CHAPTER-IV
THE PAST REVIEWED

"Scenes in ordinary life that are insipid at twenty become interesting at thirty and tragic at forty", Hardy wrote in his journal on the 19th April 1888. He acknowledges that the changes wrought within man by time are strong enough to alter his perspective so that viewing the same event at two different stages of life will yield or elicit two different reactions. Time may or may not change the external world, but life experiences do change the worldview and the reactions. Hence, one of the basic reasons for Hardy's frequent look "backward" to his past is the desire to view the old event in yet newer light.

'... I begin again, as if it were new,/A day of like date I once lived through ...' Hardy says in "Joys of Memory" (367) admitting that the act of remembering is not a passive one; he is not a mere spectator but a participant all over again, but with the experience of the intervening years to give him the benefit of objective distance as well as maturity and understanding.

While in the majority of the Time-related poems, Hardy is able to easily "exhume" the memories and relive them with the freshness
of actual happenings, just those poems will be considered in this chapter in which he has not just viewed but reviewed his past. To them he has brought to bear the objective distance that time and life-experiences, as well as his basic honesty, provided.

Dennis Taylor (Hardy's Poetry, 1981) says 'the central issue in Hardy studies is what happen to experience as it is made into literature, the experience remembered ...' (p.xiii). He borrows Middleton Murray’s phrase ‘the culmination of experience’ to describe the memory of the experience that is exhumed (p.88). In the same argument, Taylor puts forth the case that the exhumation of emotions after a long period of time does not means that the emotion interred has lain static because ‘his advance in awareness coincides with a regression into memories which are eventually seen in the final form and matured significance’ (p.88). The experience and understanding accumulated over the years helps understand the past in all its depth and significance.

The poem “House of Hospitalities” (156) best explains Hardy’s attitude to memory and the past. The house of hospitalities has changed from a place where the narrator says they ‘called in friends’ for festivities for cheer, music and food, to a deserted ruin where ‘the
mole now labours,/And spiders knit.’ The seasons and time are long past for this house, but for him the story is different. The house may be in ruins

Yet at midnight if here walking,
   When the moon sheets wall and tree,
I see forms of old time talking
   Who smile on me.

In fact memory is the index to indicate a mind still alive, he feels.

‘We two kept house, the past and I’ he admits in the “Ghost of the Past” (249) indicating the presence of the past in his present. ‘I did not mind the Bygone there —/The Present once to me’, he says further. In fact, the present stands transformed because of the memory of the past: ‘There was in that companionship/Something of ecstasy’.

As time takes its toll on the mind and heart, the memories get dimmer. ‘And then its form began to fade/Began to fade’. When life itself begins to decline; memory does too:

   It dwindles in my eye;
   It looms a far off-skeleton
And not a comrade nigh,
   A fitful far-off skeleton
Dimming as days draw by.

In fact Taylor says ‘... remembering is hardly distinguishable from awareness itself. When memory begins to die, the mind begins to die’. (p.94)
At the simplest level are the lyrics like “To Louisa in the Lane” (822), “Faint Heart in a Railway Train” (516), “A Countenance” (847). As he looks back at the childhood infatuation discussed in Chapter-I that forms the subject of “To Louisa in the Lane” he understands that his shyness came in the way of what should have been. He now wishes for a second chance. As an old man he wishes to be able to go back to the same “hallow in the lane”, to be able to meet her again and rectify the mistake of his boyhood.

Similarly in “Faint Heart in a Railway Train”, he goes back to a moment of temptation that he let slip away. He recounts an ordinary railway journey, the tedium of which is broken by a fleeting glimpse of a woman’s ‘radiant face’ at a passing station. The momentary vision passes even before he can muster courage to alight. From the distance of years, as he looks back he is filled with regret at his indecision ‘... O could it but be/That I had alighted there!’

