Building Tension: Gothic Rhythm and Pastoral Imperfection in Hardy’s Poetry

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“Mr. Hardy has never written with flowing rhythms,” wrote an anonymous reviewer of Poems of the Past and the Present (1901), “his verse often halts, or dances in hobnails.”¹ Contemporary criticism of Thomas Hardy’s poetry is littered with references to his “woodenness of rhythm,” “technical inexpertness,” “clumsy metres,” and “lack of metrical finish.” His poetry is described as “slovenly, slipshod,” and “uncouth,” “poorly conceived and worse wrought.” Referring to poems in Hardy’s first collection, Wessex Poems (1898), one critic laments, “were the form equal to the matter, they would be poetry.”² It was in reaction to this kind of criticism that Hardy wrote in the Life, “there was … as regards form, the inevitable ascription to ignorance of what was really choice after full knowledge.”³ In an attempt to show that his poetry was not simply the sudden and undoubtedly short-lived whim of an established novelist, Hardy states that “[y]ears earlier he had decided that too regular a beat was bad art.”⁴ His explanation draws upon his years of training and experience as an architect, which, according to Linda Shires, “was not merely a preliminary career but an important crucible for much of his art and labour to come.”⁵ Hardy writes:

He had fortified himself in his opinion by thinking of the analogy of architecture, between which art and that of poetry he had discovered … there existed a close and curious parallel, both arts, unlike some
others, having to carry a rational content inside their artistic form.\textsuperscript{6}

Recognising this parallel, Shires asks for “a preliminary leap of imagination” when she suggests that a set of poems can be compared to a building, “composed of parts, of temporal layers, of pieces.” In addition to a “strong skeletal design,” and “supports like arches and spaces,” this building also has “flying buttresses and, in Ruskin’s words ... ugly goblins, and formless monsters, and stern statues.” From the imperfect fragments comes “some sort of totality.” This building, argues Shires, “is also the representation of a type of consciousness at work, doing emotional and rational labour.”\textsuperscript{7}

The rational content to which Hardy refers in his statement from the \textit{Life} reflects Ruskin’s view that Gothic is “the only rational architecture.”\textsuperscript{8} In “The Nature of Gothic” (1853), a copy of which Hardy kept in his study,\textsuperscript{9} Ruskin states that Gothic architecture has both external forms and internal elements. The latter are described as: “certain mental tendencies of the builders, legibly expressed in it; as fancifulness, love of variety, love of richness, and such others.” The external forms are “pointed arches, vaulted roofs, etc.” Ruskin goes on to insist that “unless both the elements and the forms are there, we have no right to call the style Gothic.”\textsuperscript{10} What Ruskin describes as the “Mental Power or Expression” behind Gothic architecture reflects exactly Hardy’s belief that bricks and mortar retain memory and can also contain the personality of their creators. The dialectical pairing of the emotions of the builder with the material form of the building in architecture is represented in Hardy’s poetry; but rather than “rational content,” his poetry creates a tension between the expression of emotion and “artistic form.” In an aphorism included in the \textit{Life} directly before the passage on Gothic rhythm, Hardy draws attention to this conflict between natural emotion and art: “Poetry is emotion put into measure. The emotion must come by nature, but the measure can be acquired by art.”\textsuperscript{11} The “art” cannot be too contrived, however, for this will negate the emotions being expressed. For Hardy, the difference between a “living” and a “dead” style “lies in not having too much style—being, in fact, a little careless, or rather seeming to be, here and there.” He acknowledges the contrivance involved in “seeming to be” careless, but, nonetheless, it was “inexact rhymes and rhythms now and then” that were for Hardy “far more pleasing than correct ones.”\textsuperscript{12} Once again, the influence of Ruskin is evident, as in “The Nature of Gothic” he writes, “no architecture can be truly noble which is not imperfect.” It is “Gothic imperfection” which represents a kind of freedom for the workers, showing “their weaknesses together with their strength,” ensuring that “the labourer’s mind had room for expression.” Extending this notion to all art, Ruskin states, “no good work whatever can be perfect,” and then, with further extension, he continues, “imperfection is in some sort
essential to all that we know of life," it is a sign of “progress and change.” Ruskin provides his own pastoral contrast, noting the dialectic at the heart of all living things: “Nothing that lives is, or can be, rigidly perfect; part of it is decaying, part nascent.” Ruskin’s observation that “in all things that live there are certain irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life, but sources of beauty” could easily be written about Hardy’s poetry. In the Life, Hardy wrote he “knew that in architecture cunning irregularity is of enormous worth, and it is obvious that he carried on into his verse, perhaps in part unconsciously, the Gothic art-principle in which he had been trained—the principle of spontaneity.” Shires reads Hardy’s Gothic as “a radical and resistant aesthetic,” as a “thread of Hardyan subversiveness” that, in the “Poems of 1912–13,” “exposes,” amongst other things, “romantic idealism.” Peter Widdowson and Terry Eagleton have noted a similar process at work with Hardy’s so-called “realism,” that the “contradictory nature of his textual practice cannot but throw into embarrassing relief those ideologically diverse constituents of fiction that it is precisely fiction’s task to conceal; it is by ‘not writing properly,’” Eagleton concludes, that Hardy is able to expose the device of humanist-realism. Hardy’s poetic form represents what Eagleton identifies as the “ceaseless play and tension” between “‘rustic’” and “‘educated’ writing,” a tension that threatens to expose the artificiality of pastoral poetry and undermine the ideology of rural peace and harmony. Hardy’s poems are not constructed to represent a perfect landscape or to meet the expectations of his readers; instead, the irregularities in rhythm reflect the vagaries of nature and the contradictions inherent in the pastoral mode, foregrounding the conflicts that are at the heart of Hardy’s poetry of the rural.

