The dominant theme of Hardy's poetry is of 'exhumed experience', or memory of experience. Hardy possessed a remarkable memory and power of total recall that enabled him to draw on his early experiences again and again for the subject of his poems. About this unusual gift Hardy has this to say: "I have a faculty (possibly not uncommon) for burying my emotions in my heart or brain for forty years and exhuming it at that end of time as fresh as when interred."¹ Thus, on several occasions during a poetic career of nearly six decades, Hardy was to write poems whose origins lay in real life, in actual experiences of early life. One such remarkable example is "He Never Expected Much" (873) written in his eighty-sixth birthday, where a childhood experience is 'exhumed' after a period of nearly eighty years and presented with the vividness of an immediate experience.

However, it is seldom that Hardy is able to view these past experiences in an attitude of pure nostalgia without making the past the base from which to critically appraise the present. As mentioned
in the introductory chapter, the basic pattern of Hardy's poetry of personal time is of 'Then and Now'. This is very much of a piece with what Hynes\(^2\) calls the basic 'antinomial' nature of Hardy's poetry whereby special aspects are highlighted by the presence of a contrasting situation placed alongside it. The remembrances of the past stand out against the contrast provided by a 'now' or a 'later' period.

However, although a modest number, there are poems where he does suspend, however briefly, this objective, analytical and ironical approach. These few poems are important because they indicate that in Hardy's attitude to the past there does exist a mode of perception where he is content to see the past purely as time that is past. He makes remarkably little or no attempt to place the remembered experience alongside his present for the sake of ironical contrast. In them he appears content to accept the linear progress of Time. He remembers them simply because at the time of their occurrence they had so impressed him so as to be 'interred' in his 'heart or brain' and their exhumation many years later helps him go back in time with fond nostalgia.
In Hardy the perceptions of Time and Space are both closely linked as well as quite divergent. Hence, while on the one hand Time stretches out beyond the bounds of historical past, Space is mostly limited to the cramped, precisely defined boundaries of his homeland, Dorset. Yet, the two are linked and interwoven through the experiences and recollections of the poet and the other local inhabitants.

In “The One We Knew” (227), it is Hardy’s grandmother Head, a local woman, whose memory of events of long ago, narrated to the eager, raptly attentive young minds around her, not only brings alive the past, but keeps it so.

With cap-framed face and long gaze into the embers –
We seated around her knees –
She would dwell on such dead themes, not as one who remembers,
But rather as one who sees.

She seemed one left behind of a band gone distant
So far that no tongue could hail:
Past things retold were to her as things existent,
Things present but as a tale.

Her remembrance of the past goes beyond nostalgia, beyond mere recollection, to become a perception a seeing, for she is ‘not ... one who remembers/But one who sees’ the past. Thus, while not in denial of the passage of time, she can look behind her to a time in the past
and still be able to distinctly view that event from where she is now, as though the event had remained frozen in time while she moved on in time. Thus while she recounts those events from the past to the children gathered around her, investing them with endurance and life of current happenings. Her listeners sense this: her recollections, gradually begin to feel a part of their experiences too – as if they too had shared the actual, original events. This legacy of memories passed unto the children serves to bridge the generations and events both important and trivial, as well as manners, customs, mores are kept alive and transmitted to the future through the mode of memory.

The history of the specific space, i.e., place and its people, become an inheritance that is both deeply influential as well as a controlling and restricting factor in so far as such shared, common memories serve to separate the group from the rest, knit them into a oneness by making them distinct from the rest. It makes for the peculiar rootedness and loyalty to the place of one’s birth, to the people of one’s youth, it creates the unquestioning and unchanging attachment to the soil of one’s past and finally that is the cause of that attachment to the past that we see in Hardy.
Hardy remembers that “her gaze, as she spoke of things gone distant/So far that no tongue could hair”, were fixed on the ‘embers’, remnants of a roaring bright fire, yet with warmth and glow enough to draw close and warm those ‘seated round her knees’. She, as well, is described as ‘one left behind’ by earlier times and mates. Yet, it is through the medium of her memory that the ‘dead themes’ come alive to become more than just a recounting fact. They gain sufficient vigour to actually intrude into the present and undermine its impact: “Past things retold were to her as things existent/Things present but a tale.” This memory from Hardy’s childhood ‘exhumed’ after a great passage of time, recounted with the clarity and detail of scenes still visible, forms a point of confluence of the past and present for Hardy.