The poem “An Opportunity” (577) remembers how ‘forty springs back’ he had met this lady casually. They had parted without regret at the close of the day and never run into each other the next forty years. Looking back, Hardy is regretful that they never utilized the ‘opportunity’, otherwise they might have come to mean
something to each other and a totally different life together would have taken shape. He is mildly bitter as he wonders at the workings of human life:

This is a bitter thing
For thee, O man: what ails it?
The tide of chance may bring
Its offer but nought avails it

All the three poems referred to here deal, with various degrees of seriousness, with what he later recognizes as missed opportunity. In each case he puts the blame not on Fate or circumstances, but squarely on himself. Time has provided him the insight he lacked when he actually lived the experiences. Now what is left are only realization and mild regret.

Hardy’s memory of incidents and people from the past though impressive in its detail, it is the objective distance of time that he allows into the remembrance that becomes the focal point. In “A Countenance” (847), Hardy remembers a lady whose slightly irregular face he had found attractive. He says her laugh was ‘not in the middle of her face quite’ and goes on to describe in an amazingly total recall, her slightly peculiar hairstyle, her ‘too full’ lips which, he had then found quite pleasant. He even remembers how the lower lip cast a shadow that looked green when she passed under ‘midsummer
leaves’. Regretfully he remembers how their lives went their different ways and he lost ‘all sight and touch of her’. Now, remembering her as an elderly man with the infatuation behind him, he wonders if he would have remained as attracted or charmed by her irregular looks after the first flush of love had died or if he would, like the others, have eventually ‘minded’ it when ‘love became unblinded’.

Hardy brings the freshness of honesty to his recollection here. He is aware that time changes all; even love and our reaction do not always remain as they were.

Knowledge of later sorrows sometimes cast their shadows on happier memories. As he experienced them, the events were perhaps entirely happy, but subsequent failure of the relationship underscores the memory with sorrow and bitterness. “At the Piano” (482) deals with a relationship that is at its peak – the woman is playing at the piano while her lover stands close by looking on and admiring not just the music but her as well. A picture of bliss. The man’s joy has him slipping into a totally happy reverie, the happy sight in front of him ‘sent him mentally straying/In some fancy place/Where pain had no trace’.
But this scene of contentment is marred by the reference to the 'Cowled Apparition' – misfortune, comes between them causing a diminishing of everything – her 'notes seemed to sigh' and the lights to go dim. They are both unaware of the changes, although 'Time laughed awry,/And the Phantom hid nigh. The indication seems to be when they look back later with the experience of the bitter end to their relationship behind them, the scene will not seem to have been as perfect as they think it is when they are living it.

Stretching logic to a point rather far, Hardy says in “Before Knowledge” (374) that ‘well had I borne/Each scraping thorn’ had she but called to him from ‘across the stretch between’ before they actually met. They were destined to meet, yet the period of life before that, were days of pain and struggle for him: all of which would have lessened or vanished had she but called out to him from beyond the gap. An argument that does defeat logic unless one understands that he is looking at the past without her in his life from the perspective of the present when she is in his life. It is with the knowledge of her soothing presence that he looks back at the pain in his life before her entry into it and involuntarily the thought is, if only he had known what was to follow, he would have borne it all better.
Many of Hardy’s dramatic poems are structured on the theme of the Past Revisited. “The Tramp Woman’s Tragedy” (153) and “The Flirt’s Tragedy” (160) have as narrators the architects of the tragedy the poem is built round. A stupid, playful attempt to arouse the jealousy of the Tramp woman’s ‘only love’ ends in tragedy. He kills his supposed rival and is hanged for it while she remains alone drifting aimlessly, haunted by her past. Filled with remorse, she is left ‘haunting the Western Moor’. “The Flirt’s Tragedy” speaks similarly of love and rejection. The narrator, though rich is not physically attractive to win his lady’s love, though she toys with his affections. He hires a good looking youngman to court and subsequently betray her. After the betrayal, he steps in to save her through marriage which is no more than a compromise for her. When she finally learns of his role in her ruin as also that he has killed her former lover; she commits suicide. He is as haunted by memories as by guilt. As with the tramp woman so with him there is a realization that being remorselessly haunted by the Past is the payment for their role in the tragedies. ‘... leave unregarded/A Cain to his suffering’, he begs his listener. For both, memory of their guilt is their Nemesis.
“The Sacrilege” (331) has a very similar structure. Here the narrator is the twin brother of the man ("Born at my birth of Mother of Mine") who is beguiled and led to crime by a wanton woman. Just before being hanged he extracts the promise from the narrator to seek vengeance on her. He does so, only to be haunted forever by the memory of his crime:

No mortal knew that deed undue
But he who schemed the crime
Which might still covers ... But in dream
Those ropes of hair upon the stream
He sees, and he will hear that scream
Until his judgement-time'.

The criminal is haunted by the memory of the crime in so devastating a manner as to be itself the judgement or punishment for the crime. Thus memory does function as conscience. Even if the world at large remains ignorant of his crime, his dreams still remain haunted by the vision of his crime, and he will know no peace henceforth. Like the Ancient Mariner, they are compelled by their memory to re-live the past again and again and understand their suffering through it as their punishment from which there will be no freedom until memory lasts.

Similarly, the persona of ‘The Rivals’ is able to recognize, in hindsight, her role in the tragic end to her marriage, but at a time when all is past and the knowledge serves little purpose. Though she
is contrite, the relationship is beyond saving. The man, whose devotion she so baselessly rejected, is long since dead: ‘Bitterly have I rued my meanness/And wept for it since he died’. Her jealousy has been aroused by her sense of insecurity. First she suspects him of loving another, subsequently she discovers it is no ‘other’ but her own photograph of long ago, that he keeps locked and sighs over. But instead of reassurance, what follows is a new jealousy – this time of her former self: ‘I chafed that he loved not the me then living,/But the Past woman still’. In retrospect, she can see her role in the breakdown of their relationship and she acknowledges it but at a time too late to be of any significance.

Other simple lyrics with the theme of past revisited emphasize the insistent, overwhelming and enduring nature of memories of certain events. “The Satin Shoes” (334) deals with the story of a bride besotted with the idea of wearing satin shoes to her wedding. But it rains on her wedding day. As the ‘lane is life a pool’ she cannot wear her satin shoes: ‘Her dream is shown to be inept,/Her wish they overrule’. But the memory of a wedding without those shoes tortures her to insanity: ‘From her wrecked dream, as months flew on,/Her
thought seemed not to range’. When she has to be taken to the ‘madhouse’ finally it is the satin shoes they use as enticement:

If you will go, dear, you must fain  
Put on those shoes – the pair  
Meant for your marriage, which the rain  
Forbade you then to wear.

The lady has been so disappointed that although time moved on, she remained back mentally at that day when her simple dream was shattered. That is the power of the past: at times it can obliterate the present and make nonsense of the time-flow so that chaos and confusion may even result.

“The Dance at the Phoenix” (28) similarly demonstrates the power of the past and the power it exerts to revisit it. Jenny had been a less than virtuous maiden when she agrees to marry her ‘rural’ admirer, privately promising to remain faithful to him. She keeps her promise, her two sons are grown men when she learns ‘Her early loves from war had come,/The King’s-Own Cavalry’. As she hears the music of their celebration at the Phoenix Inn, she feels the stirrings of temptation as the memories of the past waken:

And yet those notes – they thrill me through,  
And those gay forms move me anew,  
As they moved me of yore!
The past beckons her too strongly and she sneaks into the Phoenix. She dances, her old age notwithstanding, to return to her sleeping husband only early next morning. When he wakes up, Jenny lies dead next to him. The memories of the past, the desire to actually relive them, are too strong for Jenny. She chooses to revisit her past, sacrificing both her present and future.

