ceases to be of importance in art — it is a student's style — the style of a period when the mind is serene and unawakened to the tragical mysteries of life; when it does not bring anything to the object that coalesces with and translates the qualities that are already there, — half hidden, it may be — and the two united are depicted as the All.⁸

What Hardy strove for, the co-operation between the dead world of fact and the imagination is, indeed, what Coleridge laments the loss of in his "Dejection Ode" when he states that if we wish to know something beyond the inanimate cold world then, "Ah, from the Soul itself must issue forth/ A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud."

Hardy frequently refers to Wordsworth and Coleridge in his prefaces to his poetry and in his personal writings and it is clear that their poetry and poetic theories were of particular significance to him, especially Coleridge's concern with the transfiguring power of the imagination. But the difference between Hardy's poetic experience and that of Coleridge is as important as the parallels. Whereas in Coleridgean terms the imagination, operating under the gentle control of the will, co-operates in a reciprocal way with an active universe in order to create a living relationship between mind and objects, for Hardy the imagination works in a somewhat different way and fulfils

an inevitably different function. Unlike Coleridge and Wordsworth, Hardy's imagination is not intuitive because, quite simply, for him there was nothing "out there" in the universe to be intuited. Moreover, in his art the function of the imagination is not, as Coleridge suggests, to bring "the whole soul of man into activity"⁹ but rather to bring it into being. Nor can it achieve the vision of some immanent ideal, but strives instead to gain some fundamental sense of meaning grasped and articulated. This is why J. Hillis Miller's suggestion that Hardy regarded the mind as little more than a puppet of the Universal Will is, in my view, too large a generalisation.¹⁰ Although in the poem, "He Wonders About Himself," Hardy admits that "Part is mine of the general Will," like Schopenhauer, his favourite philosopher, Hardy felt that there are moments when the imagination gains its freedom, "actuated by the modicum of free will conjecturally possessed by organic life when the mighty necessitating forces — unconscious or other — that have 'the balancings of the clouds,' happen to be in equilibrium, which may or may not be often."¹¹ This statement goes a long way to explain the comparative rarity of visionary poems in Hardy's large output of verse, for it is only in this state that the poet is able to create a clearer vision of the world, a state of "pure perception" in Schopenhauer's terms. More importantly, it makes plain that the imagination is liberated in conjunction with the will, not subordinated to it as in Coleridge's view, but rather it seems to co-operate with it in such a fundamental way, in the poems I propose to discuss, that they become a single creative force — which might perhaps best be described as "poetic will." Hardy's moments of transcendence are therefore very different from those of Wordsworth and Coleridge. They are not vague stirrings — "a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused," as in "Tintern Abbey" — nor an attempt to reach beyond the material world to an ideal state as in "Kubla Khan."

Instead they register the achievement of meaning; they assert the joy of being here and now and Hardy constantly seeks to establish poetic structures to capture this.

It is important to insist on the positive quality of the poems I wish to consider because J. Hillis Miller again overstates his case, it seems to me, when he argues the corollary of his remark about Hardy's passivity — that in Hardy "the act of coming to self-awareness does not lead to a recognition of the intrinsic quality of the mind [but] is a revelation about the outside world, a recognition of the mute detachment of external objects. . . ." On the contrary, Hardy's visionary poems are fundamentally a record of self-discovery and a celebration of meaning and value and this is a process in which the obstinate facts of the external world are internalised and transfigured. Indeed, the intrinsic quality of the mind is the overt subject of the title poem of *Moments of Vision*. Working in co-operation with the poetic will, which functions intermittently when the universe is in equilibrium, sometimes in the depths of night or in the moments before death, the imagination, symbolised as a "magic" mirror which is both passive and active, has the power not only to transfigure the outer world but to "[throw] our mind back on us, and our heart,/ Until we start." It penetrates the inmost recesses of consciousness "like a dart," making us "such a breast-bare spectacle see/ Of you and me. . . ."

