The bulk of Thomas Hardy’s poetry is biographical in nature. Though not strictly confessional and marked often times by deliberate reticence, his poetry is deeply personal. Hardy’s remark quoted in his biography by his wife, Florence Hardy that there is more biography in a hundred lines of his poetry than in all his novels, has declared the personal quality of his poetry (The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1962, p.392). As a poet writing unto the very end of his long life – Hardy’s poetry tends to be retrospective in nature. Thus, the essential pattern of his poetry is of Now and Then and Time the subject that runs through the greater part of his nine hundred-plus poems.

Time, however, is a subject, basically so fraught with abstractions, that it becomes necessary to look into some of the major philosophical opinions. However, the concept of time yields varied and diverse meaning to the philosopher, the scientist, the naturalist and yet another to the experiencing individual. To the layman, time is so event-based a consciousness that life and time are often understood synonymously. In fact, in any attempt at exploration or explication of the one, the other becomes the logical premise or reference point.
Amongst the postulates of the major philosophers on time, the seminal concept must surely be that of Plato. Plato spoke of time as a ‘moving image of eternity’ while Aristotle brought his definition closer to life as human beings experience it, when he defined time as ‘the Life of the Soul in movement as it passes from one stage of Act or experience to another’. This is what man ordinarily understands of the concept. To him time projects itself through his experiences and it is always in a state of movement forward. He is the connecting link between these episodes – hence time – past, present and future, stand connected through the experiencing self or ‘soul’. Time to him is an empirical concept.

The philosopher may speak of time as ‘a priori’, i.e. independent of all experiences, but the experiencing individual would perhaps more readily identify their beliefs with the definition by St. Augustine (rather than the Kantian ‘a priori’), and not solely because of the mystical poetry of the words that time is ‘a present of things past, memory, a present of things present, sight and the present of things future, expectation.’ Time as projected through human consciousness and perception, shapes as memory, sight or expectation, i.e past, present or future.
Sometimes, as with Hardy, the dividing lines between the past, present and future may not exist. G.J. Whitrow in *The Natural Philosophy of Time* (London, 1961) offers the following explanation as to the origins of the concept of time:

The psychological origin of the concept of time is therefore to be found in the conscious realization of the distinction between desire and satisfaction. The sense and purpose of associated effort is the ultimate source of the ideas of cause and effect; but it was only by a series of scientific abstractions that men eventually arrived at the concepts of a uniform temporal sequence and a definite causal process.

Thus time-awareness is awakened as a result of yearning which demands satisfaction so that man resolves and moves towards this goal. He marks the period of effort by a series ‘scientific abstractions’—time, as ordinarily understood.

The most commonly experienced form of this abstraction is ‘clock-time’ which Whitrow also describes in his book as time-continuum. It is the visually continuous, infinitely divisible time generally measured by clocks and timepieces. This is the time that dictates the life and movement especially of the urban, industrial man. This is not the time of human experience.

‘Cyclic time’ is the abstract division of time into periodic cycles giving us years, months, seasons, days and nights, and hours.
Cyclic time is pivotal to man: this is the aspect of time he is most familiar with. Interestingly, however, with reference to human experience, cyclic and clock time are experiential concepts as they gain meaning only at the level of personal experience. The division of time cannot be experienced, save what happens in it. Thus, modern man's daily routine has to be explained in terms of this division of time that consequently leads him to the hypothetical division of time into past, present and future, thereby imposing a time-logic on the flow of life.

Whitrow also speaks of Human time as a period in cyclic time that lingers long in the collective unconscious (e.g. "October Revolution" – lingers on much beyond the actual period of cyclic time "October"). A personally significant moment in human life (of love, despair, etc.) becomes an unforgettable experience. Human consciousness alone defines time, which otherwise, is meaningless and unrelated to human life. An aspect of Human time is Individual time. Here man's past which is burdened with unfulfilled potentialities, vague urgings, undetermined fancies become the basis of measuring time.
That time is irreversible is a concept that all philosophers have stressed. Each moment, each fraction of time differs from the predecessors as it does from its successors. Thus, ‘No two leaves are alike” declared Leibniz propounding his theory of ‘Les Indiscernible’.

Albert Einstein spoke of the time-space phenomenon – the past, present and the future, as relative to position both in time and space. The location of the observer in relation to the observed would determine what constitutes time past, present or future.

In sleep and dreams, past, present and future blend into a moment out of time, extra-temporal as Marcel Proust terms it in *Temps Retrové (The Past Recaptured)*. He believed that memory was the mode of awakening our ‘being’ in the past experience; when recalled, this being from the past experience blends the now and the then and to-be-present, past and future – into a moment out of time.

Henri Bergson spoke of external and internal time or *La durée* or duration. He spoke of it as ‘The shape taken by the succession of our states of consciousness when our inner I lets itself live, that is to say, when it refrains from establishing a separation between its present state and the preceeding states’ (*Oeuvres*, p.67). He speaks of intuition as the mode of perceiving *La durée*, by intuition meaning
something more akin to imagination. The empirical experience of
time thus is not mechanistic or mathematical but biological or
anthromorphic, where consciousness, which is described as based on
memory, becomes the only instrument of apprehending time. True
time thus becomes beyond any measurement or divisions into past,
present or future.

