

DOKTORI DISSZERTÁCIÓ

**In the Mood that Stillness Brings:
Man and Nature in Thomas Hardy's Poetry**

László Noémi

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**In the Mood that Stillness Brings:
Man and Nature in Thomas Hardy's Poetry**

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THESES

Thomas Hardy lived the larger part of his life under the reign of Queen Victoria, in an age marked by multiple scientific inventions, industrial revolution and urbanization, related social tensions and a developing sense of alienation, a gradual process of democratization and by the almost invisible yet utterly significant transgression of social boundaries of which Hardy himself was a telling example; an age that witnessed the development of sociology and psychology as new branches of science; while his life is a link between the age of Darwin, Newman, Ruskin, Matthew Arnold and that of W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot or James Joyce.

While I found his novels worth reading and remarkable because of a certain lyrical quality of his prose, Hardy's poems quite often sounded to my non-native English-speaker's ears as dry and prosaic, as strenuous and twisted, as strange and obstinately pessimistic, until I have discovered the characteristic Hardyesque atmosphere that runs like an underground stream in the poetry and mostly surfaces in his shorter, "non-philosophical," usually elliptical poems, in pieces like *I Look Into My Glass*, *Neutral Tones*, *In the Time of "The Breaking of Nations"*, *In a Eweleaze Near Weatherbury*. I think these are the poems and this is the mood that carry the germs of the Hardy-disease that comes in an unnoticed and gradual manner over anyone with an affinity for the special blend of resignation and hope, of neutrality and passionate interest, of wide, bleak landscapes framed by a few twigs like the veins on an ageing hand, to be experienced in Hardy's poetry.

Hardy's poetic force lies not so much in the language but in the atmosphere of his poems, in his treatment of memory and the passing of time, in his acceptance of the worst aspects of the surrounding world paralleled by constant intimations of the best. Another characteristic aspect of this poetry is its treatment of various elements of nature, of the order of things in the universe and of the often torturous and antagonistic, yet at other times harmonious and memorable encounters between man and nature. I set out to write something that is most probably in the neighbourhood of a series of interrelated essays on man and nature in Thomas Hardy's poetry.

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Each chapter-title has the same structure: a line of verse or prose taken from Thomas Hardy, followed by a subtitle designating the general topic of the chapter in question. The first chapter, *No Answerer I: Mother Nature and the Immanent Will*, analyses the problems of creation, deity, destiny and the situation of humanity in this universe as seen by Thomas Hardy in verse.

Hardy's ideas about the origin of and general laws active in the world were shaped partly by the Christian system of values on which he grew up in an isolated, rural English settlement, partly by his increasingly agnostic views developed after the age of twenty, upon reading works signed by Darwin, J.S. Mill, Huxley, Hartmann, Comte; while an undeniable part in his gloomier outlook were to play certain events of his life which he, with more or less success, had carefully tried to conceal from the larger reading public.

The general message – to the extent to which it is acceptable to generalize anything in the work of a writer who went out of his way to ensure the world that his verse did not contain any consistent philosophy – is that man lives in an entirely neutral world, on the whole indifferent to his suffering; that creation is actually a “blunder of overdoing,” because man's mental and emotional faculties are far more developed for him not to see the drawbacks of the system with his own mortality at the head of the list. Nature is a motherly figure of originally benign intentions but she is either blind, must be asleep or simply indifferent – because there seems to be no other answer to the question of how could things evolve the way they did on Earth if there is any trace of consciousness, morals or ethics in the supposed creator of the universe.

To explain the impulse or intent at the bases of creation, Hardy had devised the notion of the Immanent Will, an unconscious, blind and uncaring Entity in action, a supreme cause and explanation to all earthly events. Then he borrowed the notion of human perfectibility from Comte and integrated it in his own system of “moments of vision,” and did not exclude the possibility of this Immanent Will gradually becoming conscious and thus more merciful – an attitude often termed as “evolutionary meliorism.” Nevertheless man, as seen by Hardy, is still at the mercy of blind forces such as Fate or Incident, for the working of which there simply is no rational explanation to be found and

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no reasoning might be established for the existence of such things as ethics or morals in the rules that govern the natural world.

However – and now we have passed to the second chapter, *The Plain Sense of Things: a Evolution and Never-Napping Time* – there is nothing to be surprised about in the arrangement of things on Earth, because Nature is also the location for the eternal Darwinian struggle for life: by the second half of the nineteenth century bird and beast are no longer innocent creatures in the garden of Eden but parties engaged in a never-ending battle as “Nature is red in tooth and claw.”