This poem displays Hardy's profound sense of the relation between true selfhood and moral identity which is also evident in his reply to the charge of pessimism so often brought against him — that it constituted only " 'questionings' in the exploration of reality" necessary as "the first step towards the soul's betterment."¹³ His position is the opposite of, for instance, Dostoevsky's Kirilov in *The Possessed*, who cries, "If God does not exist, everything is allowed." Because, in Hardy, the poet transcends himself not towards God but towards man, the achievement of being brings not only enormous freedom but also

responsibility, both to himself and to others. Like Schopenhauer, whom he often quotes as a philosopher of hope, Hardy stresses the central importance of loving-kindness in human relations; he affirms the fundamental human values of love and fellowship. And because it thus overcomes alienation and despair, Hardy's finest poetry also embodies a sense of profound joy.

As Donald Davie has pointed out, there is no clear line of development in Hardy's work.¹⁴ His major visionary poems occur sporadically throughout his career and they do so because the unfettered operation of his poetic will was a rare accident, dependent on his sense of equilibrium in the universe. This feeling permeates "The Darkling Thrush," for instance, a poem of the highest imaginative order. Apparently a modern lament for the death of God and of Nature, the poem employs a universalised and visionary landscape to record the end of place and time — "The land's sharp features seemed to be/ The Century's corpse outleant," the frost is "spectre-gray," the clouds form a "crypt" and the wind provides a "death-lament;" even the "ancient pulse of germ and birth/ was shrunken hard and dry,/ And every spirit upon earth/ Seemed fervourless as I." This awful nullity, which is developed by the image patterns of the first two stanzas, is mirrored in the consciousness of the poet himself. The century's outleant corpse makes a parallel with the poet who "leant upon a coppice gate" the "weakening eye of day" creates a metaphor for the darkened vision of the poet, while the tangled bine-stems scoring the sky "Like strings of broken lyres" is a further image of poetic sterility. The poet stands in mute contrast to the joyous thrush, the only other inhabitant of this ghastly landscape and to the creative impulse of the bird's "full-hearted" song.

Hardy's central distinction between the poetic sterility of the man for whom the universe is dead and the thrush which experiences "Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew/ And I was unaware," appears to justify Hillis Miller's

criticism of Hardy as a detached and passive observer whose poetry displays a fundamental withdrawal from life. But this view does not do justice to the complexity of the poem. Here, as in several of his visionary poems, Hardy inhabits the world of the poem not only as a neutral spectator, but also as an active participant. This duality of experience is embodied in the structure of the poem, which creates a profound connection between the two inhabitants of its desolate world, the nihilistic poet and the optimistic thrush. Of course the thrush has a richly symbolic function; on one level its instinctive song represents the natural world's anticipation of spring and regeneration; it is also a universalised symbol of humanity; but fundamentally, "aged . . . frail, gaunt, and small," like Hardy himself, the thrush functions in the poem as its governing symbol for the continued creative activity of the poetic will, which is still at work below the level of conscious thought and which is free to operate because the temporal frame of the poem crystallises a moment of poise in the universe. Like the poet, who is both observer and agent, the thrust creates his essential self by means of an act of will; he has "*chosen* thus to fling his soul/Upon the growing gloom" (my italics) — a defiant action which images his attempt to transcend the way he has been "thrown" into the world in an existential sense. The thrush's affirmation of the sheer joy of being in the present moment and the accompanying sense of significance is given peculiar force by the poem's terrible context of non-being and by the awful irony of the poetic "persona's" inability to grasp the meaning offered. Nevertheless, its song of ecstatic optimism, an unwitting act of loving-kindness, forges a contact between itself and the poet, creating a sense of his solidarity with all living things, and because the thrush also represents the enduring connection between the poet and his creative imagination the poem is allowed to stand as a courageous celebration of the poetic will and of the

possibility for the survival of undeceived joy in a world of dissolution.

Hardy also turns to his own life in order to explore the way in which the achievement of a sense of personal value is contingent on the perfect interrelation of time and place. "The Self-Unseeing" records a moment in his boyhood when he danced in the parlour to the music of his father's violin, while his mother sat by the fireside. Such moments, Hardy stresses, must be seized and utilised because, as he bleakly admits in this poem, the opportunity frequently passes unrecognized. This particular moment was unusually propitious because, as Hardy demonstrates, it was a moment of perfect universal balance. Here time, which in Hardy is always the chief threat to the attainment of joy through self-definition, is disciplined, harmonised and humanized by music and dance. As the insistent repetition of the word "here" suggests, place is of fundamental importance in the process, not only because limited space and the present moment are the only contexts we have to create our integrity, but because for Hardy place contains both past and present and therefore has the almost magical power to suspend time. Place is concretely realised by the "ancient floor" and, paradoxically, by the images of feet walking and dancing, which frame the poem and reinforce the dominant image of stillness, of time annihilated by place. But the potential amount of transcendence is lost because the actions of the man, the woman and the child are involuntary. Listening to the music they enter a hypnotic state of euphoria, which is emphasised by the heavy alliterative effect of the final stanza. The woman muses, rapt, staring into the depths of the fire, the man plays his violin in isolated abstraction, while the child dances "in a dream." Passive and self-regarding, they are firmly linked with the "dead feet" at the opening of the poem, with time outside of place, time the destroyer which they apparently have controlled but which in truth obliterates them. That the

moment described is one of sheer escapism rather than fulfilment is evident in Hardy's indulgent description of the cosiness of the scene; the warmth of the fire, the cliché of emotion in the phrase "glowed with a gleam" and the ironic undercurrent that runs through the too emphatic "Blessings emblazoned that day." Ostensibly connected by time, manifested in music and dance, they fail to realise that what connects them fundamentally is place, the "ancient floor" on which they act and which symbolises a deeper and more sacramental relation of human lives. Visionary moments like this, if grasped, offer unparalleled opportunity for people to transcend themselves by unifying acts of love, but in denying what links them they only confirm their human isolation and as Hardy unflinchingly records, the pleasure that they have gained is won at the cost of turning their faces away from a profounder reality.

By contrast, the achievement of genuine human fellowship is presented dramatically in "At the Railway Station, Upway," a poem in which once again Hardy's strange sense of special moments of equilibrium permeating human affairs is strongly in evidence. The station is an area of stasis where time is suspended as people occupy a limbo between trains and where different lives come together and then diverge without achieving any significant connection. The three figures waiting on the platform, the innocent young boy, the police constable and the handcuffed convict, create a universalised image of the human condition, but Hardy is fundamentally concerned to suggest the possibility of its transformation. The child's instinctive pity for the convict and the contrasting complacent indifference of the worldly constable establish perspectives of irony and sympathy which by the poem's conclusion have been transmuted into a unifying mood of common human charity. The boy's spontaneous act of loving-kindness in playing his violin to cheer the criminal creates the grounds for the convict's transcendence of both the boy's

pity and the constable's indifference. His strange, apparently ironical singing about freedom is not sheer bravado, but a profound act by which he creates a sense of his own particular momentary value. Hardy employs the apt coinage "grimful glee" to describe the singular mood in which his stern assertion of will paradoxically produces a deeply felt liberating energy. What the moment reveals is the "*other side* of common emotions," the joy that lies beyond despair, the transcendence that can be achieved only through an awareness of tragic experience. What is more, the convict discovers in the same act not only an inner freedom, but a new sense of human responsibility. His song is also a kindly response to the boy's overwhelming need to feel that he has somehow helped the suffering man. And through the song the convict achieves solidarity not only with the boy, imaged in the music which they share, but also with the constable, imaged in their exchange of smiles which negates the corresponding earlier image of the cruel manacles. Subjection has been replaced by fellowship and the poem's dominant tableaux — the boy playing his violin and the handcuffed convict singing of freedom to the constable on the station platform between trains — establishes a complex and powerful symbol of the human will triumphantly wresting significance from the tragic absurdity of daily experience.