“An Unkindly May,” from the posthumous collection, Winter Words (1928), illustrates well the subversive nature of Hardy’s pastoral:

A shepherd stands by a gate in a white smock-frock:
He holds the gate ajar, intently counting his flock.
The sour spring wind is blurting boisterous-wise,
And bears on it dirty clouds across the skies;
Plantation timbers creak like rusty cranes,
And pigeons and rooks, dishevelled by late rains,
Are like gaunt vultures, sodden and unkempt,
And song-birds do not end what they attempt:
The buds have tried to open, but quite failing
Have pinched themselves together in their quailing.
The sun frowns whitely in eye-trying flaps
Through passing cloud-holes, mimicking audible taps.
‘Nature, you’re not commendable to-day!’
I think. ‘Better to-morrow!’ she seems to say.
That shepherd still stands in that white smock-frock,
Unnoting all things save the counting his flock.\(^\text{18}\)

The poem is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, it is an excellent example of the poetic vibrancy of Hardy’s later work. If not unique, it is certainly rare for a poet to write with the energy and purpose that Hardy summoned consistently well into his eighties. For my purposes, the poem is most important for what it reveals about Hardy’s reading of the pastoral tradition. “An Unkindly May” begins and ends with a consciously hackneyed image of the shepherd standing by a gate in stock smock-frock watching his flock. This image of the shepherd represents what had become traditional pastoral, although Hardy has him intently at work rather than in a state of *otium*. Between the artificial pastoral framing of the opening and closing couplets, there are twelve lines, also couplets, of startling imagery. As suggested by the title, this particular spring does not bring with it a gentle, warm breeze; instead the wind is “sour,” “blurting,” and “boisterous,” bringing with it “dirty clouds.” This being a Hardy poem, it is not too long before the focus is on the animals in the scene, but the pigeons and rooks are “dishevelled” and look like “gaunt vultures, sodden and unkempt,” songbirds are unable to finish their songs, and, despite their best efforts, buds fail to open. Separated from this section of the poem, the shepherd is himself a pastoral contradiction. In part, there is an insistence on work: he simply has to get the job done, regardless of the weather, but he is also a stock figure, unaware of the realities of nature. The image of the shepherd is evoked to question the pastoral tradition’s capability when it comes to describing the complexities of rural life. The buds attempting to open in line 9 anticipate Larkin’s “The Trees”: “The trees are coming into leaf / Like something almost being said,”\(^\text{19}\) and despite Hardy’s attempts at saying it, at representing a harsh natural world, the sarcophagus of what had become traditional pastoral, represented here by the stock shepherd and the rigid, regular form of the poem itself, remains. In “An Unkindly May,” Hardy shows that the pastoral tradition is left wanting when it comes to representing a working farm and inclement nature.

The contrasts connoted by the figure of the shepherd, and between the order of his point of view and the disorder of the representation of nature are just two examples of the importance of conflict in Hardy’s poetry of the rural. It is the dialectical relationships in Hardy’s pastoral that make his reading of the mode so complex; but pastoral conflicts are not exclusive to Hardy. In *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes* (1971), Harold E. Toliver foregrounds the contrasts inherent in the pastoral, noting, for example, a number of “dialectical pairings” at work in Virgil’s *Eclogues*, such as the
relative positions of Meliboeus and Tityrus in the first Eclogue: the former turfed off his land; the latter secure in his; or the many competitions that take place, of which the singing contest between Menalcas and Damoetas in the third Eclogue is just one example. For Toliver, the “idyllic element” of the pastoral “habitually calls forth an opposite”; the pastoral setting “is likely to be exposed to such things as industrialism, death, unrequited love, unjust property division, or merely an opposing idea of perfection.” These contrasts, and the tensions caused by them, are recognised by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* (1973). Using the fourth Eclogue as his example, Williams argues, like Toliver, that the “magical Utopian vision” represented by the paradisal pastoral environment “includes within its celebration the consciousness of the very different present from which the restoration will be a release.” Bakhtin notes a critique of the present in his discussion of the idyll in the novel. What he reads as the “Rousseauan line of development” sublimates “in philosophical terms the ancient sense of the whole,” which “makes of it an ideal for the future and sees in it above all the basis, a norm, for criticizing the current state of society.” Similarly, Williams argues that even with “images of an ideal kind, there is almost invariably a tension with other kinds of experience.” In his list of examples,Williams includes a few dialectical pairings of his own to complement those provided by Toliver: “summer with winter; pleasure with loss; harvest with labour; singing with a journey; past or future with the present.”

In this reading of the pastoral, it is the contrast between what *could be* and what *is* that provides a tension central to many classical examples of the mode. Toliver suggests that these “tensive structures” “permeate the pastoral tradition from Theocritus to the eighteenth century,” but does note that the contrasts and the resulting tensions are not explicit in all pastoral, leaving at one extreme the “pure idyll” which “leaves it largely to the reader to remember whatever contrasts the normative world affords.” The reader would, perhaps, need to have experienced these contrasts in order to remember them, and what is “normative” to some, could be considered quite idyllic by other members of the community. Williams is more explicit about the “achievement” of what he describes as the “Renaissance adaptation” of classical pastoral, which finds the literary form separated from any experience of rural life, a process that continued well into the eighteenth century with the Augustans:

> step by step, these living tensions are excised, until there is nothing countervailing, and selected images stand as themselves … Thus the retrospect of Meliboeus, on the life he is forced to leave, becomes the ‘source’ of a thousand pretty exercises on an untroubled rural delight and peace.
Through the process of selection recognised by Williams, the pastoral as a tradition becomes a polite mode of literary expression, with all contrasts and subsequent tensions removed. Much of what became counter-pastoral—the representation of work and death and political themes like the threat of eviction—is found in the classical pastoral of Theocritus, Virgil, and Hesiod and only became counter to the mode at this point in its development. With regard to work, Bakhtin writes that the “labor aspect” of what he describes as the “family idyll” in conjunction with the “agricultural idyll” is of “special importance”: “it is the agricultural-labor element that creates a real link and common bond between the phenomena of nature and the events of human life.” Bakhtin notes that the element of labour is “present already in Virgil’s Georgics,” but it is also a significant presence in a number of other classical works. Hesiod’s Works and Days is, according to Williams, an “epic of husbandry” featuring the working year of “ploughing, tending vineyards, keeping pigs and sheep and goats,” and Theocritus’s Idylls have what Williams refers to as a “working context” that is “recognisable and at times insistent.” Bakhtin adds that what is “especially important” is that “agricultural labor transforms all the events of everyday life, stripping them of that private petty character obtaining when man is nothing but consumer; what happens rather is that they are turned into essential life events.”