Interestingly, now through his personal memories of his childhood, he revives the ghosts of what were themselves memories of even earlier unseen times. They now became part of Hardy’s memories and thus give life and length to what were themselves originally the girlhood memories of his dead grandmother. Thus, his present encapsules in it the times gone by – past that crosses the bounds of personal past and does go far beyond that to assume the shape of a legacy or inheritance for the community. His present
moves forward carrying the sum of memories of times even before the start of his personal history.

A poem that touches upon a similar theme is "Places" (293).

NOBODY says: Ah, that is the place
Where chanced, in the hollow of years ago,
What none of the Three Towns care to know—
The birth of a little girl of grace—
The sweetest the house saw, first or last;
   Yet it was so
   On that day long past.

Nobody thinks: There, there she lay
In a room by the Hoe, like the bud of a flower,
And listened, just after the bedtime hour,
To the stammering chimes that used to play
The quaint Old Hundred-and-Thirteenth tune
   In Saint Andrew's tower
   Night, morn, and noon.

Nobody calls to mind that here
Upon Boterel Hill, where the waggoners skid,
With cheeks whose airy flush outbid
Fresh fruit in bloom, and free of fear,
She cantered down, as if she must fall
   (Though she never did),
   To the charm of all.

Nay: one there is to whom these things,
That nobody else's mind calls back,
Have a savour that scenes in being lack,
And a presence more than the actual brings;
To whom to-day is beneaped and stale,
   And its urgent clack
   But vapid tale.

_Plymouth, March 1913_
One of the poems in a series of twenty one poems, "Poems of 1912-1913" – written after the sudden death of his wife, Emma, this poem too speaks of a past and a memory that though not experienced by him personally, has become a part of his past and his memory. Emma’s birth, her listening in childhood to the clock in her room, her, bold and carefree cantering on horseback down the steep ‘Boterel Hill’ in her youth (at this stage of her life, Hardy had entered her life and the memory is surely also his own of her daring horsemanship) are events that have been so often narrated, that they have now become his memories. Thus, these ‘places’ are dear to him, he says in the poem, because of their association with the person who meant so much to him for so long. While they may be significant to nobody else, these events from Emma’s past are so vivid in his memory that they appear to him to have a ‘savour’ that his present lacks, and have a life and ‘presence’ more than his actual present. His mind relives the times that he never experienced personally, but which have become such a vital part of his memories, that he confesses that by comparison ‘today is beneaped and stale/And its urgent clack but a vapid tale’. Hence, like “One We Know” (227), this poem too emphasizes the important role communicating and sharing play.
Memories cross the barriers of individuals and time within the context of a close relationship.

Similarly, in "Old Furniture" (428) Hardy uses the mode of memory to travel back in time to a period much before his personal history. He uses the 'relics of householdry' – heirlooms that 'date from their mother's mother' to imagine and so relive times that he could not possibly have known personally. Her sees the 'hands of the generations/That owned each shiny familiar thing' and in a fantastic imagery has visions of the earlier and even earlier owners of those relics handling them: 'Hands behind hands, growing paler and paler'. He sees the former owner's 'foggy fingers' move to 'set the minutes right' on the 'clock's dull dial'; he sees fingers 'dancing' on the old violin 'just over the strings by the nut' and the bows receding and advancing as it produces a melody in 'airy quivers'; above all, he clearly sees a face lit up and gradually melt into darkness as he imagines the tinder box picked up, a match struck, lit, and blown off.

Memory is the mode used to converge time, to hold the past in the present. "One We Know" (227), "Places" (293) and "Old Furniture" (428) show the poet's ability to evoke memories of times he has not personally experienced. His imagination enabled him to
forge a link with the past through the memories of others which he has made his own. The past therefore is not his past but that of others and the time he goes back to are well before his lifetime, sometimes, generations before him. Therefore, his memory and imagination together help him to break the barriers of time and individuality. He 'exhumes' the memories of the lives other than his, of lives before him, and succeeds in converging the past and present as so much of his past is interwoven in his present.

