ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy described himself in one of his poems as a man who is:

... but a shape that stands here,
A pulse mould,
A pale past picture, screening
Ashes gone cold

["Dead Man Walking" (166)]

The focus of this research has been on the study of his poetry in an attempt to understand not only the reason behind his intense interest in the past, but also to try to arrive at a more coherent pattern of his attitude to the past and his concept of time through a study of his poems of the past. Primarily, this has meant the reading and analysis of those of his poems that deal with time, past or memory.

For the sake of convenience, the research has been carried out in five segments or chapters and a Preface. The five segments constitute the varied perspectives that his vision of the past has been narrowed down to.

The Preface presents a brief account of some major philosophical concepts that was prevalent during Hardy's time. The definition of time by Plato, Aristotle and St. Augustine are briefly
mentioned, more emphasis being laid on the definition and analysis by G.J. Whitrow. His concepts of 'cyclical' and 'individual' time are mentioned with the view to refreshing the reader's mind with common familiar concepts of time.

Mention has next been specially made of Henri Bergson and Marcel Proust whose concepts of time and the past bear striking similarity with Hardy's ideas. Bergson's concept of \textit{la durée} or duration, its apprehension through the what he called 'intuition' are explained. For Bergson, the past prolongs into the present, and Time, therefore, goes beyond any division into past, present and future. These are ideas that Hardy's poems too testify to again and again.

But it is with Marcel Proust that Hardy's ideas bear closer similarity. Proust's concept of 'extra-temporal' time where past, present and future blend in a moment out of time is mentioned. Hardy's theory of 'exhumed emotion' is shown to share common ground with some of Proust's comments.

The Preface has deliberately been kept brief so that it does not grow either too technical, or too philosophical lest it detract attention from the subject at hand, which is poetry.

Chapter-I is the \textbf{Introduction} where attempt has been made to lay the foundation for the arguments to follow in the subsequent
chapters. It begins with evidence, chiefly biographical, of the importance he gave to, and the seriousness with which he viewed, his career as a poet. This was necessary to show that his poems reflect some of the most important ideas and attitudes held by him. However, the main focus here is on the personal as well as socio-historical influences that are the underlying cause of Hardy's avid interest in the past. The time of his birth, formative years and young adulthood was also the time of rapid industrialization in England. The consequent socio-economic changes it brought at its wake was felt up to Dorchester, where Hardy worked as an apprentice to Sir John Hicks, the architect. But he continued to live at Bockhampton, where the winds of change were yet to reach. His moving, in the course of a single day between a world rapidly changing and another so deeply entrenched in its centuries-old seemingly changeless English market-town ethos must have influenced his ability to move with such ease from the present to the past in his poems.

Another important reason lies in the tendency of the age. The nineteenth century was a period of growing alienation from the traditional belief system. In a world of change and flux, memory proved to be the only abiding reality and writers of the period, in their search for an alternative, valid, enduring core of belief turned
increasingly to the world of time past. “To think of life as passing away is a sadness; to think of it as past is at least tolerable.” (F.E. Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, London: Macmillan, 1964, p.200). Introduction to the world of new ideas through his habit of self-study as well as new friends like Moule, brought about not just new ideas but a breaking away from the old chiefly religious beliefs. Hardy would never recant but would forever look back, as several poems testify, at a time of greater solace and less tentativeness. Hardy’s aesthetic principle of ‘exhumed’ emotion was explained here in order to throw light on Hardy’s impressive power of total recall.

Chapter-II is entitled *The Past As Times Past*. It deals with those poems where the attitude to the past is simple and nostalgic, although never sentimental. These are the poems whose origins lie in his early life at Bockhampton. Incidents of domestic bliss are recalled from great distance of time. Childhood memories [“The One We Knew” (227)] showed memory could prove a link between generations and keep local traditions and lores alive through time. Personal memory at times was seen to supercede communal memories [“The Roman Road” (218)] while shared memory not only bonded the group or pair closer still, but it also segregated this group
or pair from the others. Memory thus was seen to cohere and segregate at the same time ["A Church Romance"(211)].

Hardy’s belief in the role of memory in giving life and endurance to events and people of the past was highlighted here as also Hardy’s acceptance of the irreversibility of time:

– O friend, nought happens twice thus; why,
  I cannot tell!
["On the Departure Platform" (170)]

Chapter-III – The Past as Present begins with a mention of Samuel Hyne’s\(^3\) statement that the basic pattern of Hardy’s poetry is ‘antinomical’ above ‘dialectical’ is discussed and explained. Hardy’s basic pattern being ‘antinomical’ contradictory arguments or situations are set alongside each other to great ironical effect. Hardy refrains from showing any kind of bias. Several poems were closely studied to reveal how evolving within the antinomial framework, Hardy’s poems yield a consistent pattern of Now and then; a circumstance, situation or emotion from the present is placed in contrast to a similar circumstance in the past. Hardy refrains from passing any judgement or drawing any conclusion but leaves the irony to speak for itself. In fact, the very titles of several of Hardy’s poems declare the antinomial structure that reveals a pattern of Now and Then: “Boys Then and Now’ (875), “Before Life and After” (230), “The Old
Neighbour and the New (640) among others. At a more complex level of this structure were the poems like “Just the Same” (650) where the tension between Now and Then was manifested through the contrast between a changing internal world vis-à-vis an unchanging external world, or vice-versa.