"Bereft" (157) tackles a similar subject from the other side, as it were. Here too a spouse is overwhelmed by her past. In this case, it is the memory of her dead husband. Every little homely detail of his presence in her life is remembered and contrasted with the changes his absence has brought. ‘When the summer dawns clearly,/And appletree-tops seem alight,/Who will undraw the curtain and cheerily/Call out that the morning is bright?’ The past so overwhelms her, she wishes herself dead too. The look backward has made her realize the importance of his long years’ presence in her life: she feels incomplete and alone now without him.

The woman in “The Farm Woman’s Winter” (162) undergoes a very similar experience. Her mate has died of cold and exposure and left a vacuum in her life. She looks back at the past questioning the human situation where one gets what one does not want and loses
whom one does. 'So savage winter catches/The breath of limber things/And what I love he snatches./And what I love not, brings.' For both these women, the loss of a loved partner awakens them to grief and regret as they realize the irreplaceable nature of their loss.

The conclusion arrived at by the narrator of "The Inquiry" (198) shows how certain unalterable truths about life and the human situation becomes clearer when one travels back in time. The narrator enquires after one 'Peggy Beech' with ill-disguised curiosity and keenness. He remembers how he and a certain John Waywood had courted her promising to marry her only when financially successful. That took its time being realized. In the meantime, his and John's interest was worn down by time while, ironically, hers remained constant. On looking back, he can clearly see how that long wait between promise and its fulfillment managed to diminish the value of everything. Only retrospectively viewing the situation he is able to see the entire story in its actuality. In the light of the changes brought on by the long wait, her constancy appears lifeless and dull rather than inspiring and commendable. Time has transmuted everything vital to the unimportant:

In years agone at Hermitage
This faded face was counted fair,
None fairer; and at Hermitage
We swore to wed when he should thrive.
But swore to wed when he should thrive.
But never a chance had he or I,
And waiting made his love outwear,
And Time, that dooms man’s love to die,
Preserves a maid’s alive.

The comment of Dennis Taylor referred to earlier, says ‘his increase in awareness coincides with a regression into memories’. Hence, his purely personal poems that are time-related display this ‘awareness’. It is only when hindsight provides him the necessary insight and objective distance, can he present, and recognize, the experience in its true and ‘final form and matured significance.’

A poem of personal memory that looks back the entire span of his long lifetime is “He Never Expected Much” (873). The by-line says ‘A Reflection on my Eighty-Sixth Birthday’. As he looks back those eighty-plus years, he says with the finality of last words, that life has kept its faith in being faithless:

Well, World you have kept faith with me, ...
Upon the whole you have proved to be
Much as you said you were
Since as a child I used to lie
Upon the leaze and watch the sky,
Never, I own expected I
That life would be all fair.
His memory of the events in his life, taken in their totality, scanned from practically the end of it, seem to confirm the belief he set out with as a young child.

He expected, and his life experiences later confirmed, that life does not ‘promise overmuch’ – nothing in extremes, what it does do is string up a lifetime of little events and small occasions: ‘just neutral tinted haps and such’. With hindsight, he realizes that the slings and arrows of life – (‘strain and ache’) left less mark on him simply because he had been forewarned, and therefore fore armed, against them.

“The Self-Unseeing” (135), as we have seen in discussions in earlier chapters, again deals with a childhood memory recalled later. The occasion remembered is one of domestic bliss – the mother, father and the dancing child (himself) are experiencing one of the happiest times of their lives: ‘Blessings emblazoned on us that day.’ But, as with all human experiences of happiness, only in retrospect does one recognize this condition. Thus, Hardy says, in the midst of bliss, the three were ‘looking away’, unaware of the momentous nature of the time.
Memory, thus, functions as nemesis often. Again, it may even be the cause of grief and regret. The enduring and insistent nature of memory permits the existence of personal or internal time (like Bergson’s “La Durée”) so that certain experiences of the past seem to have an existence out of time.