Yet another poem that displays a presence of a similar past, though in a perception that is chiefly romantic, where Hardy speaks of a time before his own is “A Church Romance” (211). It deals with the oft-repeated, much-loved subject of the Hardy parents' first meeting and falling in love. The poet retells, with the graphic detail of a present happening, bringing to it an immediacy, the romance of the first meeting – she at the pew and he at the musician's gallery, and the instant attraction between the two. The details, lovingly narrated years later by her, are treasured and kept alive in the memories of the children so that several decades later Hardy recalls in his poems those very details of time and atmosphere, as if they were part of his personal experience. The poem then moves on to recount the events
subsequent to that period of the story that occupies within the poet’s own living memory: he recalls their times much later, when after ‘long years thence .... Age had scared Romance’, i.e., when age and custom had dulled the fire though not the affection. Then, “... at some attitude of his or glance/That gallery scene would break upon her” – the past would replace the present and she would see him again, with the clarity and detail of a vision, as he was then – “... as a minstrel, ardent, young and trim,/Bowing ‘New Sabbath’ over ‘Mount Ephraim’.” At an instant of time, the past could be recalled at will to replace the present.

The poem throws light on an interesting aspect of a relationship: its moments in the present are buttressed by its own special past. In effect, Hardy attempts to show here that a personal relationship of some depth, does carry its own history so that its moments are complexes of now and then. For all times to come, Jemima Hardy’s view of her husband will carry the legacy of her first sight of him. Memory will ensure that her perspective will be a complex of the present and the past “And long years thence, when Age had scared Romance,/At some old attitude of his or glance/That gallery-scene would break upon her mind/With him as minstrel,
ardent, young and trim”. Hence, her perspective in the present must necessarily be different from those of others. Thus, if common, shared memory units a group, a couple, a community, by the same token, it also segregates them from the others.

“The Roman Road” (218) examines the poet’s personal past in relation to the general past or the memory of the group, the society or the place. If in “The One We Knew” (227) Hardy’s stance was that individual memory is a mode of keeping alive through time the legacy of a historical past, then in “The Roman Road”, he uses childhood memory to demonstrate that a personal memory may even exist which may have little to do with the historical past. This basic contrast is the motif of the poem; his own, very personal memory is so vastly different, in fact, in compete contrast to what other “thoughtful men” share.

The Roman road running ‘straight and across the heath’ evokes in the more sensitive and imaginative of the locals, the ‘thoughtful men’ of the poem, thoughts of the past that lead them to ‘delve and measure and compare’ the days of ‘Now and Then’. Such intent and conjoint memory raises ‘visionings on the vacant air’ of ‘helmed legionaries, who proudly rear/The Eagle as they pace again/The
Roman Road'. The historical past of the road, handed down from the distant past through folk legends and beliefs is today so much a part of the local ethos that they can visualize the 'helmed legionaries', see clearly the eagle-emblemed pinion fluttering as they proudly 'pace again/The Roman Road' – a shared memory of incidents and personages from beyond their actual personal experience. Memory is handed down through time to become a part of the local ethos and through it, of individual memories.

But the poet’s personal memory cuts across this historical past so that for him, the sight of this Roman Road evokes a totally different vision – 'But no tall brass-helmed legionnaire/Haunts it for me'. It is his 'mother's form ... guiding his infant steps' that rises in front of him as he remembers vividly the childhood experience of accompanying his mother through that 'ancient thoroughfare'.

The Roman road, like the memory associated with it, persists through time and change, imbuing the local consciousness with its particular history. Only, occasionally, in a context such as Hardy's here, does a personal experience create a memory of its own. Then, the two, the private and the communal memory, however divergent,
succeed in a co-existence of sorts, though it is clear from his poem that the personal memory retains the foreground.

The association that Hardy has nurtured through life between the road and that particular childhood experience, however, does not deny or nullify the common memory; all it does is add yet another dimension, a personal and particular one, for a specific individual. The poet can understand, and anticipate even, the historical association of others, he is not oblivious of it, but he chooses to dwell on the specific, personal association. To the received tradition, as it were, the poet has added a personal facet.