Hardy's poems are in a way records of the passing of time: leaves fall, snow covers an empty road, rain glides over a landscape smearing it with mud, trees are planted and they seem to suddenly have grown as they obscure the sky, birds pipe their songs and fall, to become a “pinch of unguarded dust,” flowers are cut and left to wither away; and all this seems to constitute an almost unbearable burden in the poetry, nevertheless Hardy's lines will not break under this weight, because beside the acute attention given to and record of all the forms of transience in the world, Thomas Hardy has also got eyes to discover certain subtle forms of immortality in the surrounding world. Leaves may fall but they will grow and fall again and this will go endlessly on, birds may turn to dust nevertheless their song remains the same across the centuries, landscapes may change or be changed by man's interference – yet the rain is most likely to keep falling the same way it did in biblical times. What distinguishes the natural world and its inhabitants from humanity in Hardy's view is that the former possess a certain kind of “blessed hope” and innocent trust in the way of things owing to which the natural world does not carry the burden of conscious unhappiness which affects humanity.

The third chapter, *An Authentic, Indubitable Spectre: Human Shows and the Haunted Narrative* deals with Hardy's views on life after death and his special attitude sometimes termed “an obsession with ghosts.” Perhaps because he started to publish his poetry at the age of almost sixty and kept writing poetry well beyond the age of eighty, when he practically stopped attending mundane events because the number of his acquaintances no longer among the living was greater than that of those alive, this poetry is permeated with figures of fleeting ghosts, with churchyards or lamp-lit, deserted

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streets, with morbid narratives of people thought to be dead who reappear, or people who are awaited but never show up – rendered in the re-modelled style of the ballad-tradition.

Hardy's preoccupation with ghosts is quite easy to demonstrate just by a brief list of poem titles, such as *I Have Lived With Shades*, *A Christmas Ghost Story*, *The Souls of the Slain*, *The Ghost of the Past*, *The Graveyard of Dead Creeds*, *Spectres that Grieve*, *Voices From Things Growing in a Churchyard*, *I Travel as a Phantom Now*, *The Shadow on the Stone*, *The Phantom Horsewoman*, *The Haunter*, *The Voice*, *The Head Above the Fog*. Hardy is also the author of a series of love-poems written at the age of seventy-two, on the loss of his first wife, when he revisited the places of their courtship and early marriage alone, and had somehow managed to become the haunting figure of his own past. The journey and the related poems even led to certain critical writings that liken Hardy to Dante on his way in a personal purgatory while the youthful ghost-figure of Emma, the deceased wife, is not far from that of Beatrice.

The majority of Hardy poems featuring ghosts, but the series of *Poems of 1912-13* in particular, draw their roots from the same basic situation: that of the traveller; as if these transitory figures, balancing on the borderline between the real and the unreal, were only accessible to those who themselves are in a stage of transition, between two locations, between two states of mind, between two emotions or between two stages in their life – a basic situation that also appears in Hardy's poems closely linked to the ballad tradition, thus these are also examined in the third chapter.

The fourth chapter, *Things Sinister and Things Sublime: Nature as Vehicle for Restrained Emotion* deals with the way in which Thomas Hardy uses the scenery in his poems to reflect the feelings or mood of his characters; the way in which he presents Nature in an anthropomorphic disguise and the way in which personal history always gains emphatic importance over the great events of human history. This way of presentation with Hardy is also a modality to establish a certain kind of harmony that seems to be created to make up for the generally pessimistic atmosphere of the poems. Milieu and person, scene and figure interpenetrate and become one and this is how despite all the tension and contrast at work in it, the world is finally balanced and at peace in Hardy's nature poems.

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For Hardy, the humblest man or woman always bears greater significance than the great slices of landscape that often seem to render the human figure insignificant. Even if his immense, brooding landscapes seem to dwarf his characters, it is the characters who are the focal point of any scene – and while bent at keeping an eager eye at the natural scenery around, Thomas Hardy is primarily interested in the human event that takes place amidst the scene, even if – and the chapter develops this topic as well – his poetry is also relevant for the way in which the perception of landscape and the approach to various prototypes of scenery have significantly changed during the Victorian and into modern times.

Starting from the Romantic visionary stage, where man's encounter with the natural world is actually an act of merging with the cosmos, an act of sublime courage granted only to the elect and also a means of defeating time, when nature is most often the location for cathartic experiences and the scenery is equally imbued with a sense of exquisiteness and grandeur, all this is chastened and tuned down with the Victorians who were to discover the fact that his own mind can at times be the most dangerous possible place for a man to turn to, consequently in Hardy there is no act of volition for that “merging with the cosmos,” things simply happen because it is in their way to be so and man cannot defeat time. Man is simply a part of the landscape because he cannot be otherwise. At the same time that landscape is also a part of man, haunted by his memories and marked by his toil.

The way in which man marks the landscape by his toil can also appear under a more controversial light, and these aspects are examined in chapter five, *The Sundial on a Wet Day: Acceleration, Urbanization and the Ancestral Line*. This chapter deals with the inventions that occurred in Hardy's lifetime and the way they have affected the connection of humanity to the natural world, the aspects of urbanization upon certain elements of rural life and the effects of acceleration on man's perception of time and space. If previously we have argued for a sense of harmony, balance and unity established in the Hardy poems between man and nature, now we discover how the poet also noted the threads of separation, how he sensed a certain growing distance between man and nature; a distance that is the direct result of evolution, or of the industrial revolution, one might add: while humanity became increasingly sophisticated on the

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intellectual and technical side, it has lost an important part of its instinctual connection to the elements and has “forgotten” or has been compelled to forget how to resonate with nature – one more source for brief tragedy and gloomy mood in Hardy’s verse.

Surprisingly enough, the age of gramophones and motorcars, of umbrellas and electricity is actually dwarfed by the “sturdy muteness” of our forerunners who had the gift of accepting the world the way it manifested itself to them. The inherent message seems to point towards a sense of futility apparent for Hardy in the great race into the future: while going head over heels to create a mechanical world of his own invention, man actually narrows his senses and severely reduces his natural environment in variety, he seems to lose touch with elementary attitudes such as patience, will and enduring.

The chapter also comments Hardy’s extensive knowledge on the Wessex landscape, his interest taken in the situation of farm labourers and his triumph over a process that might be termed “the death of the landscape”, namely the way he managed to transcend the passing of the sublime and the celebration of the picturesque, and how he established his special kind of landscape of a “chastened sublime.”

The first five chapters are focused on nature, or primarily on nature and man seen in his connection to this entity he tends to destroy. The sixth chapter, *A Confederation of Words: Language – A Poet’s Second Nature* deals with Hardy’s language and with the multiple arguments it gave birth to; it deals with the way in which Hardy, like a clock-master, made the linguistic mechanism answer his exact demands in his design of a world consumed by nostalgia and decay.

Owing to the fact that the object of this dissertation is the nature poetry of an author who had the occasion to exercise his hand on twenty novels before he finally turned to verse, the treatment of his poetic language includes a brief history of the process that led to Hardy’s breach with the novel as a genre, a breach that was mostly caused by the harsh criticism his views expressed in his prose were subjected to and by the conviction that opinions expressed in verse could pass for something much more harmless and innocent as compared to those forwarded in prose.

The chapter deals with various elements of Hardy’s specific poetic vocabulary, with the way in which his new approach to language and mood influenced English poetry for more than half a century, with the connections between his idiosyncratic approach to

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language and his training as an apprentice in (Neo-)Gothic architecture. Examining the problem of language being the result of an organic development or much rather a system resembling an institution, we arrive at the conclusion that for Hardy, language is an institution, but an institution made before we were born and which binds us in frames that we have not chosen. Whatever motivated the first language, whether conscious plan or natural imitation, it is lost. This language, derived from ancient roots, evolves by endless modifications whose ultimate implications cannot be gauged. It is thus both like an institution, of which we have only partial control, and like an organism, whose growth we cannot predict.

Hardy had to face multiple antagonistic voices in the criticism of his literary language, especially as in the early twentieth century, when he published nearly all his poetry, the explosion of technology, communications, radical politics, radical secularism, sexual revolution, syncretism in architecture, artistic experimentation, surrealism and world disorder had greatly influenced his reviewers, that the reaction to his style was actually an “organic growth” that developed from a general situation characterized by an intricate net of radical changes to which the poet had sensitively resonated.

The seventh chapter, *The Mournful Many-Sidedness of Things: A Farewell to the Romantics* examines Hardy's nature poetry in the light of Wordsworth's and Shelley's poetry. In a famous diary note Hardy remarked how Wordsworth could have easily peeped into his cradle; then Hardy is often said to be a continuator of a line of poetry in English, the greatest representative of which is William Wordsworth; while in his book on the anxiety of influence Harold Bloom relates Hardy's poetry to Shelley's and argues that it was in fact Hardy who had established Shelley as his literary ancestor.

The chapter tries to find an explanation for the way in which Wordsworth's enchanted forests, solemn riverside landscapes and snow-capped mountain peaks re-appear as grey pond, heath-land, lonely tree and barren hill-side among Thomas Hardy's lines, for the heightened interest in some obscure Power, some Logic of transcendental nature, some palpable Explanation that prevails in the oeuvres of both poets and for the tensioned dichotomy characterizing the outlook of both authors. It also sets out to examine how while with Wordsworth there is a certain sense of reciprocity in the relationship of nature and imagination, as human imagination re-creates and interprets

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nature and nature simultaneously channels the force of our imagination, Thomas Hardy describes a type of nature unable to cherish her children, he severs the contact present in the vision of the Romantics and views humanity as screened from nature by their own petty suffering and by the inherent neutrality of all things and processes on earth.