Hardy wryly defines his own sense of alienation from the modern world, with its illusory promises of purpose, action and progress, in that splendid visionary poem, "Old Furniture." It is a deeply personal poem in which Hardy, although aware that "the world has no use for one today/ Who eyes things thus — no aim pursuing!" nevertheless courageously asserts the absolute value of his own mode of vision. Indeed, the poem is organised by its many images of perception — "see," "eye may frame," "I see," "Who eyes things thus," "Creeps to my sight" — as Hardy enacts a magical resurrection. Time is brilliantly encapsulated by place and although the past is shown to be

progressively and irretrievably past, the poem bears no trace of corrupting nostalgia because the co-operation between place and the eye of vision, which both perceives and half-creates in Wordsworth's phrase, makes the pasts of all the generations simultaneously present. Hardy's juxtaposition of the living candle-flame and the cold mirror which reflects it creates a factual yet visionary image for the simultaneity of the warm hands of the past generations and the shiny, dark solidity of the furniture which they caress. Although the poem's emotion is carefully controlled by Hardy's use of homely language and by the quiet, intimate tone, there is a magical effect created by the imaginative fusion of object and vision. Insensate things come alive at the moment of vision through the co-operation between delicate images of wraithlike movement — hands "dallying", the flickering reflections of the candle-flame, the "foggy finger" moving with "tentative touches," fingers "dancing" — and the static, inert solidity of objects like the clock, "this old viol" and "that box."

For Hardy the neutral objects of the material world are given meaning as they are stamped by people's creative existence and he lovingly recreates in the vision the way people's identities have been captured in the almost sacramental "relics of householdry" around which their daily lives were built. He celebrates their love of domestic warmth (the box for tinder), punctuality and order (the finger putting the clock right) and harmony (the music of the viol), simple acts of human assertion which were once defined by place but which have been apparently obliterated from the surface of things by time. Yet the values which they won from their futile routine are available to the eye of vision and are given in the poem a permanent value outside time. Hardy's identification with the past generations stresses his profound feeling for the continuity of human life, which is evident, for instance in "Heredity" or "In Time of 'the Breaking of Nations'", but in "Old Furniture" his resurrection of the dead is funda-

mentally an act of pure loving-kindness and while it emphasises his isolation from the past as well as from the present, it creates at the same time a deeper sense of human solidarity.

Hardy's manipulation of time so that place is allowed to symbolise both past and present also has a liberating effect. It allows human actions to be redefined and revalued. As the generations live again, Hardy gives new meaning to their lives and they in turn bestow on him a surer sense of being. Hardy thus creates his own spiritual values in the face of the awful inexorability of time by a supreme act of poetic will. Indeed, the controlling image of this marvellously delicate poem is that of the poetic will at work, waxing and waning like the viol bow receding and advancing and the fact "glowing forth in fits from the dark" until inevitably it falters and, like the linden cinder, it "goes out stark." But not before there has been an achievement of knowledge, the recognition of human fellowship, the apprehension of beautiful lives, of meaning grasped, with an accompanying spiritual renewal.

Hardy's special, almost primitive sense of place is central to his visionary poems because for him place contains all time and preserves the significance of human actions, which can then be apprehended by the poet in a state of "pure perception." This awareness is the controlling force behind some of the poems which focus on the loss of his wife, Emma. In that moving poem, "At Castle Boterel," for instance, in which Hardy records his visit to a landscape he had once rambled over with Emma, he feels that the very place exudes her presence. The fact of Emma's existence transcends time because the "primaevial rocks" record "that we two passed" and it is this that gives life to the visionary phantom who remains on the slope long after they have both gone. Another of their favourite haunts, the waterfall in "After a Journey," fulfils a similar function and the revelation of Emma's continued existence gives Hardy the courage to assert that "I am

just the same as when/Our days were a joy, and our paths through flowers." The best example of this imaginative process, however, is the third poem of this series, "The Phantom Horsewoman," in which Hardy employs a similar technique to that which governs "The Darkling Thrush." He separates the poet, described from the ironic point of view of a detached observer, as a man in a "care-worn craze," from his description of the operation of the poetic will itself. As in "Old Furniture," Hardy draws attention to the uniqueness of his imaginative process by setting it apart from the modern world of scepticism and rationalism. What he presents in the first three stanzas is the conventional view of visions as simply illusions manifested to the insane in unlikely places, obsessive fantasies associated with their pasts that often root them to the spot. People like the observer speculate about the crazy man's vision as a "sweet soft scene," a "phantom of his own figuring." This description is coloured by pity because the vision is felt to be purely subjective and to bear only a limited meaning and value. And this is intensified as the stark reality of Hardy's bleak universe is captured in the dominant image of the desolate shore on which the poet stands staring at the empty waves.