Going to the past also means coming face to face with reality. It was revealed that the protagonists of the dramatic poems differed in their reactions — reality being preferred in “The Revisitation” (152), while illusion was the option chosen in “My Cicely” (31).

But is not always that the pattern of Now and Then is quite so simply structured. A more complex construct was apparent in poems like “At Castle Boterie” (292) and in what might easily Hardy’s best poem. “During Wind and Rain” (441). The complexity of Hardy’s poetic vision was revealed in his ability to fluidly cross time-barriers to present a single, comprehensive picture.

The several modes or portals used by Hardy in his travel to the past was next discussed. The situation triggering the journey ranged from physical sensation [“Under the Waterfall” (276)], music [“Rome On the Palatine” (68)] actual items associated with a loved one from the past [“To My Father’s Violin” (381), “Old Furniture” (482) “On a
Discovered Curl of Hair” (630), journeys [“At Castle Boterel” (292)], as well as logs, trees, or leaf. Just about anything, however, slenderly reminiscent of a situation in the past, was the doorway leading Hardy to his journey to the past, which he then recalled with the graphic detail and immediacy of an ‘eidetic’ image. The term ‘eidetic’ is used by Tom Paulin in *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception* (London: Macmillan, 1975, p.121) to refer to these images from memory that are presented with the detail of actual vision.

In several poems there appeared a sense of confluence of the different times described.

The main focus of Chapter-IV – The Past Reviewed is summed up by Hardy’s declaration that ‘Experience Unteaches’ (F.E. Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, London: Macmillan, 1964, p.176). By the comment Hardy was referring to the effect of time and life-experiences on human perspective. Memories of certain experiences of the past show that the understanding and reaction may stand altered when reviewed from a great distance of time.

Therefore, Time is not always inimical to man: he uses his life experiences to gain greater self-understanding.

When the past incidents are ‘exhumed’ after a long gap of time, Hardy is able to view them differently – more objectively, and often
more compassionately. The re-viewing of the past arouses reactions ranging from light-hearted regret at missed opportunity [“The Opportunity” (577), “Faint Heart in a Railway Train (516); “A Countenance” (847)] to a darker, more sombre awareness of misused opportunity in poems like [“We Sat at the Window” (355)].

The Poems of 1912-13 dealing with Hardy’s deeply moving analysis of his tumultuous relationship with his wife that moved from love to indifference to rekindled love after her death, records regret of a more tragic nature. Her sudden death opened the floodgates of varied emotions as Hardy found himself remembering her and their long relationship of thirty-odd years. In this chapter, the gamut of this varied emotional reactions is analysed. They are seen to range from shock, sorrow, regret, guilt to acceptance and renewal of love.

For the first time perhaps, he is able to view the relationship, now that it is past, from her perspective – as in “The Upbraiding” (486) – recognizing the role his own indifference played in the breakdown of their marital life. In the same poem, Hardy displays his ability to objectively view even his present reaction: in the poem the ghost of his wife asks if this renewal love for her will survive his death, or if, when united after death, he will again return to his former
indifference. A similar capacity for dispassionate, objective self-analysis is the subject matter of yet another poem, “Surview” (662).

In poems like “The Oxen” (403) and “An Afternoon Service at Mellstock” (356), Hardy views his memories of past religious beliefs and practices in the light of his later rejection of them. What comes through from the study of these poems is that while Hardy rejected wholeheartedly the validity of these religious beliefs, he could not reject the validity of their value at the individual and the communal level. He would always look back with yearning at a time of greater confidence and solace.

This chapter shows that it is not the distance of time alone that provides the hindsight necessary to truly appraise a situation. It may sometimes be even necessary to become a ghost to establish total understanding. For example, the persona of the dramatic poem “I Rose Up as My Custom Is” (311) though he was a caring, sensitive poet when alive, is yet surprised to learn how flawed his understanding had been of the true character, motives and thoughts of his ladylove. It is only as a ghost that he can establish true communication and begin to understand her desires and insecurities.

The concluding chapter is entitled Integrated Vision. Here the conclusions evolving out of the discussions of the previous chapters
are stated and finally an attempt made to see the pattern that has emerged.

The conclusion evolving out of chapter-I was that certain personal as well as socio-historical factors shaped Hardy's 'backward' looking attitude to the past. The poems studied in chapter-II – The Past As Time Past revealed that Hardy was aware of the flow of time and its irreversibility. He was content to see the past as time which is past and did not try to forge a link with the present. Memories of personal past, communal past and historical past were seen to sometimes blend and sometimes to diverge. The conclusion was that memory unites as well as segregates the group or individual.

Chapter-II – The Past as Present developed finally the conclusion that often the past did exist in a moment out of time through personal memory. Barriers between the past and present were ignored by memory in certain cases. The past and present were placed alongside each other to affect a confluence of time.

The Conclusion that the discussion of Chapter IV – The Past Reviewed evolved was that through the instrument of hindsight, memory could and did function as nemesis or a medium of justice. It was also capable of sowing grief and regret although its most
important function was as a medium of introspection leading to self-understanding, though not leading to a self-making.

The pattern that finally emerged was that time is an ally of man. Memory allows him to see the history of his evolving self-through a series of life-experiences. It is only through the agency of memory that he can view the entire process as a continuum. Human beings, being often different, disconnected selves, it is through the instrument of memory that he can perceive the underlying unity between his various selves. This saves him from a sense of living in fragments by leading finally to an integrated vision of the self.

END NOTES

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Source:

Secondary Sources:


