The Disappearance of the Real: Obscurity in *Jude the Obscure*

Nobuyoshi Saito

As a sick man’s dreams,  
Creating vain phantasms.

— Horace, *De Arte Poetica*, 7

[His eye] saw as an object what made it impossible for it to see. Its own gaze entered into it under the form of an image at the moment when this gaze was considered to be the death of all images.

— Blanchot, *Thomas l’obscur*, 17-18

After having seen Sue Bridehead disappear into Phillotson’s room to do her ultimate “penance,” the Widow Edlin sighs, saying, “Ah! Poor soul! Weddings be funerals ’a b’lieve nowadays. Fifty-five years ago, come Fall, since my man and I married! Times have changed since then!” (386).¹ This robust pillar of traditional agrarian commonsense deeply deplores the loss of such fundamental distinction in human life as “weddings” and “funerals.” The loss, or change, can be understood both in terms of time and space, as a result of the conflict between the traditional and the modern, and between the rural and the urban.² Hardy’s Wessex is not a timeless locale of rural order and peace— a fit object for, or a construction by, the nostalgia of dwellers in modern cities – , but, as Raymond Williams says, a “border country,” “a changing and struggling rural society” (196), where the “centrality of change, and of the complications of change” has been affecting the inhabitants’ “whole structure of feeling” (197, 209).

About fifty years before Mrs. Edlin’s lamentation, Matthew Arnold had
already experienced similar but cataclysmic changes in his “structure of feeling” on his honeymoon to Dover Beach. Instead of the identity of weddings and funerals, he was threatened by the multiple schisms between sight and hearing, the past and the present, and appearance and reality. “The sea is calm to-night” (1), but “Only … /Listen! You hear the grating roar” (7, 9); “The Sea of Faith / Was once, too, at the full” but “now I only hear / Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” (21-2, 24-5); and

… the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain. (30-34)

The dissociation between sight and hearing, and the severance between the past and the present inevitably split the world into appearance and reality. Truth is located in the sounds now being heard here in darkness: “And we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night” (35-37). The world is, in truth, a field of the night battle fought by undifferentiated bodily masses in an obscurity ever “darkling” into complete darkness. The truth of the world is fast fading into obscurity. A spurious light in “a land of dreams” is fast disappearing, and a lost faith or a crumbling reason can no longer distinguish between friend and foe, good and evil, the true and the false, besieged by terrifyingly formless and imponderable – headless and heartless – blind forces. The only possible light of truth and faith on the battlefield is generated by a pair of lovers themselves: “Ah, love, let us be true / To
one another!” (29-30). The truth of the world dwindles into a tiny flame of the lovers’ truthfulness to each other; religious faith, into a silent vow of their hearts. It may seem a peculiarly “modern ‘existentialist’ kind of love” (Miller, *The Disappearance of God* 251), but it was still hopefully capable of generating the truth and faith out of nothing in a sufficient clarity and splendor.

So does the poet whisper. His voice calls out to his love in the room, “Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!” (5), and urges her, “let us be true / To one another!” The two exclamation marks indicate the speaker’s emotional urgency, and the woman’s silent visage, a visual and spiritual antithesis of the “ignorant armies,” must have been shining “moon-blanced” (8) like “a land of dreams.” Thus the sound returns in the poet’s voice, and the appearance remains in his love’s face. Both could be just as merely auditory, or just as only seeming, because the woman remains voiceless and bodiless. She could be the last appearance, or apparition, desperately clung to by the solitary poet raising his agonizing outcries in the midst of “ignorant armies” on the “darkling plain.” The room they stay in safely together might be, after all, part of the world which only seems to be “a land of dreams.”

About a century before Arnold, a philosophical inheritor of the Enlightenment had rigorously defended the light of reason. “The land of shadows is the paradise of dreamers. Here they find an unlimited country where they may build their houses ad libitum” (37), writes Kant at the beginning of his *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, Illustrated by Dreams of Metaphysics* (1766). This follows the book’s epigraph taken from Horace’s *De Arte Poetica*: “A sick man’s dreams, creating vain phantasms.” Kant scourges as sick dreamers’ raving nonsense some spiritualists’ belief in the existence of bodiless spiritual entity, whose most powerful upholder
was Swedenborg. He refuses to know whether the spirit exists or not, or to understand what the word “spirit” means (42). He starts and ends at the same point of ignorance (112), and concludes by lauding the ignorance as a garden after Voltaire’s honest Candide: “Let us look after our happiness, go into the garden, and work” (122). The garden is the realm of human experience and human reason, and the philosopher’s work there consists exclusively in “recognizing whether the task be within the limits of our knowledge and in stating its relation to the conceptions derived from experience, for these must always be the foundation of all our judgments” (113). Hence, metaphysics should not be a study of immaterial beings putatively existing beyond the physical world, but a study of the human reason operating within the realm of human experience. In short, “metaphysics is the science of the boundaries of human reason” (113). Kant’s adherence to the realm of human experience is the foundation of his philosophical realism or empiricism he inherited from the Enlightenment, and his later transcendentalist analytics “transcends” the realm of human experience, not outward toward the world of spirits beyond the experiential world, but inward toward the analysis of human reason itself, which makes human experience possible in the first place. His transcendentalism “transcends” his own realism within itself; it delves into the world of human experience in order to find the a priori conditions for the very possibility of an experience.

Within the realm of human experience, Kant goes on to diagnose the spirit-seeing as a case of pathological confusion of the internal and the external, the spirit and the body, cognition and perception. He first establishes the distinction between man as intuitively self-cognized and as externally perceived: “the conception which the soul of man has of itself as of a spirit, which, moreover, it has obtained through the contemplation
of the immaterial, *i.e.*, by observing itself in its relation to beings of similar nature, this conception is entirely different from that where its consciousness conceives itself as a man, by means of an image originated in the impression of corporeal organs and conceived of in relation to none but corporeal things. It is, therefore, indeed one subject, which is thus at the same time a member of the visible and of the invisible world, but not one and the same person” (67-8). However, the internal spiritual conceptions often tend to resort to various external physical observations and make the objects “assume, as it were, a bodily garment to make themselves clear” (69), for example, “ideas, which are communicated by spiritual influx, would clothe themselves with the signs of that language . . . . [and] the sensation of the presence of a spirit becomes converted into the picture of the human figure; the order and beauty of immaterial world into fantasies which, under other circumstances, give pleasure to our senses in this life, &c.” (69, 70). These “apparition[s]” or “pictures of the imagination” are intensified and projected onto the external world, by unhealthy — sick — persons with unusually sensitive organs, and finally “such abnormal persons would be confronted, in certain moments, with the appearance of many objects as if they were outside of themselves” (71). Thus, the diseased mind with its useless powers confounds the real and the phantasmal, truth and delusion: delusion is mingled with truth, a real spiritual sensation being, indeed, the foundation, but converted into phantoms of sensuous things. It will further be admitted that the power to thus develop the impressions of the spirit-world into the clear perception of this world can hardly be of any use, because in such a process the spiritual sensation becomes necessarily so closely interwoven with the fancies of imagination that it cannot be possible to distinguish the truth from
the gross surrounding delusions. (71)^5

Or rather, perhaps, the real and the phantasmal are always superimposed more or less upon one another, inevitably making any mode of perceptions a sort of palimpsest. For example, here is an illustration (Plate 1) by Thomas Hardy for his *Wessex Poems* (1898) published three years after *Jude the Obscure*. It is a landscape with some sheep and trees, and with a pair of spectacles superimposed on it. The landscape is in fact a composite of the two different views: one of the landscape seen by the naked eyes as it is, and the other seen through the spectacles. Or rather, since the sight, either with or without the spectacles, presupposes a visual sensory organ, the eyes, as is emphasized by the presence of the spectacles, the landscape consists of the two different modes or moods of seeing: the one natural and the other artificial, the one clear and neutral, therefore, objective, and the other refracted and tinged, therefore, subjective. The landscape itself, then, is split along the rims of the spectacles into two: without, the real Dorset, and within, the imaginary Wessex. Or rather again, the split is in fact a superimposition, or visual palimpsest, for the imaginary Wessex is “seen” on top of the real Dorset. Hardy’s own map of Wessex gives an admonitory explanation: “Italics, small & capital = Fictional names / Upright old text = Real names. It is to be understood that this is an imaginative Wessex only, & that the places described under the names here given are not portraits of any real places, but visionary places which may approximate to the real places more or less” (Millgate 234-5). If the map shows the visual structure of the landscape within the rims of the spectacles, the illustration shows the visual meta-structure of the reader’s vision of Hardy’s fictional world.
Outside the rims of the spectacles, the focus is on sheep, real Dorset sheep, and inside, everything is to be at Hardy’s artistic “focus imaginarius.” The trees on the left are both inside and outside, the trunks outside and the foliage inside, at the same time, apparently with no difficulty, suggesting that after all, inside and outside, trunks and foliage, are vitally connected parts of the same old trees, real Dorset trees. But, one wonders, where would people appear to become visible in the illustration, for example, a lonely traveller or two upon the footpath that runs diagonally across? If the Widow Edlin is safely outside the rims, Sue appears to be perilously within, where weddings almost look like funerals. For Arnold’s poet, the world outside the rims of his spectacles is a peaceful deception, and the only hope is inside, which is illuminated by the hopefully authentic light of true love. Raymond Williams would say that the world outside of eternal bucolic bliss is an illusion, while the world inside of rapidly changing, almost self-disfiguring modernity is the reality. And Kant would advise the amateur illustrator to throw away his clouded and diseased spectacles altogether and look at his own garden with
a naked eye of reason. But the question is, where is the garden, or where is the house for lovers to live in?

*  

As is well known, Hardy wrote in his preface to the first edition of *Jude the Obscure* (1895), as follows: “Like former productions of this pen, *Jude the Obscure* is simply an endeavour to give shape and coherence to a series of seemings, or personal impressions, the question of their consistency or their discordance, of their permanence or their transitoriness, being regarded as not of the first moment” (xliii). Apparently this is Hardy’s last manifesto for his literary impressionism. Conspicuous here is the absence of any reference to the originals or sources of the “seemings” or “impressions,” and to the concomitant notion of correspondence and accuracy. The criteria of consistency or discordance, of permanence and transitoriness, which would be essential indices to the reality or non-reality of the things supposed to generate and underlie all those seemings and impressions, are not regarded as of any importance. What “seems” and “impresses” – the object – is of less importance than the mind to which it seems, and which it impresses – the subject. Thus, literary impressionism reverses value judgments inherent in the causational relationship between object and subject. The mind does not question the consistency or permanence of impressions in order to determine the reality of their material origins; it does away with the notion of their accurate or inaccurate correspondence with the originals. The “consistency” of impressions in terms of their origin is replaced by their “coherence” to each other within the sensory register of their recipient. Since the criteria of permanence or transitoriness is abandoned in relation to the things, now
the seriality or sequentiality of “a series of seemings” is purely a function of the “coherence” registered by the mind, an internal subjective connection between impressions outside of temporal flow in the real world—a connection among a series of present moments of their perception.

Hardy’s almost Pateresque literary impressionism, however, is belied or significantly modified, by his own literary notes as well as a series of his literary essays — “The Profitable Reading of Fiction” [1888], “Candour in English Fiction” [1890], “The Science of Fiction” [1891], or “Why I Don’t Write Plays” [1891]). For instance, in 1891, to the question why he does not write plays, he answers simply that “Because, in general, the novel affords scope for getting nearer to the heart and meaning of things than does the play” (Personal Writings 139). This, in fact, is a succinct repetition of what he wrote in 1881:

Style — Consider the Wordsworthian dictum (the more perfectly the natural object is reproduced, the more truly poetic the picture). This reproduction is achieved by seeing into the heart of a thing (as rain, wind, for instance), as is realism, in fact, though through being pursued by means of the imagination it is confounded with invention, which is pursued by the same means. It is, in short, reached by what M. Arnold calls ‘the imaginative reason.’ (The Life I, 190)

Under the banner of realism, the thing returns to its central position, and so does the concept of correspondence or “perfect reproduction.” The thing is split into surface and depth, the skin and the heart, and the perfection of reproduction, the true poeticality of the picture, depends not on any observation of the surface, but on the penetration into the depth. The mind’s faculty required for realism is neither the ability to receive and reproduce the appearance of things nor the ability to create and invent things out of
nothing, but the ability to discover and reach the heart of things. It is what he calls, after Arnold, “the imaginative reason,” that can uncover the truth of things.

Apparently, Hardy’s focus has been shifted from the truth of the mind to itself as it received “seemings” from the things outside, to the truth of things in themselves as they await to show themselves out of their hidden depth. The shift is, in terms of the mind’s workings, from receptive sensitivity to penetrating imaginative reason, and in terms of things’ activities, from negative appearing to positive self-revelation. In short, the shift is from the mind to things, from impression to expression. And it is along the axis or spectrum of these two opposed concepts — impression and expression — that Hardy’s field of representation of the real is developed.

In 1886 Hardy reiterates his belief in “the heart of things” as a locus of the real, as follows: “My art is to intensify the expression of things, as is done by Crivelli, Bellini, etc., so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible” (Jan, 3, 1886; The Life I, 231-2). His sense of the need to intensify for the sake of a greater clarity betrays his anxieties about the accessibility of “the inner meaning” of things on one hand, and the reliability of the mind’s “imaginative reason” to find it on the other. He warns himself against “the Hypocrisy of things. Nature is an arch-dissembler. A child is deceived completely; the older members of society more or less according to their penetration; though even they seldom get to realize that nothing is as it appears” (Dec. 21, 1885; ibid. 231). The mind is to penetrate the false appearance of things, but more often than not, it simply misapprehends due to its sense of diffidence and self-mistrust and the lack of support from another mind equally self-mistrusting: “Misapprehension. The shrinking soul thinks its weak place is going to be laid bare, and show
its thought by a suddenly clipped manner. The other shrinking soul thinks the clipped manner of the first to be the result of its own weakness in some way, not of its strength, and shows its fear also by its constrained air! So they withdraw from each other and misunderstand” (Jan. 6, 1886; ibid. 232). However, a compromised agreement between the two “shrinking souls,” a weaker form of inter-subjective consensus, would only add another crust to the false appearance. The power to penetrate should be sought in another direction, in philosophy: “Novel-writing as an art cannot go backward. Having reached the analytic stage it must transcend it by going still further in the same direction. Why not by rendering as visible essences, spectres, etc. the abstract thoughts of the analytic school?” (March 4, 1886; ibid.). Penetration to “the heart of things” is to be carried out through abstraction of all that is not at the heart itself; intensification of “the expressions of things” is to be done by the removal of their obfuscating contingencies. Hence the opposition between the two kinds of reality and of realism — the abstract and the material: “Abstract realisms to be in the form of Spirit, Spectral figures, etc. . . . . The Realities to be the true realities of life, hitherto called abstractions. The old material realities to be placed behind the former, as shadowy accessories” (ibid.).

Such a project of Hardy – first to intensify through philosophy “the expression of things” into abstract thoughts, and then to embody those essences visually as spirits or specters – is rather schematic, and, as Hardy himself later confesses, it has been carried out not in a novel, but only “through the much more appropriate medium of poetry, in the supernatural framework of The Dynasts as also in smaller poems” (ibid.). Personification of abstract ideas as spirits or specters simply would not work in the realistic or naturalistic framework of novels; “the old material realities” which novels
deploy to secure the convincing characters and plots cannot simply be their “shadowy accessories.” However, on the critical axis of impression / expression, Hardy persists in refusing the photographic copyism or mechanical reporting of the mere surface of things on one hand, and the self-complacent appreciation of aesthetic impressions as a form of self-expression of one’s own artistic sensibility on the other. For instance, he understands that the principle of the impressionist school is that “what you carry away with you from a scene is the true feature to grasp; or in other words, what appeals to your own individual eye and heart in particular amid much that does not so appeal, and which you therefore omit to record” (Dec. 7, 1886; *The Life* I 241). But “the true feature” of things can express itself only to the true kind of eye, “the spiritual eye”: “Whence arises the art of poetry and novel-writing? Which must certainly show art, or it becomes merely mechanical reporting. I think the art lies in making these defects [i.e. “Nature’s defects” in a woman “not fair to the outward view” in Coleridge’s poem] the basis of a hitherto unperceived beauty, by irradiating them with ‘the light that never was’ on their surface, but is seen to be latent in them by the spiritual eye” (June 1872; *The Life* I 151). More succinctly, “The poetry of a scene varies with the minds of the perceivers. Indeed, it does not lie in the scene at all” (Aug. 23[,1865]; *The Life* I 66), and “Truly has it been observed [by Thomas Carlyle] that ‘the eye sees that which it brings with it the means of seeing” (“The Profitable Reading of Fiction,” *The Personal Writings*, 125). The perceiver’s mind infuses its own spiritual truth into things it sees, and things seen express it as their own inner meanings. The real appears at the meeting point between impression and expression, between the mind’s spiritual eye and the innermost heart of things, as a spirit, a spectral figure, or a ghost.

The real flees from the realm of visibility where the mind’s mechanical
observation and things’ material surface encounter, and yet it remains as a mystery visible only to the spiritual eye of a visionary capable of abstract imagining: “Nature is played out as a Beauty, but not as a Mystery. I don’t want to see landscapes, i.e., scenic paintings of them, because I don’t want to see the original realities – as optical effects, that is. I want to see the deeper reality underlying the scenic, the expression of what are sometimes called abstract imaginings” (Jan. 1887; *The Life* I 242). The artistic style to capture this mystery will no longer be a romantic Wordsworthian realism of perfect reproduction of natural objects, but that of the “mad” Turner in which the object and the subject are fused together into the mystery of the real: “The ‘simply natural’ is interesting no longer. The much decried, mad, late-Turner rendering is now necessary to create my interest. The exact truth as to material fact ceases to be of importance in art – it is a student’s style – the style of a period when the mind is serene and unawakened to the tragical mysteries of life; when it does not bring anything to the object that coalesces with and translates the qualities that are already there, – half hidden, it may be – and the two united are depicted as the All” (*Ibid.*., 242-3). If the madness is a precondition for an absolute coalescence of the subject with the object, those visionaries who try to see the invisible real live their lives in perpetual state of somnambulism:

You may regard a throng of people as containing a certain small minority who have sensitive souls; these, and the aspects of these, being what is worth observing. So you divide them into the mentally unquickenened, mechanical, soulless; and the living, throbbing, suffering, vital. In other words, into souls and machines, ether and clay. . . . [P]eople are somnambulists – that the material is not the real – only the visible, the real being invisible optically. [I]t is because
we are in a somnambulistic hallucination that we think the real to be what we see as real” (Feb. 13, 1887; *ibid.*, 243).

Here is noticeable a subtle but decisive change in Hardy’s perspective. The visionary tries to see the invisible heart of things, and Hardy tries to see the equally invisible heart of that visionary. This is a precise moment of the birth of a narrator as a gazer at his own fictional characters. The narrator observes their “aspects” and discerns their “sensitive souls” “living, throbbing, suffering, vital,” among the multitude of others “mentally unquickended, mechanical, soulless.” These sensitive souls are the living heart of human race as a whole, as opposed to its superficial, mechanical, dead parts sleeping soundly in the material world. If, according to his heart’s need and desire, the sensitive visionary or spirit-seer can believe what he sees as the real or the innermost heart of another, then this vision should also be what the narrator can believe as the real at the heart of human race. If not, both the visionary and the narrator might be all in “a somnambulistic hallucination” in their shared but ever frustrated quest for the real, ever tantalizingly elusive.?

* 

The narrator of *Jude the Obscure*, a self-styled “chronicler of moods and deeds” (278), chronicles Jude Fawley’s life as a moving panoramic visual field. Mostly and most characteristically, Jude’s “deeds” are specifically ocular acts, and his “moods” are motives and conditions that determine the mode of encounter between his mind and the objects of his sighting, an encounter or coalescence of subject and objet in his self.

Jude’s life as a chronicle of his eye’s visual filed begins and ends with
his ocular acts. When he is eleven, at the departure of his schoolmaster, Phillotson, from Marygreen to Christminster, he is moved to tears, looking into a well: “The well into which he was looking was as ancient as the village itself, and from his present position appeared as a long circular perspective ending in a shining disk of quivering water at a distance of a hundred feet down” (5). The “long circular perspective” is both temporal and spatial: it somehow connects the “small sleepy” ancient village Marygreen where the boy is left behind and Christminster as a distant town where his schoolmaster will pursue his “scheme or dream” for his future. If a bright future in a distant town is a “shining disk,” the water reflecting its image is “quivering” as if responding to the tears Jude sheds onto it. At the end of his life, when he is near thirty, Jude sees a complete darkness in the midst of “a warm, cloudless, enticing day” (391), reversing the “shining disk” at the bottom of the dark well into an absolute darkness at the heart of cloudless daylight: “Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There was a man child conceived. . . . Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it” (392). The imperative “let” in this quote from the Book of Job is not enunciatory but performative; the act of seeing is equal to the act of verbal quotation, and both perform the same final act of will, here Jude’s will to see nothing but darkness. Darkness is visible in the form of the absence of any object to be seen. Or rather, Jude’s eye loses the strength to send out its gaze toward any outside objects, and encircles upon itself within. The “long circular perspective” in the well has finally turned into a distanceless and directionless orbicular non-perspective, as it were, confined within its own orb. It is an ultimate form of ocular despair. Between these two ocular acts, Jude’s life has been lived as a chronicle of his eye.
Between the “shining disk” at the beginning and the suicidal “darkness” at the end, there is a whole field of visual experience for Jude. His visual field expands itself in vertiginous circular movements until the very end.