With respect to a possible connection between Shelley's and Hardy's poetry, the argument is that even if scenes beaming with the light of spirit and beauty abound in Shelley's verse, even if Thomas Hardy preaches a gloomy world, there are instances in the poetry of the former that might have provided the seeds of Hardy's greyish plant, there are "obscure clouds moulded by the casual air" there, that might have provided for the rainy background, too. Topics related to sexual conventions as well as metaphysical speculations seem to have been extremely delicate to tackle during the creative period of both the authors discussed and both had to face difficulties owing to the overt expression of their religious (agnostic) views.

Chapter eight, *Iced Airs Wheeze Through the Skeletoned Hedge: Thomas Hardy's Poetry in Time* deals with the way Hardy's voice and mode of approach as we have experienced it in his nature poetry has survived in the work of later poets, because for over half a century Thomas Hardy was a well-known man of letters and the writing of his poetry – as distinct from its publication – covers the same broad period of time. The man who grew up and began writing in the world of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, George Eliot and John Stuart Mill, lived on and continued publishing as a contemporary to T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence, and from the point of view of his poetic influence this proved to be a crucial fact.

Perhaps the greatest driving force of this lasting influence was the fact that whatever the approach, antagonistic as Eliot's or F.R. Leavis', or appraising as Ezra Pound's or Philip Larkin's, poets could simply not adopt a neutral stance in the matter of Hardy's poetry: its multiple contrasts and gloomy attitudes, its special treatment of language and mood triggered an itch to take sides in all those who have clashed with it.

Commenting a comparative analysis of Yeats' *Leda and the Swan* and Hardy's *A Thought in Two Moods* produced by John Powell Ward in his *The English Line: Poetry of the Unpoetic from Wordsworth to Larkin*, the chapter distinguishes two basically different poetic modes of the turn of the century and then examines how the one

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represented by Hardy's poem developed through the poetry of Robert Frost, W.H. Auden and Philip Larkin. The argument follows Hardy's "working method" by which he took brief moments of everyday human experience, with the most often occurring topics of death, birth, loss or some sort of misunderstanding and framed them in a carefully designed textual universe, remarkable not through its ornaments but through its puritan discipline and minimal use of poetic heavy artillery while as a result the framed human element gained heightened significance.

In the concluding part of the chapter we witness how the same simplicity of language, discipline in cadence and rhyme, presentation of a brief moment of queer experience in the first person and the silent figure of a domesticated animal characterize Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, respectively how W.H. Auden's 'Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,' turns out to be a poem that bears certain striking resemblances to Hardy's *Shut Out that Moon*, while it also stands in contrast to it, accomplishing a special kind of synthesis between the painful rejection of the romantically idealistic attitude and the subliminal affinity to the very same attitude while it also marries elements of puritan expression and hyperbolic wording, characteristics of the two distinct groups of poems discussed in the opening of the chapter.

Chapter nine, *No Wizard Wields the Witching Pen: The Thomas Hardy Paradox*, focuses on several controversial aspects of Hardy's life and creative work, as well as on a set of paradoxical features of his creative attitude and nature poetry. It comprises the discussion of topics related to Hardy's life, autobiography and biographies, to his secretive and shy attitude towards the subject of his childhood and private life; related to matters of class-division and the limits of fiction and fact when dealing with the events of an author's life; related to the extent to which any person – no matter how dedicated to the task – can re-create or erase certain elements of the personal past.

There follows a discussion of the exasperation felt by so many of his readers at his 'philosophy' (especially in the case of the 'philosophy' decanted from the novels) arguing that in fact Hardy's effect on his readers – his power to move them in particular – did not really seem much connected with this particular philosophy. Such a hiatus irritated the late Victorian mind accustomed to continuity between attitude, system and feeling, alike in Tennyson as in George Eliot, but the same kind of exasperation can be

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found in a generation of readers whose responses to art have been influenced by T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence.

Paradox and controversy are quite frequent instances in Hardy's poetry, because he was a poet "with one eye fixed on the boundless universe and the other on the darkling thrush," because his attention extends from rural corners to the macrocosm, not only of the physical world beyond but also of the unmapped reaches of the mind and the heart and the spirit. This is how in certain respects, in the opinion of several of his critics, Hardy's work is viewed as a see-saw between sensation and reflection, between inspiration and sober reason – and perhaps this special blend of contrastive elements is responsible for his lasting poetic influence as well.

Finally, I should add that in the process of gathering material for this thesis I have never regretted my choice of topic; that it has never occurred to me to try and change it. In a way, reading the criticism on Hardy's work and the studies in his life and times had an aspect that was not far from engaging into an intricate detective story; that beyond having finally produced a series of essays in an attempt to take a stance in this world dominated by sharp contrasts and twilight harmonies, the most important thing that happened to me was that I had opened a door upon a universe that is definitely worth further exploration.