But a proper perception of an event or situation seems to be the most important outcome of the journey to the past. Revisiting these situations with the greater wisdom gained through the intervening years (Taylor’s statement that the ‘advance in awareness coincides with the regression into memories’ mentioned earlier) allows Hardy to ‘review’ them with greater neutrality or objectivity. But it is to his “Poems of 1912-13” (277-297) the group of twenty-one deeply moving and poignant lyrics written at the sudden death of Emma Hardy, that Hardy most successfully brings his analytical powers. He dissects the exhumed experiences and emotions with honesty and the objective distance of a scientist. The relationship, which had seen tumultuous days, is analysed, once it has become a part of the past (which it does, with Emma’s death).

“The Going” (277) demonstrates Hardy’s early inability to come to terms with her death; he turns his gaze instead to the past. He
relives the memory of his first sight of her: ‘You were the swan-necked one who rode/Along the beetling Beeny Crest’. He remembers their early years together as happy days: ‘Life unrolled us its very best.’

But the look backwards also brings memories of their subsequent unhappiness, which, now, looking back seems strange and incomprehensible: ‘Why, then, latterly did we not speak?’ There is regret that they made little effort to bridge the breach: ‘Why ... Did we not think of those days long dead,/And ere your vanishing strive to seek/That time’s renewal?’ However, Hardy’s questionings end on a note of pained acceptance of the ‘unchangeable’ as he concludes ‘All’s past amend’.

Looking back at their relationship of more than thirty years, Hardy accepts the various phases it went through – the good and the bad phases – and is filled with regret that time has run out for them before any positive steps could be taken to rebuild the relationship.

Interestingly, Hardy mentions here, as well as in a few other poems (“After a Journey”, “At Castle Boterel”, “Beeny Cliff”, “Places”) that a journey to a happier past can reawaken the happiness again. Hence, it must be the intense journey back to the early, happy
years together, after Emma’s death that is responsible for the rekindled love in Hardy for her. Revisiting times of love and happiness brings it all back into the present.

That is why in the poem “The Voice” (285) of the same series, Hardy refers to her as the ‘woman much missed’ because he says now ‘you are not as you were/When first you had changed from the one who was all to me,/But as at first, when our day was fair’.

The voice of Emma seems to beckon him and he follows, certain that it is the Emma of earlier times that he will find. The love he feels, then, is for the Emma that was, the Emma of the past. However, it is only after the death that he can view the earlier Emma in the Emma that lived with him, as a stranger, in his house all these many years. But to view her as the same person and feel a rush of love for her, Hardy had to travel back to the past and review his early memories of her first, down ‘even to the original air-blue gown’.

In “After a Journey” (289), Hardy revisits Cornwall and the places there associated with their first meeting and courtship. Physically being in the same places again, led, as if by Emma’s ghost, seems to reawaken the past so vividly that he actually thinks he sees her ‘facing round me everywhere,/With your nut-coloured hair,/And
grey eyes, rose-flush coming and going'. After the first 'awe', there is the recognition and satisfaction of having 're-entered your old haunts at last.' Almost as if the younger Emma of his courtship still exists, he says 'Through the years, through the dead scenes, I have tracked you'. And the first question on meeting her face to face is: what did the subsequent breach in their relationship mean to her? Without apportioning blame to either, he describes the breach in neutral ones: 'Summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division'. He realizes now that Death in a sense has brought that 'division' to an end and brought about, paradoxically, something like a reconciliation. The physical actuality of the experience of revisiting the old haunts evokes the memories so emphatically that the past merges with the present and Hardy can actually ask the question troubling him about a time much after the early past associated with those places. Most importantly, memories of love fill him all over again with love for his late estranged wife.

Though not from the series "Poems 1912-13", a poem that similarly revives memories in order to analyse the situation better, is "We Sat at the Window" (355). The memory is of day in 1875 at Bournemouth, when the two are imprisoned indoors by the incessant
rain outside. While the rain outside 'babbled unchecked' and rushed out of 'gutter and spout' in 'the busy way/Of witless things', there is complete silence within:

Nothing is read, nothing to see
Seemed in that room for her and me ...
... 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.

There is a sterile, soul-destroying vacuum between them. It is only when Hardy looks back at this memory, can he diagnose the basic problem with their relationship: lack of communication. They knew so little of each other, yet each had virtues enough to surprise and please the other had they but got to know of them. At the very start of their married life (they were married in 1874), they had ceased to try to know each other properly; the upheaval that followed their entire thirty-odd years together was the natural outcome of this lack of communication between them: 'wasted were two souls in their prime'. It could have been forestalled had they but become aware of the ailment, the poem seems to suggest. But it is only now, scores of years later that Hardy himself has been brought face to face with it after hindsight provides him the necessary insight.
A closer look at the relationship from a distance of time allows him to see it in totality and dispassionately. Thus, the chances of the comments coming closer to the truth is more likely in these poems of retrospection. He does not hesitate to minutely examine the situation, seeing it from all angles, and then sometimes coming to startling, if accurate, conclusion. One poem where he displays such a mode of retrospection is “Had you Wept” (313). In a seemingly paradoxical conclusion, Hardy says that strength in a woman can often be the cause of isolation, lack of connection and communication. Hardy feels that a mere, but timely display of emotion – viz. misery or regret will go a long way in maintaining a relationship:

Had you wept; had you but neared me with a hazed uncertain ray,
Dewy as the face of the dawn, in you large and luminous eye,
Then would have come back all the joys the tidings had slain that day,
And a new beginning, a fresh heaven, have smoothed the things awry.'

Hence, the epiphanic revelation the poem provides is that stoic endurance can harm a close relationship by isolating the one from the other. Although a universally acknowledged merit, mental strength of this magnitude betrays an important canon of good relationship by breaking down the channels of communication and sharing. Her
strong, individualistic attitude has finally brought the relationship to ruin. Thus, Hardy now concludes: ‘the deep strong woman is the weakest, and the weak one is the strong’. It is her reserve restraining her from finding a ‘balm’ for her ‘torrid sorrow’ that is the root cause of the ‘deep division, and our dark undying pain.’

On looking back, Hardy has come to the above conclusion that extended, is his realization too after examining the situation described in the poem “You Were the Sort that Men Forget” (364). A strong woman is a poor communicator and hence the cause of the ruined relationship. The same strength when manifested in an attitude of forthrightness and honesty is again the barrier to good inter-personal communication. Such a woman fares poorly in personal relationships. The men have not taken too kindly to her because, he now realizes, she practiced no ‘art’:

You’d not the art – you never had  
For good or bad –  
To make men see how sweet your meaning,  
Which, visible, had made them glad.

It is not only that she kept her sweetness from ever being ‘visible’ but also because she was honest to the point of rude tactlessness, that they turned away: ‘you would by words inept let fall/offend them all.’
Hardy realizes that she compounded her si... of omission by a certain obtuseness in her relationships:

You lacked the eye to understand
Those friends off hand
Whose mode was crude, though whose dim purport.
Outpriced the courtesies of the bland.

Her sterling qualities won her no friends: contrary to expectations, they only brought her sorrows, because she lacked tact and discernment. Without these qualities, the poet today understands, human relationships seldom can endure. Nature's gift of a warm and loving heart goes to waste in so far as it neither know how to give, nor does it receive, what it richly deserves.