In addition to representations of labour, Virgil’s first and ninth Eclogue include the theme of eviction, and what Virgil, Theocritus, and Hesiod certainly have in common, just as Poussin suggests with the famous inscription, “et in Arcadia ego,” is that death is never far away in the landscape of classical pastoral. In countering the polite adaptation of the mode, Hardy is looking back as much as he is looking forward. He returns aspects of the darker side of the landscape to his poetry, and also adds a heightened awareness of the relations of labour and class. It is not only the working shepherd in “An Unkindly May” that begins to make labour visible, for example. At line 5 of the poem, the use of the words “plantation” and “timbers” is a reminder of human agency in the countryside, and the industrial imagery of their creaking “like rusty cranes” reinforces the working context. Hardy’s pastoral provides dissonant voices that reinstate the tension that was at the heart of the classical form of the mode.

In Literature and the Pastoral (1984), Andrew V. Ettin recognises the contradictions at work in “[t]he pastoral impulse toward containment” which “involves holding contraries together in apparent unity, forged by art out of discordant emotions and perceptions.” The apparent unity is the deliberate and artificial form of the poem, within which a number of conflicts take place: there is a dialectical relationship between artifice and reality,
form and subject, and between what has been read as the pastoral and counter-pastoral. “An Unkindly May” illustrates the importance of Ettin’s apparent unity and the tensions that accompany it. Along with much of Hardy’s poetry of the rural, the poem exemplifies what Toliver describes as the “shifting relationship between the poetic enclosure and the exterior world,” between the poem “as a fictional construction”—its very deliberate form—and the reality of its subject. The poem becomes its “own kind of transforming locality capable of reshaping nature in art.” It is how nature is reshaped that is key to understanding the complexity of Hardy’s pastoral. Toliver argues that an “Arcadian retreat is not necessarily a lyric sublimation of unpleasantries” but it is “an image of nature so clearly artful as to suggest openly the poet’s inevitable improvements on it.” In this way, the poem draws attention to its artificiality, emphasising the distance between poetic enclosure and the exterior world. Hardy is doing something subtly different. Although the form of the poem—its shape, even its metre—represents order, Hardy “loved the art of concealing art,” and it is through his use of irregular rhythm that, rather than offering up a kind of paradise, he appears instead to dismantle it.

Toliver uses an excerpt from Emily Dickinson’s “The Wind Begun to Knead the Grass” to show how the “analogy between a poem and a perfect landscape holds to some extent even when the poet makes no explicit claim for it.” Dickinson’s storm is described thus:

The leaves unhooked themselves from trees
And started all abroad;
The dust did scoop itself like hands
And threw away the road.

Toliver acknowledges that the “storm is scarcely gentle,” but argues that through personification and regular form, the “stanza cannot help taming its violence and suggesting a locus amoenus or pleasant place in spite of itself.” According to Toliver, this example from Dickinson “humanizes the leaves and the dust” which “appeases our desire to find correspondences between the human and the natural world.” I would argue that in Dickinson’s poem this correspondence is hardly comforting, and the same can be said for the use of personification in Hardy’s work. Creeping late into “an Unkindly May,” at line 14, the speaker addresses Nature, but she only “seems to say” that she will be “Better to-morrow.” Elsewhere, it is the buds that correspond with the human world, but as this is Hardy’s human world, they have tried to open, to do what is expected of them, but they have failed, ultimately finding some solace in community as they pinch “themselves together in their quailing.” There is a sense of failure, too, with
the songbirds that are given just enough agency to give up. Even the sun is frowning. The prosopopoeia does not, as Toliver suggests, “quiet discord and produce a pastoral harmony and transformation”; instead it brings closer to the reader the violence and destruction of the natural world.