For feeding the rooks he is supposed to rattle away from the field, the young Jude is punished by the farmer Troutham who swings around the boy’s body and beats him with the rattle: “‘Don’t ’ee, sir — please don’t ’ee!’ cried the whirling child, as helpless under the centrifugal tendency of his person as a hooked fish swinging to land, and beholding the hill, the rick, the plantation, the path, and the rooks going round and round him in an amazing circular race” (10). His deed – the act of letting the rooks feed – has been motivated by his mood — his self-identification with the birds: “his heart grew sympathetic with the birds’ thwarted desires. They seemed, like himself, to be living in a world which did not want them” (9). And his experience of the “amazing circular race” leads to an intuitive perception which the narrator, almost regretfully, says Jude is yet too small to fully understand: after the incident Jude walks along the trackway weeping “not from the perception of the flaw in the terrestrial scheme, by which what was good for God’s birds was bad for God’s gardener; but [only] with the awful sense that he had wholly disgraced himself” (10; italics mine). And yet, only two pages later, the young Jude suddenly appears to be grown within the narrator’s mature, philosophical vision sympathetic to, and more importantly, vicariously expressive of the boy’s still inarticulate mood:

Nature’s logic was too horrid for him to care for. That mercy towards one set of creatures was cruelty towards another sickened his sense of harmony. As you got older, and felt yourself to be at the centre of your time, and not at a point in its circumference, as you had felt when you were little, you were seized with a sort of shuddering, he
perceived. All around you there seemed to be something glaring, garish, rattling, and the noises and glares hit upon the little cell called your life, and shook it, and warped it. (12).

The flawed “terrestrial scheme” and “Nature’s logic” are simultaneously perceived and not perceived by the boy Jude. He is too immature yet to perceive, but that he is destined to perceive them is shown in the narrator’s maturer vision. The “he,” the boy Jude, is coalesced with the narrator’s suppressed “I” into the joint “you” in a generalized philosophical statement. Also this is the precise moment when the narrator’s technical third-person point of view is coalesced with the character’s first-person point of view under the pressure of irrepressible sympathy. Jude’s sympathetic self-identification with the rooks is “represented” by the narrator’s equally sympathetic self-identification with his character Jude. What all this means is that the character’s visual field is one with the narrator’s, and eventually the reader’s, visual field. The visual “amazing circular race” is the narrator’s and the reader’s as well as the character’s.

Shortly — twenty pages in the text — before his death at about thirty, Jude experiences a similar kind of “amazing circular race” which he had experienced at eleven. Befuddled with drinks for three days, he marries Arabella for the second time. After coming home from the church, she reports upon the wedding, saying, “Well, he was a very nice gentlemanly man indeed. I mean the [officiating] clergyman. . . . But Jude, my dear, you were enough to make a cat laugh! You walked that straight, and held yourself that steady, that one would have thought you were going ’prentice to a judge; though I knew you were seeing double all the time, from the way you fumbled with my finger” (372). Obviously, Arabella herself, who laughs at Jude’s double-seeing, is seeing double here, Jude and the “gentlemanly”
clergyman as equally suitable for her proper spouse. Even Tinker Taylor, a late-comer to the wedding party, sees double, the day and the day before being exactly the same: “Well, really, I could hardly believe my eyes when I looked in! It seemed as if I was flung back again into last night, all of a sudden” (369). Jude himself sees double in time, like Tinker Taylor: “‘But, – are we out in our old house in Marygreen [at the time of his first marriage with Arabella]?’ asked the stupefied Jude. ‘I haven’t been inside it for years till now! Hey? And where are my books [which in fact he had burned later]? That’s what I want to know?’” (365). The “amazing circular race” is temporalized here. The “long circular perspective” is shortened into a déjá-vu, the seeing of the same thing again; the bodily “whirling” in space of the boy Jude has been transformed into a recurrence, a repetition in time, within “the fearful throbbing of his eyes and brain” (368). And the narrator, with the similar view of “Nature’s logic,” states that the maturer but heavily drunken Jude does not see, but is destined eventually to see, his own life circling back to its very beginning: “The circumstances were not altogether unlike those of their entry into the cottage [of Arabella’s father] at Cresscombe, such a long time before. Nor were perhaps Arabella’s motives. But Jude did not think of that, though she did” (364). Thus abolished is a temporal perspective which alone would have allowed Jude to live a life in a straight line forward from the past through the present toward the future, describing a trajectory line of growth, quest, or pursuit of aims.

The structure of visual field thus opened up in Jude the Obscure seems to be delineated quite unequivocally and legibly in the authorial rubric in the preface. The novel “attempts to deal unaffectedly with the fret and fever, derision and disaster, that may press in the wake of the strongest passion known to humanity; to tell, without a mincing of words, of a deadly war
waged between flesh and spirit; and to point the tragedy of unfulfilled aims” (xliii). The novel’s visual field, it is said, is structured along the vertical thematic axis of “a deadly war waged between flesh and spirit” and the horizontal temporal axis of a “tragedy of unfulfilled aims.” The focal point, or the central theme – “the strongest passion known to humanity” – will go through the “fret and fever, derision and disaster” again and again, until it tragically breaks down with its aims yet unfulfilled. As long as the war between flesh and spirit is an eternal conflict inherent in the dual aspect of human existence, its sufferance and endurance, and the inevitable unfulfillment of its aims, will raise the protagonist to universal tragic grandeur. However, in fact, the war between flesh and spirit is not securedly contained within an eternal vision of human nature. The war is not simply a permanent state of a single, unified selfhood; rather, it splits the self, opens it up from inside, and proliferates itself, spawning a never-ending series of similar “wars” – conflicts and contrasts – , for example, between the ancient and modern, the rural and urban, the natural and artificial, conventionalism and individualism, law and freedom, norm and eccentricity, intellect and feeling, middle class and working class, the Hellenistic and Hebraic, religion and love, the feminine and the masculine. Once placed within this kind of kaleidoscopic visual field, any object or subject is splintered into a series of fragments through continuous refractions and deflections, polarizations and parallaxes; images both visual and verbal – pictures and photographs, quotes and letters – start whirling round and round in an amazing phantasmagoric race. There is no master-light without to stabilize the visual field, nor is there any master-eye within, any stable self, to establish an object as such, either. Sue Bridehead quotes from P. B. Shelley’s “shapes like our own selves hideously multiplied” (276). Quite characteristically, she misquotes
in a sense, because she quotes it intending to prove that she is not a scared evader of the consummation of her love for Jude, but a prophetess of a radical revolution in marriage as a social institution: “Everybody is getting to feel as we do. We are a little beforehand, that’s all. In fifty, a hundred, years, the descendants of these two [strangers they see married at the registrar’s office] will act and feel worse than we. They will see weltering humanity still more vividly than we do now” (ibid.) And yet, her quotation is quite apt, for it testifies the splitting and multiplication of her self between her revolt and defeat, her intellectual pride and deepest fear.

Christminster, and then Sue Bridehead, are the two primary objects for Jude’s ardent gaze in his visual field. Both lack material substantiality and solidity as objects. Their status is peculiarly specular and spectral, ethereal and metaphorical, as if they were only generated by and sustained within, the creative imaginings of Jude’s eyes. In this sense, they are nothing but the expression of his ocular activities, an embodiment of what his eye desires to see. And yet, they are objects out there for his gaze to look at. They express themselves – their inner meanings – in the form of impressions his hypersensitive eye receives from them. Expression and impression, the subject and the object, meet, and embrace themselves in a consummate ocular moment of truth and love.