Thomas Hardy’s attitude to Bergson’s philosophy of time was
dismissive. Hardy dismissed Bergson’s theory of time considering it a
restatement of earlier well-known philosophy (dualism). Hardy in a
letter to Dr. C.W. Sleeby says about Bergson’s theory ‘... you may be
rather shocked at some views I hold about his teaching ... his is rather
an imaginative and poetical mind than a reasoner’s, and that for his
charming and attractive assertions he does not adduce any proofs
whatever ... I fear his theory is, in the bulk, only our old friend.
Dualism in a new suit of clothes – an ingenious fancy without real
foundation, and more complicated than the fancies he endeavours to
overthrow’. (Life, p.369) However, just as Hardy’s poetry reveals his
belief that the man transcends time through memory, similarly does
Bergson’s belief in the inner time or duration of memory (la durée
intervieure) that exists apart from chronological time. In “The Clock
of the Years” (481) he speaks of the memory of his beloved having survived her death — ‘The Memory of her/Had lived in me’; while numerous poems of memory testify to his belief in the transcendence of time by memory. Bergson’s belief is of internal time — duration or durée, the term given to the succession of states of consciousness when it does not make any separation between its present and past states. The apprehension by the inner states of consciousness of time is not clock time but true time which is beyond measurement or division into past, present or future. The apprehension is in timeless moments where past and present are unified in a mental representation. Memory plays a crucial role in this. In Bergson’s own words, la durée is dependant on memory: “There is no mood, however, no matter how simple which does not change at every instant, since there is no consciousness without memory, no continuation of a state without the addition, to the present feeling of the memory of past moments. That is what duration consists of. Inner duration is the continuous life of memory which prolongs the past into the present, whether the present distinctly contains the ever-growing image of the past, or whether, by its continual changing of quality, it attests rather the increasingly heavy burden dragged along
behind one the older one grows. Without the survival of the past in
the present there would be no duration only instantaneity” (“The
Creative Mind”, 1946). 5

Hardy’s creative imagination prolongs the past into the present
in his poems, memory being apprehended through imagination.
Bergson’s *la durée* is apprehended through ‘intuition’ which is
defined as the faculty that apprehends the wholeness and the true
reality of thing. It is very similar to creative imagination.

Bergson’s *la durée* ignores the reality of past and present – just
as Hardy’s memories move between the past and present ignoring
time barriers.

Bergson’s internal duration held, that there is a continuous life
of memory that prolongs the past into the present, whether the present
contains a clear, ceaselessly growing image of the past or whether it
rather testifies, through its continuous change of quality to the ever
increasing load as we grow older. Without the survival of the past into
the present, there would be no duration, only instantaneity. This
internal duration is thus Bergson’s interpretation of memory.

Bergson’s argument that the only time that truly exists is the
past, finds an interesting echo in Hardy’s poetry. Bergson’s
explanation is the future is yet to be and hence lacks reality, while the present is just a fleeting instant that moves into the past at the very point of perception. Thus, with Hardy as with Bergson, sometimes the dividing lines between the past, present and future cease to exist: the consciousness of the experiencing self may coalesce them into one whole. Hardy views not only his past and present as a continuum but, in instances of discovering the linking consciousness of others, separated by years, he can now even generations dovetail into a comprehensive whole: 'It bridges over the years to think that Gray might have seen Wordsworth in his cradle, and Wordsworth might have seen me in mine'. (Life, p.386)

But it is with Marcel Proust that Hardy's concept of time and memory shares greater similarity. Proust declares in The Past Recaptured (1970)⁶ his inability to live in the present basically because he can rue or savour that present only when it is past. In "Self-Unconscious" (270)⁷ Hardy says similarly:

> Along the way  
> He walked that day,  
> Watching shapes that reveries limn  
> And seldom he  
> Had eyes to see  
> The moment that encompassed him.

Again in "The Rambler" (221) he admits:
The tones around me that I hear,
The aspects, meanings, shapes I see,
Are those far back ones missed when near,
And now perceived too late for me.

Proust’s statement in the same work mentioned earlier, that ‘past times to me is present space’ stands again paralleled by the quoted lines from Hardy, although a sizable number of Hardy’s other poems also echo the same declaration.

In Hardy’s journal dated 4th December 1890 (Life, p.230) is his realization “I am more than convinced that persons are successively various persons, according as each special strand in their characters is brought uppermost by circumstances”. This almost reads like a corollary to Proust’s assertion that ‘each man is a swift, uninterrupted succession of selves. Sometimes they are disconnected. It is only in the retina of the mind, memory, that we can hope to recover and recognize previous selves, even discover a thread of unity’. The importance of memory in recognizing the ‘various persons’ within one person is established in Hardy’s remembrance of his late estranged wife in her various ‘person’ – a child (“Places”), daring horsewoman, sweetheart, stranger and after death, the ghostly symbol of lost love. It is the action of memory alone that ‘unites’ these ‘various persons’ into the composite character of Emma Hardy.
Even Hardy’s famous theory of ‘exhumed emotion’ finds a parallel in Proust. Hardy declared in Life (p.378): ‘I have a faculty (possibly not uncommon) for burying an emotion in my heart or brain for forty year and exhuming it at the end of that time as fresh as when interred’. He gave as an illustration, the poem “In the Time of the Breaking of Nations” (500). It was based on an emotion experienced in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War and exhumed nearly forty-five years later, in 1914 during the war with Germany. Innumerable poems of childhood and youthful incidents were recalled in poems when he was past eighty years old.

In the earlier quoted work of Proust, he too reveals a similar thought:

A moment can endure in the consciousness, unimpaired, simply because it has lain forgotten, untouched by habits, change, reflection. Intrinsically, it is the same moment, or rather, the nearest approach to identity possible in the human context. It is too, a moment which has been outside time for some time. (p.8)

Hardy, Bergson and Proust all believe in the importance of involuntary imagination the action of which can take one out of chronological time where past and present are often inextricably integrated into a moment ‘out of time’ or ‘extra-temporal’.
Again, Hardy and Proust echo Bergson in their recognition of the inevitable issue of self-analysis in a succession of juxtaposed states.

END NOTES

5. *Ibid*.