In these examples, the humanising of various elements of nature and landscape does not suggest a *locus amoenus* but the regularity of form can hint at a possible paradise. The appearance on the page of “An Unkindly May” seems to represent order: a neat block of twelve lines between two couplets with the metre controlling the length of the lines, keeping them within a couple of syllables of one another; but the poem is not nearly so regular as it may at first seem. Through the “cunning irregularity” of Hardy’s Gothic rhythm, he is able to point to the cracks in perfection. The effect is illustrated when Hardy’s poem is, once again, compared with the extract from “The Wind Begun to Knead the Grass.” As Toliver explains,

> The two sentences develop in units of eight and six syllables in almost identical metrical arrangements, syntax, and grammar: the twenty-eight syllables move in exact formation, commanding the event to take part in their poetic ritual.

Unlike Dickinson’s formal precision and order, which, it should be remembered, provide a tense opposition to the violence of the storm, Hardy’s “metrical pauses” and “reversed beats” twist and often break the regularity of the metre. Line 3 of “An Unkindly May” reads as regular iambic pentameter: “The sour spring wind is blurtin boisterous–wise,” but with the addition of an extra syllable in its couplet partner, the beat appears to be reversed in line 4, with the foot becoming trochaic: “And bears on it dirty clouds across the skies.” Elsewhere, additional syllables, changing stress, and caesurae all act to trip the metre from time to time, with the unconventional rhythm just about holding the whole thing together.

In contrast to the deliberate irregularity of rhythm, there are poetic techniques at work in “An Unkindly May” that suggest order and harmony. The rhyme scheme of closely observed couplets, for example, is as controlled as it is insistent. In addition to this end-stopped rhyme, Hardy employs other self-reflexive devices including alliteration, as with “sour spring” and “blurting boisterous–wise”; but the musicality of the sound conflicts with the reality of the subject. Similarly, the assonance of lines 11 and 12, “The sun frowns whitely in eye-trying flaps / Through passing cloud-holes, mimicking audible taps,” draws attention to the importance of sound as the complex image compares the visual with the aural; but the image is, ultimately, disharmonious. The contrast created between the order and musicality of the poem and its verbal meaning reinforces rather
than smooths out the harshness of the exterior world being described.

As noted above, it was the “Gothic art-principle” of “spontaneity” that led to the “unforeseen” character of Hardy’s “metres and stanzas,” a character described by him as being of “stress rather than of syllable,” and, most importantly, “poetic texture rather than poetic veneer,” the latter being described as “constructed ornament,” which, as a student of the Gothic, Hardy had been “taught to avoid as the plague” (unlike clichés, it would seem). Hardy’s pastoral poetry does not cover up the rough aspects of rural life or attempt to disguise true nature or feeling with a decorative front. His pastoral is close to the ideal of poetic texture; that is, still manufactured, but seemingly woven from natural raw materials into something that feels real.

There are many times in “An Unkindly May” when Hardy’s Gothic rhythm disturbs the regularity of the poem. Apart from one very notable exception at the end, “The Farm-Woman’s Winter,” from the 1909 collection *Time’s Laughingstocks and Other Verses*, contains far fewer hints from the rhythm as to the horrors within, for although Hardy breaks the iambic trimeter rhythm by using two iambs and then a double-stressed triple foot or bacchius for the first, third, fifth, and seventh lines, he does so consistently. Once again, there is a strict rhyme scheme, on this occasion an ababcdcd alternate rhyme. The poem is divided into two eight-line stanzas, the first of which is:

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If seasons all were summers,
    And leaves would never fall,
And hopping casement-comers
    Were foodless not at all,
And fragile folk might be here
    That white winds bid depart;
Then one I used to see here
    Would warm my wasted heart!
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In conflict with the formal paradise created by the order of the poem, there is a clear longing in the speaker for a paradise that is unobtainable. Seasons cannot all be summers, autumn and winter are inevitable, and with this change of season some birds will struggle for survival; this struggle then foreshadows the loss of a loved one, whom the speaker will never see again. The poem denotes what is wished for, but connotes what can never be, and this contrast is also represented in the dialectic between the paradise possible through form and that which is impossible in the speaker’s reality. The second stanza continues to build on the theme of the absent lover, and is a suitable rejoinder should anyone suggest that hard
One frail, who, bravely tilling
Long hours in gripping gusts,
Was mastered by their chilling,
And now his ploughshare rusts.
So savage winter catches
The breath of limber things,
And what I love he snatches,
And what I love not, brings.44