When Jude sees Christminster for the first time, he “sees” it from the roof of the Brown House not physically, but ideationally, as if by an act of will. One of the workers repairing the tiling affirms and denies at the same time the city’s presence in the visual field, saying, “You can see it – at least, you can on a clear day. Ah, no, you can’t now,” and he does not even know what it looks like when it is visible, adding, “it looks like – I don’t know what” (14). While it is still invisible, Jude already knows exactly what it looks
like, the city as the embodiment of a metaphor: “‘The Heavenly Jerusalem,’ suggested the serious urchin” (15). He hopes and prays that “the mist might rise” and that “the wish to see Christminster might be forwarded” (*ibid.*), and then he does see: “the air increased in transparency with the lapse of minutes, till the topaz points showed themselves to be the vanes, windows, wet roof slates, and other shining spots upon the spires, domes, freestone-work, and varied outlines that were faintly revealed. It was Christminster, *unquestionably*; either directly seen, or miraged in the peculiar atmosphere” (16; italics mine). His desire to see makes the object to be seen show itself to him. In spite of the emphatic “unquestionably,” it is not certain whether the city is “directly seen or miraged,” and the spectacle immediately disappears in the mist and darkness: “The spectator gazed on and on till the windows and vanes lost their shine, going out almost suddenly like extinguished candles. The vague city became veiled in mist. Turning to the west, he saw that the sun had disappeared. The foreground of the scene had grown funerally dark, and near objects put on the hues and shapes of chimæras” (*ibid.*). The candlelight at the heart of this phantasmagoric view of the city is his metaphoric foresight and his burning desire to see. The city itself may be vague, but his vision of it is beyond any doubt: he has seen what he desires to see. And therefore, another candle or lamp is lighted now at the heart of the boy’s mind: Jude “smiled outwardly at his inward thoughts, . . . smiled with that singularly beautiful irradiation which is seen to spread on young faces at the inception of some glorious idea, as if a supernatural lamp were held inside their transparent natures, giving rise to the flattering fancy that heaven lies about them then” (22-23). It is thus that “the city acquired a tangibility, a permanence, a hold on his life” (16), and when he tries to see “the city of light” (20) again at night from the place of his outlook, he does
see the same city despite the fact that “no individual light was visible, only a halo or glow-fog over-arching the place against the black heavens behind it, making the light and the city seem distant but a mile or so” (17). The tangibility of “a halo,” the embodiment of a metaphoric “city of light,” and the physical distance abolished by the full lucency of the vision to the eye – these are the preconditions for, as well as the outcomes of, Jude’s sighting of the city of Christminster.

Jude’s visionary view of Christminster is obfuscated and darkened by his perception of another kind of tangibility. When Vilbert fails to bring him the Latin and Greek grammars he had promised, Jude has a “sudden insight” that “what shoddy humanity the quack was made of,” and that “there was to be no intellectual light from this source” (23). When he finally obtains the grammars from Phillotson in Christminster, they only expose his own “grand delusion” (25), his “childish idea” of “pushing to the extremity of mathematical precision what is everywhere known as Grimm’s Law, – an aggrandizement of rough rules to ideal completeness” (24). If his expectation had been childish, his reactions to the discovery of his own delusion are equally childish and extreme: “he wished he had never seen a book, that he might never see another, that he had never been born” (25). During the succeeding three or four years of learning the grammars, “a labour like that of Israel in Egypt” (ibid.), his ardent vision has been sobered and disciplined into a realistic plan for its slow, gradual achievement in the future. However, this temporal projection of the vision toward the future does not cure him of his unacknowledged sense of chimæra-like emptiness of his vision. And this visionary hollowness is to be filled by a presence, sightless and mercilessly substantial: Jude’s future projected by “a magic lantern” is filled out with the presence of “a soft cold substance,” “a piece
of flesh, the characteristic part of a barrow-pig” (32-33); his vision is supplanted with the presence of “a complete and substantial female animal” with “a round and prominent bosom, full lips, perfect teeth, and the rich complexion of a cochin hen’s egg” (33). The tangibility and permanence of his vision is depleted by “a sense of futility” of “the unread book,” and now it is the absence and memory of the substantial woman, Arabella, that makes him feel a void inside: “She was not there now, and ‘the embroidery of imagination upon the stuff of nature’ so depicted her past presence that a void was in his heart which nothing could fill” (44). He is keenly aware of such changes in himself, and tries to rationalize them defensively as a mere change in his point of view, as if he were free to choose whatever perspective or vision he likes: “‘Wasting,’ it depended on your point view to define that: he was just living for the first time; not wasting life. It was better to love a woman than to be a graduate, or a parson; ay, or a pope” (43). And yet, his original vision persists now in the form of the “look” of things, for example, Greek letters on the title page of the New Testament he used to read: “a general consciousness of his neglect seemed written on the face of all things confronting him…. There lay his book open, just as he had left it, and the capital letters on the title-page regarded him with fixed reproach in the grey starlight, like the unclosed eyes of a dead man” (43).

Arabella fails to cure Jude of his ingrained visionariness, for, as he soon finds out, she is far from being complete nor substantial. In fact, her womanhood is nothing but an assortment of petty tricks and techniques for manipulations of appearances both visual and verbal. Her “instinct towards artificiality … [and] adept[ness] in counterfeiting” – her dimple-making and false hair – gives him “a feeling of sickness” (53). As Anny says, she is “a deep one” with a double trick (54), first tempting Jude and
then making him believe in the sham pregnancy. While seducing and teasing him with an egg wrapped in a pig’s bladder hidden in her bosom, she declares, “it is natural for a woman to want to bring live things into the world” (50), and her parents at the news of her pregnancy declare, just as she had planned, that his marriage proposal is “the sort of conduct they would have expected of such an honest young man as Jude in reparation of the wrong he had done his innocent sweetheart” (52). The intentionally superficial use of the words and notions of wrong and innocence, reparation and honesty, is part of the tricks for catching “a simple fool” like Jude (ibid.). He sees through Arabella, who is “not worth a great deal as a specimen of womankind,” but his ideationalism will not allow him to see through his own “idea”: “he kept up a factitious belief in her. His idea of her was the thing of most consequence, not Arabella herself” (ibid.). All these tricks and manipulations are supposed to serve some hidden real purpose, and its reality – substantiality – may justify the use of tricks, and cure Jude of his foolish visions. However, the reality of the purpose itself is far from being complete or substantial, but senselessly naked, surrealistically real, and so will be the life started on that purpose achieved. As Arabella triumphantly declares, after all “married is married” (54), and “what’s done can’t be undone” (56). The factuality of the fact is confirmed by the deadness of tautological expressions, which does away once for all with a metaphorical space in which the questions of meaning and significance, moral judgment and choice, can be posed and answered. Similarly, at the scene of killing pigs, Arabella insists, “Pigs must be killed,” for “Poor folks must live” (59). Jude calls for “a little pity on the creature,” for he sees the pig’s “glazing eyes riveting themselves on Arabella with the eloquently keen reproach of a creature recognizing at last the treachery of those who had seemed his only
friends” (ibid.). He looks at the same scene differently, as “a dismal, sordid, ugly spectacle – [as one of] those who saw it as other than an ordinary obtaining of meat” (ibid.). The scene is an eerie repetition or déjá-vu, of the rook and Farmer Trougham: “The white snow, stained with the blood of his fellow-mortal, wore an illogical look to him as a lover of justice, not to say a Christian; but he could not see how the matter was to be mended. No doubt he was, as his wife had called him, ‘a tender-hearted fool’” (60). Arabella’s substantiality does not cure Jude of his vision-seeing, but rather urges him even more strongly toward vision-seeing through her threatening a total obliteration of his visionary space, of the very possibility of his seeing anything at all.