What Hardy has us infer from the above two poems is his realization that unless one can bring to human relationships sensitiveness and wisdom, goodness, virtue or even moral strength alone is not sufficient. The 'art' he mentions is not necessarily negative in its connotation; in fact, by linking it with the gifts of Nature in the last but one line he has shown that the term has been used in the positive sense of a sensitivity perceptive of the needs of others. However, to be aware or the goodness lying behind all that gruffness, to be close enough to read her well, yet not be affected by her 'inept words' would require the kind of objectivity only time can
provide. Hence, a sensitive honest portrayal of the complex subject such as this, is only possible in hindsight, perhaps. However, sometimes objective distance provided by time is alone not enough: it has to be aided by a complete renunciation of the self. Hardy makes this possible through the use of his favourite mode of traveling back: in the guise of a ghost. In the poem, "I rose up as my Custom is" (311) the narrator is one who was once a poet, but now is a ghost. On All Souls' Day, he rises and visits his old love and her new husband to enquire about her well being. How easy it is to plumb the depths of honesty as a ghost, he discovers since he no longer is a player amongst the others. He is even able to view himself, if a little smugly, quite objectively and see the drag of a companion he was when alive: 'Wrung in brow,/And crazed with the ills eyed.' She admits honestly, yes, 'A poet is the worst' kind of a husband because 'Women are practical and they/Crave the wherewith to pay their way,/And slake their social thirst'. A poet is an 'ideal' they have a passing infatuation for, but they look for a provider in a husband. Material comfort and social status are what they look for in a husband - '... look at this man snoring here —/He's no romantic chanticler,/Yet keeps me in good style'. It is easier for a woman not to have to plumb the depths
of her heart but remain satisfied with the material gains. A poet forces her to know herself and face her true feelings honestly: he tries to 'quest into my thoughts, ... wants to know/What one has felt from earliest days,/Why one thought not in other ways/And one's Love's of long ago'. She is not comfortable confronting her deeper feelings. The poet-ghost is shocked to discover the truth: 'Her words benumbed my fond faint ghost', because this truth underlying their relationship, and the true nature of woman was surely beyond his expectation, although he was unlike like the 'snoring' man beside her now, but had been a caring, sensitive, intuitive poet. A woman's logic, her insecurities and her true feelings are truly beyond the comprehension of the most sensitive of men – even distance in time may not bring him closer to the truth. Hence, Hardy gives him the dispassionate interest of a ghost.

Again, perhaps because much of it is wistful thinking only, in the use of a ghost can Emma become the caring companion of old that Hardy wishes for, so desperately. Hardy imagines in “The Haunter” (284) an Emma who loves to 'companion him to places/Only dreamers know', but is perplexed by the problem of letting him know she does so. There is a hint of self-reproach when Hardy imagines
Emma’s ghost commenting on the lack of communication when alive: how he ignored her when alive thereby not permitting her to evolve into a loving companion. She is desperate that channels of communication be now opened between them: Hardy’s imagining her thus is indication that a communication of sorts is now established.

When she was alive, Hardy’s indifference drove her away, he now feels and honestly wishes for a kind of reunion. Now that she is a ghost, Hardy imagines she understands better, is more caring and he in his turn, is more honest and contrite.

Developing this theme of self-awareness further, are a few other poems of Hardy. In them, memory becomes the mode of honest introspection. A poem mentioned earlier “A Countenance”, carries a hint of this brave facing up to his drawbacks. The poem describing a face, from the past, with ‘her laugh’, ‘not in the middle of her face quite’ comments how this lack of symmetry affected others adversely while attracting him. On looking back from the distance of years, he wonders whether the attraction he experienced for the unusual was because it was for so brief a period. But would familiarity have finally bred contempt? Was that only a passing fancy; could something so unusual have evolved into anything more enduring, is his query. But
the unspoken confession is — Is he capable of giving such an infatuation a sustaining power? He knows himself well enough — hence the query.

But for that honest self-appraisal, Hardy had to travel many yea in time, many years beyond the power of the infatuation to be so 'unblinded' into honest introspection.

Elaborating on the theme hinted in Stanza II of ‘The Haunter’ mentioned earlier, Hardy wrote “An Upbraiding” (486). Here again he imagines Emma’s ghost accosting him about his earlier indifference vis-à-vis his rekindled loved for her. Her ghost accuses him of trying to communicate his love for her now while ignoring her when alive: “Ah, what would I have given alive/To win such tenderness!’ But all this love for her after her death does not convince her and she asks is this love only because she is dead and unattainable now — when he dies and no more barriers exists between them, what will she see in him, she wonders, his newly discovered love for her or his earlier indifference?:

When you are dead and stand to me
Not differenced, as now,
But like again, will you be cold
As when we lived, or how?
Hardy is capable of this kind of honesty not only because he is innately so, but more because time has removed the immediacy of the situation and he can not only see others as they are, but also view himself through the eyes of others as they see him. There is acceptance of his fickleness as also perhaps an acceptance of the unpredictability of the future. It is certain that Emma’s question will remain unanswered – not because he will not answer, but because he cannot. He cannot anticipate his own feelings or reactions – his past and present have proved that.