As with the blustering boisterous wind of “An Unkindly May,” the “white winds” and “gripping gusts” here are alliterative—the almost musical technique at odds with the death and destruction the wind causes. Hardy makes visible the relations of labour, as the dead worker was clearly not cut out for such physical work, but seemingly had no choice but to spend long hours in the field. Like the simile of the rusty cranes, the rusty ploughshare is another reminder of labour in Hardy’s pastoral. The farm implement is given particular importance as a symbol for lost love; its rust suggesting that it has not been used, or at least not cared for, since the lover passed on. The caesura of the comma in the final line provides a jolt; it interrupts the smooth flow of the iambic stress. This conforms to Ruskin’s view that, “monotony in certain measure” can be used to “give value to change.”45 Although I certainly would not describe Hardy’s poem as monotonous, the sudden break is made all the more effective by the regularity that precedes it, providing a rhythmic twist that ruptures the poem, moving the reader closer to the pain felt by the speaker.

The absence of a lover, or the theme of unfulfilled love, which is central to “The Farm-Woman’s Winter” haunts much of Hardy's poetry. The most notable examples are the celebrated poems written for his first wife, Emma, which appear in “Poems of 1912–13,” and then with reasonable frequency in all of his subsequent anthologies. By representing the theme of lost or unfulfilled love, Hardy is, once again, responding to classical pastoral. In Idyll 1, for example, Thyrsis sings of the woes of Daphnis, whom the whole of nature seems to lament as he dies for love, and in Idyll 3, the lover’s serenading of Amaryllis is so unsuccessful that he proposes to lie down outside the cave in which she lives and wait for wolves to devour him. Even the cows in Idyll 4 are pining for their master, Aegon. In Virgil’s second Eclogue, Corydon burns in vain for the slave boy, Alexis; in the eighth, Damon sings of his unrequited love for Nysa, his yearning so strong that he contemplates suicide, and in Eclogue 10, Virgil tells of his poet friend, Gallus, whose love, Lycoris, has left him. The theme occurs in
a particularly classical way in Hardy’s “The Woman in the Rye,” from *Satires of Circumstance* (1914):

‘Why do you stand in the dripping rye,
Cold-lipped, unconscious, wet to the knee,
When there are firesides near?’ said I.
‘I told him I wished him dead,’ said she.

‘Yea, cried it in my haste to one
Whom I had loved, whom I well loved still;
And die he did. And I hate the sun,
And stand here lonely, aching, chill;

‘Stand waiting, waiting under skies
That blow reproach, the while I see
The rooks sheer off to where he lies
Wrapt in a peace withheld from me!’

There is a contrast immediately between the cold and discomfort of the woman’s situation and the firesides that are near. There are two speakers, one of whom is recalling someone absent, and there is the working context of the field of rye. The female speaker is yearning for her lost love, full of regret, feeling culpable for his death. The peace she imagines that he has found remains utterly out of her reach. The neat four line stanzas and the regular alternate rhyme scheme appear to suggest that the poem, as formal paradise, offers a stark contrast to the woman’s misery, but the rhythm of “The Woman in the Rye” is quite unusual. Rather than a strict tetrameter throughout, all of the lines in the first stanza are made up of nine syllables, creating a dactylic trimeter with a slightly irregular stress on the last foot, so lines 1, 3, and 4 consist of two dactyls, followed by an amphimacer. The second line, however, breaks this pattern. It begins with the double stress of a spondee, followed by an amphibrach, finishing with the quadruple foot, the choriamb. This irregularity is contrasted with the perfect iambic tetrameter of the first and last lines of stanza two, for example, or most pertinently, perhaps, the final couplet, as the order of the poem clashes with the disorder of the woman’s world.