Three years later, alone in Christminster, Jude does see the city, which is haunted by spirits and phantoms from the past. And in his sightings or “mind-sight” (74) of them, his tangible personality is dissolved into a spectrality shared by the seer and the seen: “Jude began to be impressed with the isolation of his own personality, as with a self-spectre, the sensation being that of one who walked, but could not make himself seen or heard. He drew his breath pensively, and, seeming thus almost his own ghost, gave his thought to the other ghostly presences with which the nooks were haunted” (73). He holds conversations with specters and spirits, shades and phantoms from “the ghostly past” (76). But specters disappear, and inevitably Jude is brought back from “the phantasmal” to “the actual,” from the “perfect and ideal” to the “defective real” (78), from “old poetry” to “modern prose” (79). A visionary paradise of his spectral imaginings is dissipated under “a cold northern light” of facts (107) shed first by a policeman who observes and questions Jude in his ghostly conversations aloud with his fellow phantoms (75), then by a villager John, who points out that a college where
Jude believes “there is more going on than meets the eye” is “not for such as you – only for them with plenty o’ money” (106), and finally by the master of Biblioll College, who advises him about his “much better chance of success in life by remaining in [his] own sphere” (110). In fact, Jude has had a moment of “true illumination” as opposed to the “cold northern light” to see that “here in the stone yard was a centre of effort as worthy as that dignified by the name of scholarly study within the noblest of the colleges” (79), and after receiving the college master’s letter, he readjusts his vision to seek a true reality somewhere else, no longer in the colleges but in the life of townspeople: “He began to see that the town life was a book of humanity infinitely more palpitating, varied, and compendious, than the gown life. These struggling men and women before him were the reality of Christminster” (111). Instead of a night vision on the college walls on obscure streets, he now seeks the reality of Christminster in “an obscure and low-ceiled tavern” (113), but “the isolation of his personality” persists even in this new vision with a new object; his status as a “self-spectre,” an exclusion, by the very act of envisioning, of the visionary from his own vision continues. In the tavern, Jude, drunk and piqued at a townsman’s teasing about his scholarship, recites the Articles of the Creed in Latin. By the end of his recitation, however, he almost despises his own vision, and himself as an incurable vision-seer: he cries to his hearers at the tavern, “You pack of fools! … Which one of you knows whether I have said it or not? It might have been the Ratcatcher’s Daughter in double dutch for all that your besotted heads can tell! See what I have brought myself to – the crew I have come among!” (116).

Jude cannot stop seeing visions, however, because, for him, seeing is living. Total deprivation of objects of his seeing would be like a death for
him – a complete darkness, an absolute void in which his eye cannot live. To see something is first to shed a light of one’s sight, then to “find” it as it is engendered by one’s act of seeing, and to “live” it as the objects of one’s thoughts and emotions. Something seen is always a self-expression of the seer as well as a self-revelatory – self-expressive — impression given by the seen.

After the disappearance of Christminster, Sue Bridehead becomes the object of Jude’s vision-seeing. Sue, “the one affined soul he had ever met” (113) is related to him as his cousin, and, more significantly, she is connected with him by a special kind of affinity. As the object of Jude’s vision, she has a peculiar double status as both a vision and a visionary; she is a seen object and a seeing subject at the same time. And unlike Christminster, and as is suggested by her surname, she is a woman, a living, incarnate object and subject of sexual love. Sue and Jude lovingly see and speak to each other. Her corporeity, which calls forth and approves his masculine carnality, could be grounds for the reality of their loving visions, and open up the possibility of an ultimate union of the vision and the visionary, a consummation of the shared absolute reality of vision of love. The perfectly reciprocal envisionings would possibly heal the wounds of a split between the phantasmal and the actual, and prove the truth of a shared vision, and justify the life of the two loving visionaries.

Sue is both a vision and a visionary. She first appears before Jude as a photographic image: he “observed between the brass candle-sticks on [Jude’s aunt’s] mantelpiece the photograph of a pretty girlish face, in a broad hat, with radiating folds under the brim like the rays of a halo” (71-72), an equivalent to the “halo or glow-fog” under which he first saw Christminster. The photograph “haunts” him (72), and he cannot restrain
his pure – voyeuristic – desire for an unobserved gaze at the original: he is “more than ever glad that he had not as yet revealed himself. To see her, and to be himself unseen and unknown, was enough for him at present” (85). She herself is conscious of her own status as a visual image when at the end of a day’s outing together with Jude, she offers him her image, saying, “I bought something for you …. It is a new photograph of me. Would you like it?” (133). When she comes to his room after her escape from the training school, his ardent gaze cannot but apotheosize her as a divine image: “She appeared in the light of his lamp. He went up to seize her hand, and found she was clammy as a marine deity and that her clothes clung to her like the robes upon the figures in the Parthenon frieze…. he stood with his back to the fire regarding her [in a sound sleep], and saw in her almost a divinity” (137-38, 139). She is also a visionary. A nurse of Jude’s aunt remembers how Sue used to recite Longfellow’s “Excelsior,” Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, and Poe’s “The Raven” before the vicar in a village school, and “how during the delivery she would knit her little brows and glare round tragically, and say to the empty air, as if some real creature stood there” (105), and the aunt corroborates, and warns against a foolish and dangerous affinity of visionarity in Sue and Jude, saying, “she’d bring up the nasty carrion bird [i.e. Poe’s “ghastly, grim, and ancient Raven”] that clear…, as she stood there in her little sash and things, that you could see un a’most before your very eyes. You too, Jude, had the same trick as a child of seeming to see things in the air” (*ibid*). Just like Jude’s ghostly conversations with scholarly specters in Christminster, Sue’s recitations and vision-seeing are the same act, or “trick,” of “seeming to see things in the air”; the image-making, both verbal and visual, creates a visionary’s realm of the phantasmal beyond that of the actual. She has a self-conscious knack
for generating and manipulating images of herself and others. When she was twelve, she retorts to the aunt who is about to smack her for her walking into the pond with her petticoats pulled above her knees, “Move on, aunty. This is no sight for modest eyes!” (104). In the training school, she has on a table in her room photographs of “two men in their filigree and velvet frames standing together beside her looking-glass” (135) – one of the college undergraduate, now dead, presumably for the memory of her “love affair” in the past, and the other of Phillotson, perhaps out of her sense of gratitude — , the two male images beside her own female reflection in the looking-glass. She is also fascinated with images. On the spur of the moment she buys from a foreign-looking “image-man” the plaster-statuettes of Venus and Apollo. The statuettes, “so very naked,” put her in “a trembling state,” and she “entered with her heathen load into the most Christian city in the country by an obscure street” and carries them into her “obscure chamber” (87, 88). Questioned by the landlady in spectacles about the figures in the brown paper, Sue is deceitful enough to answer they are “St. Peter and St. – St. Mary Magdalen” (89).

Sue’s dual status as a vision and a visionary splits and splinters her selfhood, leaving an empty space for an endless phantasmagoria of possible imaginary selves she assumes one after another. A girl with “a pretty girlish face” (72), “a townish girl” of “a thoughtful, quivering, tender nature” (104, 105), has no substantiality except a provisional spurious one of shifting assemblages of images of a self generated by herself and others in the empty air. She is a seen object and a speaking subject. She is seen as “an ideality” (92) or a “spirit” by Jude, and as an ideality she speaks of lofty ideas by repeating and quoting – reciting – others’, the ideas for heathenism as opposed to Christianity, for liberalism against the Establishment, for
modernism against medievalism, for the ancient and for the future against the past. Her ideality may despise and suppress any form of carnality or grossness, but it also fears its own hollowness, and longs to fill the empty air with something substantial, something passionate and physical – something real. This is her version of “a deadly war waged between flesh and spirit.” The dual visionarity of her being baffles Jude the seer, who sees it as “a riddle” (221), “one lovely conundrum” (130), a “colossal inconsistency” (167), calls her “an epicure in emotions” (165) or “a flirt” (196), “a sort of fay, or sprite – not a woman” (341), and addresses her “you spirit, you disembodied creature, you dear, sweet, tantalizing phantom – hardly flesh at all” (236). In response to his perplexity, she recites Shelley’s “Epipsychidion,” offering one of the poetical versions of her imagined self, and asking him to endorse and “substantialize” it by seeing her as such: “‘There was a Being whom my spirit oft / Met on its visioned wanderings far aloft. / … / A seraph of Heaven, too gentle to be human, / Veiling beneath that radiant form of woman ….’ O it is too flattering, so I won’t go on! But say it’s me! – say it’s me!” (236). She desires to be a being, hardly human, in Shelley’s poem, a verbal and visual image imprinted in the “visioned wanderings” of Jude’s eye, and only on condition that Jude endorses the image as “exactly like [her]” does she admit her physicality, and gives him a reward, offering her body – a cheek – for him to kiss, saying, “You shall kiss me, just once there – not very long” (ibid.).

Sue’s constant visual and visionary negotiations and manipulations not only with Jude but also with herself undermine any degree of reality of her being, either as an ideality or as a corporeity. In Christminster Jude has had his ghostly conversations with the specters of “the enthusiast, the poet, and the formularist,” statesmen, scientists and philologists, reciting Arnold,
Peel, Browning, Newman, Keble, Addison, and Ken (74-76), and so has Sue read and could easily recite “Lemprière, Catullus, Martial, Juvenal, Lucian, Beaumont and Fletcher, Boccaccio, Scarron, De Brantôme, Sterne, De Foe, Smollett, Fielding, Shakespeare, the Bible, and other such” (141). A more or less general pattern of Sue’s conversations with Jude is that she expresses ideas garnered from these sources as her own, Jude identifies the original speakers of those ideas, she rebukes him for his lack of sympathy for her, and he repeats what she has said and applies it to herself to soothe her, expressing in the same breath his feelings about her through those ideas, and she now interdicts his direct emotional appeals to her. Typical of this pattern is their talk about “a new New Testament” she proposes by editing and “re-arranging them [i.e. all the Epistles and Gospels] in chronological order,” the idea behind it being her belief that “people have no right to falsify the Bible! I hate such humbug as could attempt to plaster over with ecclesiastical abstractions such ecstatic, natural, human love as lies in that great and passionate song [i.e. Solomon’s Song]!” (146). With “a sense of sacrilege,” Jude identifies the speaker “quite Voltairean,” and Sue, with “her brimming eyes,” cries, “nobody is ever on my side!” (ibid.). Sue recites from Solomon, “Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women?”, and Jude repeats her quote, applying it to herself, saying, “You know you are fairest among women to me” and she replies, “But you are not to say it now!” (ibid.). On another occasion, Sue says the railway station is “the centre of the town life now: the cathedral has had its days!”; Jude says how modern she is, and she answers, “I am not modern, either. I am more ancient than medievalism” (128). After missing the train back and arranging instead for a stay overnight at a shepherd’s house, she is excited enough to say, “I rather like this…. Outside all laws except gravitation and germination…. I
crave to get back to the life of my infancy, and its freedom.” Jude points out that she is in fact “a product of civilization… [with] nothing unconventional at all.” She is offended, and declares she is “the Ishmaelite,” but he disagrees, saying, “An urban miss is what you are” (132). Seeing him after her marriage to Phillotson, he calls her “a flirt,” she denies it, and confesses to Jude that “the social moulds civilization fits us into have no more relation to our actual shapes than the conventional shapes of the constellations have to the real star-patterns. I am called Mrs. Phillotson…. But I am not really Mrs. Richard Phillotson, but a woman tossed about, all alone, with aberrant passions, and unaccountable antipathies” (197). She passionately denies what he says she is: she says she is “a sort of negation” of civilization (141), “very much the reverse” of a flirt (204), she is “not really Mrs. Richard Phillotson” (197). All these vehement negations of what he says she is are not enough to establish what she is in any coherent, intelligible, ideational, if not ideological, stability, for example, as a mystic upholder of ancient pagan joy, a progressive free thinker, or a radical social reformist. Rather, they only intensify the impression of her “riddle” or “colossal inconsistency,” her enigmatic status as a visionary for Jude. Her words – views, outlooks, perspectives, etc. – have, as he says, all the fidgety, flighty nervousness of “an urban miss,” “a product of modern civilization.”

The reality of Sue as a vision is not accessible for Jude, either, but remains perplexingly elusive. His vision of her becomes increasingly sexualized, and he dreams of their union as a consummation of love between a male visionary and his female vision. This might be just another case of his “erotolepsy” (92), a yearning for “a complete and substantial female animal” (33), but, as Sue herself says, “ecstatic, natural, human love” (146) is the only way for the two visionaries to reciprocally endorse and substantialize
their ultimate vision of human love, thus curing themselves of the
hollowness of their solitary envisionings. However, Sue insists on remaining
bodiless and “sexless” (143); she refuses to let Jude carnalize her spiritual
status into a loving womanhood. Jude has seen her as “a divinity,” but the
divinity is sexually ambiguous: her “epicene tenderness” is “harrowing”, she
is “boyish as a Ganymedes” (147), she only acknowledge “Venus Urania”
as a motive force for “strong attachment” (160). She says to Jude one day,
“You mustn’t love me. You are to like me – that’s all!”, but the next morning
she writes to him, “If you want to love me, Jude, you may: I don’t mind
at all” (149). Her behavior frustrates him so much that next time he sees
her, he says, “You are often not so nice in your real presence as you are in
your letters!” (158). Her “real presence” is neither in the spoken nor in the
written; she cannot say what she writes, nor can she write what she says. In
her use of language – her supposedly direct, ingenuous expression of herself
in verbal images – there is no “real presence,” and its absence only opens
up a space in which she continues to play her verbal “game of elusiveness”
(250). This is, for him, how Sue, “a phantasmal, bodiless creature” with “so
little animal passion” (ibid.), chooses to remain as such. It means that she
is not only bodiless and sexless, but ultimately loveless. Gross as it may
be, his animal passion for her is at least a reality, love in its real presence,
something real and true about his being. He accuses her of being incapable
of love: he feels that “intimate as they were, he had never once had from her
an honest, candid declaration that she loved or could love him. ‘I really fear
sometimes that you cannot,’ he said, with a dubiousness approaching anger.
‘And you are so reticent’” (ibid.). She is incapable of “full sincerity” which
he says is “the highest form of affection,” incapable of “the full truth” or
“the soul of truth” (ibid.). Sue’s “game of elusiveness” threatens to destroy
Jude’s last hope of the reality and truth of a mutually shared vision of human love. The phantasmal as a generator and proof of spiritual need to transcend the merely actual threatens to betray itself as nothing more than the illusory, a clever cover-up of the absence of the real, a self-deceptive excuse for the incapability of any truth at all. Sue’s reticence may seem to only withhold a truth which she chooses not to reveal for her feminine prudence. At his former accusation that she is a flirt, she replies, “O Jude, it was cruel to say that! Yet I can’t tell you the truth – I should shock you by letting you know how I gave way to my impulses” (196). She does not tell him, however, what her impulses are, nor the truth about her sexless relationship with her husband, Phillotson, and instead gives some generalized comments on “some women’s [insatiable] love of being loved… [and] their love of loving” (ibid.). After she runs away from Phillotson to live with Jude, she objects to staying with him in a room he has booked for them in a hotel: “I thought you might do it: and that I was deceiving you. But I didn’t mean that!” (230). With “hurried evasiveness” she just lets him attribute her behavior to “a woman’s natural timidity” (231). Here her “spiritualist” response is almost a piece of calculating, teasing prudery at worst, or candid confession of her fundamental failure in substantial womanhood at best.