Hardy travels back years to 'exhume' an experience and present it with the freshness and detail of an immediate event. A childhood experience remembered years later is graphic with details that would belie the passage of years. In “Childhood Among the Ferns” (846) he recalls (though the poem carries no internal evidence, apart from the sophistication of expression and imagery, that this is a poem of recollection) a time in childhood when he had taken shelter from drizzling rain under 'tall-stemmed ferns spread out luxuriantly'. At first the rains, falling on his canopy of ferns dripped down the fronds leaving him dry. But as the rain beat harder on his shelter of
ferns, he got a sprinkling yet took delight in pretending to ignore the 
wet on him. When the rain ceased and the sun came up, he was loath 
to leave that shelter of the now steamily drying, limp fronds. He 
experienced then a complete harmony with his surroundings and such 
a total sense of well-being that he felt he 'could live on here till death' 
confident about his conclusion that the years ahead could not reveal a 
better world than his present then. He experiences at that point of 
time, so early in life, the poem seems to suggest, that fulfillment and 
contentment in search of which a man might spend his entire life. 
Hence, he questions, as a man having reached his destination might 
justly do, the very relevance of the future experience and years: 'Why 
should I have to grow to a man's estate/And this afar-noised world 
perambulate?'

The significant feature of this poem, written after an impressive 
gap of time between the childhood experience and its exhumation in 
this poem, is the assurance of having reached the final goal at the start 
of his journey of life. The irony is clear: the fulfillment and 
contentment he had hoped to use his life to strive for were already 
reached, however briefly, when merely a child. The man of mature 
years, with a life rich with experience, reflection and success behind
him, remembers this childhood experience not as mere nostalgia, or as an example of childish naïveté, but as ephiphanone, a moment of unequivocal truth. Even while so young, Hardy’s aims and goals were apparently very clearly defined, and he did not waver from it through life, the poem’s tone of something like smugness seems to suggest. It is with a sense of wonder, if anything, that he recalls not just the sense of contentment but also the sagacity of the child.

The really noteworthy aspect of “A Childhood Among the Ferns” (846) is this that this is poem of the memory of sensations and feelings. A very ordinary childhood incident which is externally almost a non-event dealing with a child sheltering from the rain under the ferns, is transformed by the focus on the sensations and deep contentment experienced by him then. The vivid, graphic visual details of the incident (e.g. the damp steam rising out of the drying fronds) by showing the contrast between the wet world outside and snugly ensconced child under the canopy of huge ferns serves to emphasize the contentment experienced. Years later, Hardy is able to remember vividly that contentment and sense of satisfaction.

Memory of sensation again, this time the sensation of taste, is the subject of a simple lyric, “The Pat of Butter” (786):
We tasted – all so yellow –
Those butter pats, cool and mellow!
Each taste I still remember, though
It was so long ago.

From the above two poems it becomes clear that it is not exclusively the visual aspect of an experience that remains in the memory: sensory, tactile impressions as well can remain deeply buried in the mind to resurface many years after the event.

Despite the nostalgia pervading most of the poems occasioned by personal experiences at Upper Bockhampton, a few of the poems have an underlying grimness that cannot be ignored. A poem popular with anthologists, “The Self Unseeing” (135) is one such poem. It recounts with vivid detail the old house and a specific occasion of domestic happiness. The man, probably Hardy’s father, is at the violin, the dancing child is probably Hardy himself. The mother is by the fireside, gazing contentedly – her very contentment warming them up, like the warm glow of the fire by her side, and wordlessly urging them to excel, so that ‘he’ bows his strings ‘higher and higher’ and the child’s passionate dancing reaches almost a frenzy where he feels he ‘danced in a dream’. This memory of the scene of domestic bliss is undercut by Hardy’s awareness that though ‘Blessings emblazoned that day’ they were truly unaware of the greatness of the moment –
'But we were looking away’. With the same grim nostalgia he remembers vividly too those occasions where he has come face to face with harsher realities, although he has shown towards them the remarkable calmness and acceptance of the countrymen that he basically was. “Seen by the Waits” (325) is a recollection of an event during what apparently is caroling at Christmas (‘Through snowy woods and shady/We went to play a tune ... By the light of the Christmas moon;). The lady of the house is described as a ‘lonely manor-lady’. In the midst of their singing, they look up to see the reflection of the lady in the mirror ‘airy dancing’ in her nightdress alone in the room, thinking herself unobserved. His attention is caught by this unusual, almost unreal sight – he finds it a ‘strange phantasmal sight’. Only later they learn that the lady’s joy was a private, secret response to the news of the death of her errant husband. Hardy must have been struck by the difference between appearance and reality, between the public and private faces of people. Experiences like these, providing vital glimpse into the human condition, must surely have been the shaping force behind the non-judgemental, compassionate yet sharp, keen perception so characteristic of him.
A darker memory of the past forms the theme of “At the Wicket Gate” (375). The ‘church-chiming’ indicates that the general populace is congregated for service and all is quiet and deserted outside – ‘no one was nigh’, till this ‘loneness’ is broken by the arrival of the three: ‘Her father, she and I’. He then narrates, with remarkable reticence, yet in an evocative, pensive style, the story of a major emotional crisis of near tragic proportions. Their secret and tragic meeting stands in contrast to the sheer mundaness of the sudden flow of people from the church. ‘Amid them/We parted for good’, he says, mixing and merging with the crowd to go their separate ways. Looking back at that occasion of sadness, Hardy is struck by the irony emerging from the difference between appearance and reality: amidst the humdrum routine existence, posing as one of the crowd, were the three who had come to a momentous and tragic decision that would change the course of their lives – as also by the fact that:

Of the churchgoers
No single one knew
What a play was played under their eyes there
As thence we withdrew.

The grimness of these recollections are replaced by a lighter touch as he wistfully, even playfully, remembers certain other times of his boyhood and youth. In “To Louisa in the Lane” (822) Hardy travels
back scores of years to his boyhood to remember a young classmate, ‘Louisa’, whom he had met out of class one evening in the street but had been too shy to speak to. Years later, as an old man, he remembers the occasion and bids her meet him in the same lane:

Meet me again as at that time
In the hallow of the lane;
I will not pass as in my prime.

His attitude to the past is a little complex here. While he makes no attempt to deny the reality of passing time (‘I will not pass as in my prime’), yet his travel back to his early youth is undertaken as if everything else is frozen in time. The scene of the episode is as if still as it was then, the lane exactly the same so that if he could only go back there physically, they could continue from where they left off. This is the same attitude to the past that is more clearly stated in the deeply moving poem about the tragic couple in “Beyond the Last Lamp” (257). Hardy remembers a certain wet evening when he lived in London. During one of his regular evening walks beyond Tooting Commons, beyond the last street lamp, he comes across a loitering couple. He knows nothing of them, yet their body language speak of immeasurable sadness:

‘Two linked loiterers, wan, downcast’. 
He wonders who they are and what their great sorrow might be. Hours later, as he returns, he finds them still lingering, still downcast and still totally oblivious of the rain. Their deep despair is so evident that Hardy is unable to forget them, the evening or their sorrow. Thirty years later he recalls that scene with tender compassion. For him the street, the lovers are as if frozen in time: as long as his memory remains, the street, the couple, the rain will forever exist together: ‘Without those comrades there at tryst/Creeping slowly, creeping sadly/That lone lane does not exist’.

Hardy’s memory works by strong association. Thus the incident described above of the ‘mysterious tragic pair’ had made such a deep impression on him that the whole incident – the landscape, the time, the rain and the pair – are fused together to make one complete experience. However, amongst his more light-hearted recollections like “Louisa in the Lane” (822), is a poem from his early youth “To Lizbie Brown” (94). He remembers a young woman who had caught his romantic fancy and he recounts with great pleasure his still-fresh memory of her physical charms: her smiles, her singing, her arch look, her ‘bay-red’ hair. Wistfully, he remembers her marrying
and moving away from his life. There is mild regret that he did not carry his infatuation to its logical conclusion:

But Lizbie Brown,
I let you slip;
Shaped not a sign;
Touched never your lip
With lip of mine,
Lost Lizbie Brown!

But the entire recollection is one where the regret, though genuine, is not dark or passionate as it generally is with Hardy, but just lightly touched upon. Both “Louisa in the Lane” (822) and “To Lizbie Brown” (94) show Hardy looking back with pleasure at a time of youthful infatuations with only just a mock-serious hint of regret at missed opportunity. “Faint Heart at a Railway Train” (516) carries the same wistful, but basically pleasurable recollection.

The poem “Days to Recollect” (792) presents two contrasting occasions from the past – the first ‘that day in Fall’, and the second ‘that sad November’ in a manner so characteristic of Hardy’s ironic perspective that though the remembrance of ‘that sad November’ is evidently painful, yet the joy of the earlier recollection of a day of togetherness of ‘that day in Fall’ serves to off-set or minimize the tragic undertone of the later memory.
Similarly, despite the concluding lines of each stanza’s hint of the subsequent dark, sad days, the exuberant joy pervading the poem “A Bygone Occasion” (557) makes this a poem of joyful remembrance. The grimness of the lines concluding each stanza – two lines that indicate a less happy present from which the bygone occasion is recalled – only serves to heighten, by ironic contrast, the joy of a memory of a time of youth, love and happiness. A similar attitude can be seen in “Logs on the Hearth” (433). The poems is dedicated to the memory of a beloved sister, Mary Hardy, who, the poem tells, had been a friend more than a sibling. The poem is in ‘memory of a sister’, the sub-title declares, but it is as much in the memory of the apple tree of their youth which now lies cut in logs, burning in the hearth. Each fork, bole and bark of this, erstwhile tree is familiar as it lies burning now. However, it is not the regret at the time that is past that pervades the poem, but the sense of pleasure at the memory of the joyful camaraderie between the siblings.

These poems of his youth, dealing with subjects that are dear to him primarily because they are viewed from such a distance of time, show Hardy’s basic acceptance of the irreversibility of time. He does, however, understand the importance of memory in giving life and
length to events and people from his past. The poems discussed earlier, viz. "One we Knew" (227), "The Roman Road" (218), "A Church Romance" (211) bear testimony to the fact that events and people even from the dim past are kept alive through the mode of memory: 'The memory of you lived in me', he says in "The Clock of the Years" (481). It is a source of much of life's pleasures, as the poems discussed have shown, "Joys of Memory" (367) has Hardy admitting clearly that as each day dawns, he remembers 'a day of like date' from the past and spends 'hour by hour' relieving the remembered times – 'old hours re-greeting'. Events, sensations and emotions are reawakened or 'exhumed' and he experiences them yet again with the same intensity:

'... bring they must/Such throbs as at first'.

Hence, running through all his poems of the past is Hardy's acknowledgement of the importance of memory. "Old Furniture" (428) demonstrates Hardy's awareness that through imagination the past can be brought alive to become a part of the living present. The poem centers around the sense of connectedness with the past that Hardy experiences whenever he comes across ordinary household
items passed on to him from the earlier generation: 'relics of householdry/That date from the day of their mother’s mothers’.

In each stanza he pictures other times, other hands handling the family heirlooms now in his possession. He visualizes the fingers caressing the knobs and curls of the old furniture, delicately adjusting the hands of the old clock, or lovingly fingering the strings of the viol, or a face quickly lit up by the momentary flash of the tinder box. The objects are items of daily use and their polished and time-worn appearance takes Hardy to the times past when they were part of his ancestors’ lives. He pictures generation upon generation of them – ‘hands behind hands growing paler and paler’ – all members of the same family (‘Its shape the same’). Through these items he goes back in time and forges a link with the past, seeing his own life as a continuity.

Just as he did in “One We Knew” (227) Hardy shows here too that memory can bond generations together and create tradition. Hardy also shows that memory need not always be of experiences personally undergone – his grandmother’s stories (“One we Knew”), his parents’ love story [“A Church Romance” (211)] and here in “Old Furniture” (428), his memories are of times he could never have
known. Thus, imagination creates memory that helps link other earlier lives, earlier times with the present and awakens an individual to the awareness that his life and his time are not in isolation. Each carries forward with them the past.

The majority of the poems of nostalgia show Hardy generally accepting the flow of time and making no effort to transcend or freeze time. The poems “Where they Lived” (392) and “Life Laughs Forward” (394) “The Tresses” (404) demonstrate this specially. In each of these poems, the poet or the dramatic persona (“The Tresses”) looks back at a past with the awareness that the remembered perfection and happiness of that time cannot be found or even repeated in the present. There is no rancour or bitterness at this realization: just calm acceptance.