A working context and the longing for a paradise that is unobtainable are both present in “Four in the Morning,” from the 1925 collection, *Human Shows, Far Phantasies, Songs, and Trifles*. The poem makes clear the conflict between the reconstructed reality of the events described and the ordered form of the poem, but similar to “The Woman in the Rye,” although the metre is iambic tetrameter, Hardy employs irregular rhythm and unusual stress at times. In “Four in the Morning,” it is not the “cleaned up”
or artificial pastoral tradition that is unable to contain Hardy’s complex adaptation of the mode, here it is the classical pastoral of Hesiod that is found wanting. The poem begins:

At four this day of June I rise:
The dawn-light strengthens steadily;
Earth is a cerule mystery,
As if not far from Paradise
At four o’clock,
Or else near the Great Nebula,
Or where the Pleiads blink and smile:
(For though we see with eyes of guile
The grisly grin of things by day,
At four o’clock
They show their best.)

If not Paradise itself, the Earth is at least “not far from Paradise,” although the doubt later shown in the poem is hinted at by “as if.” The images of constellations suggest that the speaker believes at this stage that earth is heavenly, but it is readily admitted that things look different by day. The implication is that in half-light (metaphorical or literal) one can ignore the true nature of the world, much like the shepherd, perhaps, in “An Unkindly May.” According to Raymond Williams, Paradise is a country “in which all things come naturally to man, for his use and enjoyment and without his effort,” but this is not the case in “Four in the Morning,” or even in much of the classical pastoral that precedes it. Hardy’s use of the Pleiades responds to agricultural work in, for example, Theocritus’s Idyll 13: “At the rising of the Pleiades, what time the upland fields / Are pasturing the young lambs, and spring already is on the wane,” and later it is time to “[d]rive the furrow broad and deep, and wear the ploughshare bright.” In Hesiod’s Works and Days, the constellation is again used as a seasonal marker for particular rural tasks:

When the Pleiades born of Atlas rise before the sun,
begin the reaping; the ploughing, when they set.

The reference to the Pleiades not only situates Hardy’s poem within a rural tradition, but also within a classical literary tradition. The ideal construction finally breaks down in the third stanza, which begins with the run-on line from stanza two, “At four o’clock”:

They show their best,) … In this vale’s space
I am up the first, I think. Yet, no,
A whistling? and the to-and-fro
Wheezed whettings of a scythe apace
At four o’clock? …

The beat is reversed for the second line, becoming trochaic, and the extra syllable and frequent caesurae here act to disturb the stanza, just as the speaker becomes distracted. The “[w]heezed whettings of a scythe apace” is reminiscent of Hesiod, who writes, “[w]hen the carryhouse [snail] climbs up the plants to escape the Pleiades … it is time to sharpen sickles and wake up the labourers.” The final stanza of Hardy’s poem reflects on the sudden realisation brought about by hearing a labourer at work so early:

—Though pleasure spurred, I rose with irk:
Here is one at compulsion’s whip
Taking his life’s stern stewardship
With blithe uncare, and hard at work
At four o’clock!

The speaker’s meaning is not altogether clear, and I think his attitude is best understood if “yet” is inserted after the first line. With this reading, the speaker rose with difficulty even as he chose to rise at four, in anticipation of the pleasure derived from an encounter with the dawn or even, perhaps, a day’s writing. The labourer has no such agency; he is at “compulsion’s whip,” and yet accepts his position with “blithe uncare.” Hardy appears to be responding to another tributary of the tradition, what Michael Squires describes as the “modern” or “realistic” pastoral of Wordsworth, as echoes of “The Solitary Reaper” can be discerned; but instead of coming away from the scene filled with joy, Hardy’s observer is disappointed with his own attitude, having compared the relative ease of his life with the conditions that the worker has to endure. “Four in the Morning” is situated within a tradition only to subvert it. Before the useful advice concerning the Pleiades quoted above, Hesiod writes: “If your spirit in your breast yearns for riches, do as follows, and work, work upon work,” but he is not addressing the labourer, his poem calls upon the landowner to “wake up the labourers.” This paradise is a country in which all things come unnaturally to a few men for their enjoyment, as a result of someone else’s effort. In “Four in the Morning,” the hard work and the subjugation of the labourer act to subvert the heavenly picture of rural England constructed in the opening stanzas and seemingly represented by the formal regularity of the poem, although the rhythm is, in fact, closer to Gothic imperfection than to Palladian symmetry. Paradise is clearly unobtainable for the worker who is subject to particular relations of labour. These complex relations of labour and class are often played out as formal disturbances in Hardy’s
pastoral, as he exposes the conflict between the paradise of form and the disorder of content.