But the separation which Hardy makes between the "persona" of the first three stanzas and the vision created by the poetic will in the final stanzas is his means of holding in tension the horror of the empty universe, imaged by the vacant sands and the bewildering sea mist and the achieved joy of the meaning of being there, symbolised by the moment of vision itself. The final stanzas remove the duality of the observer and the poet to allow immediacy of vision, no longer "drawn rose-bright" but hard and clear, as Hardy creates Emma in defiance of the terrible void of her absence. She is outside time and place but she inhabits the place and moment of his vision as she "draws rein and sings to the swing of the tide." Reality and vision are united in the final stanza because

Hardy only achieves this moment by facing life squarely. Although Emma is beyond time, the poet himself is not, he is "toil-tried,/ He withers daily;" and similarly life and death are held in careful balance in Hardy's description of Emma as a "ghost-girl-rider." Hardy's vision is not offered as a metaphysical reality, as Tom Paulin suggests,¹⁵ nor is he withdrawing from life. In "The Phantom Horsewoman" Hardy captures starkly the horror of a desolate universe and the awful finality of death, but he also bravely affirms that life is neither absurd nor futile if by a positive act of poetic will he can resurrect Emma, if she has a living presence in his being which gives a continued meaning to his life.

In Hardy such moments as these are won by the mind itself, for only the mind can give meaning to reality. Hardy's moments of vision are created out of lived experience and their fundamental commitment to life gives them a universal validity. This wholeness of life, mind and art is perhaps best seen in the final poem that I wish to consider, "During Wind and Rain," in which Hardy draws once more on his memories of Emma, this time of her family home in Cornwall. In some respects it is a puzzling poem on first reading and critics have responded to it in various ways. Basically, the poem is divided into four discrete, beautiful moments of vision which embrace human fellowship and harmony as positive joys, each of which, however, is undercut by a cruel refrain which reminds the reader of the inevitable passing of time and of mortality. A straightforward approach to the meaning of the poem is to see this division as marking a simple structural irony of the kind which operates in *Satires of Circumstance*. The vision of domestic harmony on a winter evening in the first stanza, with its magical cooperation between fact and imagination, is contrasted with the falling leaves. In the second stanza the family's instinct to combat the burgeoning of the natural world in the spring, by clearing the moss in order to make way for

human concerns, is contrasted with the threatening spring gales and the malevolent storm birds. The domestication of nature is significant in the third stanza as a context for human fellowship, imaged by the sacramental breakfast under the summer tree, but it, too, finds its destroyer in time which rips the "rotten rose" from the wall. While in the final stanza the family's removal to a "high new house," symbolizing their courageous attempt to re-define their humanity in different places, puts their achievement of a poised, assured selfhood in jeopardy, like their furniture on the lawn exposed to the autumn rain. Time, present in the rhythm of the seasons, co-operates with place and with human lives, yet it also carries a threat, a reminder of the inherent futility of even their noblest actions.

One view of the poem is that Hardy simply offers two distinct perspectives and allows them to stand in silent commentary on each other. Another interpretation regards these moments of vision, incomplete as they are, as having greater vividness, more impact and significance than the negative images of the refrains. But a clue to a more fruitful approach to the meaning of "During Wind and Rain," in my reading of it, is given by its title, which is an echo of Feste's song that concludes *Twelfth Night*, a song which is itself both a profound recognition of the fundamental absurdity of the universe and a beautiful celebration of human life and values. Hardy's poem, I suggest, achieves a similar transcendence. In "During Wind and Rain" the moments of vision are not created in opposition to, or even in ignorance of, the waste and futility of life; nor are those poles of human experience permitted to stand in mute dichotomy; rather the terror of a meaningless universe is incorporated into the poem, not simply as a structural unity, but into each discrete moment of vision, subtly qualifying it and becoming part of its statement. This becomes evident if one pays close attention to Hardy's superb technique. His breaking up