That is why there is much tentativeness in the poem “Afterwards” (511). Published in 1917 when he was seventy-seven years old, it is concerned with the question of how he would like to be remembered after death. He likens the event to the closing of a gate behind one: Time will close the ‘postern’ behind his ‘tremulous’ time on earth. Each stanza imagines a different moment of death and the accompanying scene in the world of nature and its birds and animals. The imagination of the world of nature is vivid and detailed. He wonders how the world might remember him – he wishes to be remembered as ‘a man who used to notice such things’, as one who ‘strove that such innocent creatures should come to no harm’. A poem
where irony is conspicuous by its absence, in which the mood is not of gloom but peace and quiet, it is suffused with a love of the small details of the natural world. There is an impressive modesty in his wish to be only remembered as a countryman with a loving, observing eye.

This poem fuses past, present and future into one unified vision. He goes into the future to look at the present as a part of the past. Perhaps only through such a demolishing of time barriers is it possible for him to contemplate an absolute like death.

As an ultimate example of honest introspection perhaps few poems can equal: “Surview” (662). As he gazes at the fire, mesmerized by the ‘green-grained sticks of fire’ he is reproached by his own voice – his conscience, cataloging his various sins. His occasional wavering from the truth, his indifference to his late wife, his reluctance to form a consistent philosophy of life, are the subjects on which his conscience apparently continually pricks him. Lastly, ‘his own voice’ in parting, leaves the message of charity above all. The ability to honestly face up to the lapses of one’s part requires a tremendous distancing from it through time if only because then the perspective is most likely to be nearer the truth.
Physical distance as well as distance through time are both necessary to clearly perceive the change and evolution of religious beliefs. Two poems discussed in earlier chapters, “The Oxen” (403) and “An Afternoon Service at Mellstock” (356) touch on this theme. “The Oxen” is built on the traditional belief still persisting in rural England that the Oxen ‘kneel’ at the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve in homage to Christ. It is a comforting belief, and Hardy shifts the time perspective from the past to the present to say ‘So fair a fancy few would weave/In these years’. Yet, looking back, he accepts the value of these legends although he can never believe again its truth. He wishes, however, the belief could be authenticated – he would travel great distances to be able to do so, ‘Hoping it might be so’.

A companion piece of this poem is “An Afternoon Service at Mellstock”. It describes a drowsy afternoon service at mellstock in the year 1850. As the congregation looks out at the elms, the rooks and the clouds outside, they begin to sway ‘like the trees’ – forging a bond between man and nature. Hardy calls the worship ‘mindless’ as it is based on tradition and faith alone. Yet he cannot deny the value of such worship at the community level: it bonds the congregation, as
well as man and nature into one cohesive community. He realizes, looking back at these services, that their real value in human and social terms cannot be denied or replaced. For all the conviction he now has in his turning away from traditional faith, he still yearns, he realises, for that special sense of oneness such worship nurtures. In losing his faith, he acknowledges, he has lost that special feeling of wholeness with other men and nature he had as a child:

‘... I am not aware
That I have gained by subtle thought on things
Since we stood psalming there’.

Both the above poems take Hardy back to childhood memories and reawaken that sense of comfort experienced through traditional faith. With poignant honesty he realizes the loss of solace, such beliefs provided. He knows that world of such solace is forever denied to him now.

Thus, Time for Hardy is not always inimical to man’s he uses his life experiences to move towards self-understanding, though not always leading to self-making through self-awareness and consciousness. Often the pain of recognition is just pain and anguish.

END NOTES

1. Hardy, F.E. Life, p.207.