In *The Dyer's Hand*, Auden writes: “The nature of the final poetic order is the outcome of a dialectical struggle between the recollected occasions of feeling and the verbal system.”\(^5^6\) This corresponds to Hardy's thoughts on poetry stated earlier, with “recollected occasions of feeling” as the emotion from nature, and the “verbal system” the measure into which it must be put. For Auden, the poet’s “contradictory feelings” are surrendered to the poem, “in which they are reconciled.”\(^5^7\) In Hardy’s poetry of the rural, however, there is no such reconciliation; instead, it is the ongoing disagreements—the contrasts, the conflicts, the dialectical relationships—that form the backbone of his pastoral. For Toliver, “pastoralists in the main tradition” do not impose “a total harmony on nature,” they “suggest that paradise is beyond the reach even of poetry.”\(^5^8\) Toliver’s examples draw heavily on the Romantics and it is they, beginning with Wordsworth, who began to twist, subvert, and overturn the polite form of the pastoral whose selection of material had not included struggles or conflicts, returning to the tensions that were fundamental to the classical form of the mode. Much like the Gothic workmen before him, Hardy certainly does not impose a “total harmony” on nature, his reading of the natural and rural environment responds to the realities of the exterior world. He does not present a verbal harmony, and the controlled form of Hardy’s poetry is disturbed from time to time by the spontaneity of his Gothic rhythm. This deliberate attempt to show the cracks in perfection not only faintly suggests the disorder of the world he describes but also reveals the contradictions inherent in the pastoral mode itself.

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**NOTES**


3 Florence Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy: The Later Years of Thomas Hardy, 1892–1928* (London: Studio Editions, 1994), 78. This biography is published under his wife’s name in two volumes: the *Early Life* and the *Later Years*. Although written in the third person, it is largely the work of Hardy himself.

4 Ibid.
5 Linda M. Shires, “Saying that now you are not as you were’: Hardy’s ‘Poems of 1912–13,” in Thomas Hardy and Contemporary Literary Studies, eds. Tim Dolin and Peter Widdowson (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 145.
6 Florence Hardy, Later Years, 78.
7 Shires, “Hardy’s Poems,” 141.
11 Florence Hardy, Later Years, 78.
14 Florence Hardy, Later Years, 78.
15 Shires, “Hardy’s Poems,” 141.
17 Eagleton, Walter Benjamin, 128-129.
21 Ibid.
24 Williams, Country and City, 18.
25 Toliver, Pastoral Forms, 3-4.
26 Williams, Country and City, 18.
27 “All traditions are selective: the pastoral tradition quite as much as any other.” Williams, Country and City, 18.
29 Williams, Country and City, 14.
32 Toliver, Pastoral Forms, 11-12.
33 Ibid., 12.
34 Florence Hardy, Later Years, 78.
35 Toliver, Pastoral Forms, 12.
36 Ibid.
37 Toliver, Pastoral Forms, 12.
38 Ibid., 13.
39 Florence Hardy, Later Years, 78.
40 Toliver, Pastoral Forms, 12-13.
41 Florence Hardy, Later Years, 79.
42 Ibid., 78-79.
43 Hardy, Complete Poetical Works, Vol 1, 262. Lines 1-8.
44 Ibid., Lines 9-16.
46 Hardy, Complete Poetical Works, Vol 2, 72.
48 Williams, Country and City, 31.
52 Hesiod, Works and Days, 54. 571-573.
53 Hardy, Complete Poetical Works, Vol 3, 22. 16-20.
57 Ibid., 71.
58 Toliver, Pastoral Forms, 13.