of the elaborate symmetry between the four stanzas by his metrical variations in the last line of each stanza suggests how, for the neutral observer, each idyllic moment is dissolved by a harsher reality. Yet the cluster of images conveying the delicate world of the poem also contains within it this ineluctable force of dissolution. The beautiful image in the opening stanza of the candles "mooning each face," both factual and visionary, includes within it the suggestion of decay, for even as they illumine the gathering the candles are burning out, and the moon is itself a powerful traditional symbol of change. Similarly, the springtime vision of the second stanza comprehends the creeping moss which remains an enduring threat to human significance; while in the third stanza the sea, which can be glimpsed by the breakfasting group, is also a potent symbol for the mutability of life and experience. And finally, the furniture left in the open air on the lawn makes a poignant image of human vulnerability and frailty. The moments of vision themselves thus include a strong sense of an indifferent universe, of dissolution as inevitable and of human action as ultimately absurd. But this knowledge, which permeates the places in which they choose to act, is shared by the inhabitants of the world of the poem. The careful symmetry of these stanzas is the formal correlative of the way in which they nevertheless impose order and beauty on the flux of experience. Their awareness of a terrifying nullity at the heart of things is transcended by actions which celebrate love, fellowship and the sheer joy of being, which displays a powerful sense of achieved selfhood, of purpose, adventure and gaiety.

To some extent the current uncertainty about the value of Hardy's poetry derives from the critical tendency to regard his work as exemplifying his "philosophy." But Hardy, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, developed a significant part of his thinking from mature reflection upon his poetic experience. Indeed, this informs both the

prefaces to his poetry and his personal writings. And as I have been arguing, a more fruitful method of approaching his work than that of simply applying his ideas to his poetry is to consider how his poetic art illumines his thought. From this point of view, Hardy's well-known discussion of the relation between the Universal Will and the individual will, which is often regarded as the linchpin of his thinking, is not simply an abstract formulation of his view of a deterministic universe, but is also the result of a subjective analysis of his own poetic experience. Read in the context of those poems I have been considering, Hardy's assertion of the possibility of the liberation of the will and his insistence on the transfiguring power of the imagination explain how some of his finest poems came to be written. These moments of vision which, I think, lie at the centre of Hardy's poetic genius, offer a positive response to the modern experience. They rescue life from futility; they assert the significance of human values; they embody a strenuously achieved, un-deceived response of profound joy and they reaffirm in a new form the continuing romantic ideal of transcendence.

NOTES

¹Geoffrey Thurley, *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the twentieth century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974), p. 32.

²Thurley, p. 34.

³Tom Paulin, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 36.

⁴Paul Zietlow, *Moments of Vision: The Poetry of Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 10.

⁵As early as 1868 Hardy had proposed to write a volume of poems on this subject. See Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 58.

⁶See Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 244-5.

⁷*Life*, p. 114.

⁸*Life*, p. 185.

⁹Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson (London: J. M. Dent, 1956), p. 173.

¹⁰J. Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 22.

¹¹Hardy, Apology to *Late Lyrics and Earlier* in *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. Harold Orel (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 53.

¹²Hillis Miller, p. 4.

¹³*Personal Writings*, p. 52.

¹⁴Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and Modern British Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 28.

¹⁵Paulin, p. 138.

The Count-House: Wheel Friendship

The count-house is collapsing. Each blank pane
 no longer holds a sharp clairvoyant eye
 that pierced into the darkness of the mine,
 examining the actions of the men
 that smoked across the best part of the lode,
 dulled it with a candle, reeking slime,
 or beat it with their saturated clothes
 to keep the higher tribute. Now its doors
 no longer catch each whisper, chance remark,
 each clandestine agreement in the sett
 to cheat upon the bargain, mix the stones,
 to cache away the prills behind the rock
 then shin up through the winze, or climb the rise
 to trespass on the distant owner's stopes
 and carry off the veinstuff. Warping, torn,
 their ceilings damp with fungus, grey decay,
 still heavy with suspicion, deep mistrust,
 the offices no longer hold the books,
 the scanning of the quick illiterate glance
 examining the earnings on the page,
 the details of the paybills, of the fines,
 the statements of the richness of the pitch
 disguised beneath the figures in the script,
 to interrupt the contract, steal the ore.

John Gurney.