“Where they Lived” (392) describes, as the title suggests, the surrounding area of a former dwelling. Its ‘dishevelled’ and unkempt condition is described in detail while all the while he remembers its former look of elegance suggesting the health and happiness of the family within. Its companion piece, “Life Laughs Onward” (394) goes on to describe, in a similar vein, the changes the years have brought upon ‘an old abode’ – a former home. His observation of the changes leads him to realize that Life has indeed ‘laughed and moved
on unsubdued'. The only comment he offers at the very end is a terse
"Twas well" signifying an acceptance of the passage of time. It
signifies as well his recognition of change as an integral part of life
and of natural law – so that his spontaneous and involuntary ‘regretful
mood’ is no more: it has, as he says, ‘died on my tongue’.

The persona in “The Tresses” (404) looks at her limp, grey hair
and remembers how beautiful it was, both in damp as well as dry
weather, when she was a girl. Here too there is a wistful look behind,
but no denial of the changes wrought by time.

Hardy’s basic antinominal perspective does make him consider
also those events and situations that seem to throw a challenge to time
(though, significantly, there are only a handful of such poems). In
“Outside the Casement” (626) there is a mild attempt to deny time
with the naïve query:

    Should we counterfeit
    No knowledge of it
    And stay the stroke that would blanch and numb?

In a rather bizarre analysis, Hardy proves in “Heredity” (363) that the
hereditary characteristics passing from one generation to the next
through time actually does defy time:

    I am the family face
    Flesh perishes, I live on.
“On a Discovered Curl of Hair” (630) speaks of a curl of hair cut and presented in youth to the love lore poet to ‘abate the misery/Of absentness’. While the rest of the hair succumbs to the ravages of time and turns grey, this one curl remains ‘untouched by time’ and still gleams ‘live brown as in its prime’. It has escaped the clutches of time; indeed it has defeated time.

Similarly, in the “Selfsame Song” (552) it is the song of the bird, like the ‘family face’ of the last poem, that has triumphed time. The bird and the listeners change but the ‘selfsame’ song goes on through generations of birds and hearers, apparently defying time.

“In a Museum” (358) carries the same thought to a more abstract, more philosophical conclusion: the songs of this ‘ancient bird’ are not truly over; somewhere in the ‘Universe unending’ they continue to exist so that time itself begins to appear unreal:

Such a dream is Time that the coo of this ancient bird
Has perished not, but is blent or will be blending
Mid visionless wilds of space with the voice I heard,
In the full-fugued song of the Universe.

Likewise with the kiss [“The Kiss” (401)]. Though an event of long ago, Hardy surmises that though where ‘the kiss is gone none can tell’, yet he believes that
It cannot have died; ...  
Somewhere it pursues its flight,  
One of a long procession of sounds  
Travelling ethereal rounds  
Far from earth’s bounds  
In the Infinite.

Thus, despite the far greater number of poems indicating Hardy’s acceptance of the flow of time, he does revel, in his true antinomial way, in occupying a seat in the Treasury Bench, as it were, and examining his beliefs from the other, opposite side. Hardy generally does not demonstrate this denial of time evidenced in the above few poems, in his other writings. He is very aware, as a man with such close moorings in the rural way of life might most naturally be, of the flow of time as an integral feature of temporal existence: “The Missed Train” (759) most explicitly states the acceptance of the past as a period that is over as well as implicitly accepts time’s forward movement when he says:

Dim wastes of dead years bar away  
The from Now.

The irrevocability of the past is perhaps the reason for Hardy’s wistful look backward which he describes as ‘That fond, sad retrospective sight’ [“Conjecture” (418)]. This acceptance of time’s relentless march forward [“Life Laughs Onward” (394)] coupled with
the knowledge of its irrevocability clearly is the foundation of the
pensive and evocative poem “Silences” (849). The poet examines and
portrays in detail the various grades, types and measures of silences —
the silence hanging over a corpse or croft, the sudden silence of a
ringing belfry after the last peal, the eerie silence of a lonely pond
which has been the scene of a recent death by drowning, and last of
all, the still silence of a deserted old house where one has been born
and reared amide love, laughter and companionship. Describing the
last type of silence as the most ‘forlorn’, he says, though the presence
of the past is near palpable for him, yet

It seems no power on earth can waken it
Or rouse its rooms,
Or its past permit
The present to stir a torpor like a tomb.

The past is indeed the past and beyond recall. Overall, Hardy
accepts that the flow of time is one directional and non-reversible. He
firmly believes

‘Nothing backward climbs’ and ‘twice over it cannot be!’
[“A Second Attempt” (720)]

END NOTES

University Press, 1961, p.44).