Not words, but a kiss gives the two visionaries a supreme moment when they can embrace their vision now substantialized and consummated in the gendered human form. It transforms Sue, an “aërial being,” into a complete woman with “flushed cheeks,” and it makes Jude throw away the merely phantasmal for “the purest moment of his faultful life” and burn all his theological and ethical books. A sudden advent of Arabella makes Sue, now no longer “a cold-natured, sexless creature” (256), jealous of keeping Jude with her enough to make her agree to marry him, and Jude, now with
a secured knowledge of his full possession of Sue, does not insist, against her will and sensitivity, on giving their union a socially acceptable legalized form of marriage. Even Arabella’s idea of sending him her son allegedly by him is welcomed by Jude, who, with an optimistically forward-looking view, proposes to “educate and train him with a view to the University” (268), and by Sue, who says, “I’ll do the best to be a mother to him” (265). Thus the two visionaries live on in “a dreamy paradise” (262), jealously guarding against “a legal obligation” and other forms of social coercion “a passion whose essence is its gratuitousness” (ibid.), “that very volatile essence, their love for each other,” “all the romance of their attachment” from the “sordid business” of “signing the contract” between the “parties” (270-271). The “ecstatic, natural, human love” has been achieved; a vision of love – a yearning, a wanting and desiring of something as lacking – has become a truth possessed in full plenitude through a perfect, because reciprocal, sharing of the vision by the two visionaries. “‘Happy?’ he murmured. She nodded” (286). In a paradise of fulfilled vision, there is no longer any need to talk; happiness is in silence, or sometimes in a wordless act, or a question that does not require any answer, except a freely given self-expression. At the Agricultural Show Sue says, “I should like to push my face quite into them [i.e. roses],” and he “gave a little push, so that her nose went among the petals” (285). Jude asks why she is happy, but he is “quite content with a baffle from his ever evasive companion” and “he no longer wished for an answer” (286), not even her eloquent words about their return to “Greek joyousness” and their blinding themselves to the doctrine of “sickness and sorrow” inculcated by “Christminster luminaries” (ibid.). The truth of their consummated human love has been kept in idyllic silence, textually speaking, and has produced two children and the third expected, as Arabella
is quick to notice (300). The only compromise they accept as a necessary evil is to “let it be understood indirectly and with total indifference and weariness of mien, that they were legally married at last” in London (287).

The “dreamy paradise” of the two loving visionaries is to be smashed by Little Father Time, Jude’s six-year old son by Arabella. Obviously he is an allegorical figure, with his face like “the tragic mask of Melpomene” and with his eyes “resting on things [Jude and Sue] did not see in the substantial world” (270). As his name indicates, he is a visionary of time, a different kind of time from the one which Jude believes “may right things,” and in which he thinks it possible to “educate and train” his son. Jude says Little Father Time is one of “the little ones of our time” (264), but the boy is also a father time, who has produced Jude and Sue in a child time of their own. The “beggarly question of parentage” (ibid.) of the boy is essentially a question of parentage between the two different visions of time. As a fictional character, Little Father Time seems to be a flat, two-dimensional, merely allegorical figure, because his vision is always in the abstract; he cannot stop to appreciate the surface but penetrates into the depth, or “innermost heart,” of things to find a naked truth: “The boy seemed to have begun with the generals of life, and never to have concerned himself with the particulars” (267). In terms of time, about the roses Sue admires at the Agricultural Show, he says, “I should like the flowers very very much, if I didn’t keep on thinking they’d be all withered in a few days” (286), and, in terms of space, “To him the houses, the willows, the obscure fields beyond, were apparently regarded not as brick residences, pollards, meadows; but as human dwellings in the abstract, vegetation, and the wide dark world” (267). He cannot see himself as a child moving forward in a dynamic, progressive time, living from a moment to the next through a wealth of hopes and loves,
frets and cares, but only as an old man at the end of time, looking backward to all the moments that have been lived through. “He was Age masquerading Juvenility, and doing it so badly that his real self showed through crevices. A ground swell from ancient years of night seemed now and then to lift the child in this his morning-life, when his face took a back view over some great Atlantic of time, and appeared not to care about what it saw” (266). His “real self” sees a vision – abstract, penetrating, and ultimate – of the whole truth of the “great Atlantic of time.” And it is precisely here that Little Father Time, an almost impersonal character in the novel, is closest to the narrator, for example, when the narrator summarizes his vision of the history of the Fourways in the middle of Christminster, a genuine “book of humanity” (111) for Jude:

It had more history than oldest college in the city. It was literally teeming, stratified, with the shades of human groups, who had met there for tragedy, comedy, farce, real enactments of the intensest kind…. Here the two sexes had met for loving, hating, coupling, parting; had waited, had suffered, for each other; had triumphed over each other; cursed each other in jealousy, blessed each other in forgiveness. (ibid.).

Just as the narrator places the “dreamy paradise” of Jude and Sue with an inexorable temporal sequence of events, Little Father Time converges all the visionary threads into a single, abstract point of truth at the center of the “Atlantic of time”: “He was their [i.e. Jude and Sue’s] nodal point, their focus, their expression in a single term. For the rashness of those parents he had groaned, for their ill-assortment he had quaked, and for the misfortunes of these he had died” (326). This nodal point, now dark and dead, is at the end of the same perspective at the other end of which lies “a shining disk”
seen by Jude at the beginning of his visionary wanderings, at the bottom of the well, “as ancient as the village itself” (5). Within “a long circular perspective” of the “great Atlantic of time,” the vision’s life begins with “a shining disk” and ends with a darkling “nodal point,” and in the middle on the way is the Fourways as “a book of humanity.”

A night before the killing of the children, Sue could neither totally refute nor accept the abstract truth of Father Time’s conclusion that “It would be better to be out o’ the world than in it” or that “If we children was gone there’d be no trouble at all!” (322, 324). Neither Sue’s visions of incorporeal spirituality nor of ecstatic human love, none of her anticlerical, pagan, reformist, or modernist social outlooks, not even her philosophic viewpoint upon “a law of nature” could withstand nor disprove Father Time’s final vision. Sue’s double visionarity as a visionary and a vision collapses, revealing the ever perplexing equivocalities of her selfhood, a fundamental hollowness of her being: she accuses herself, saying, “Why was I half wiser than my fellow-women? And not entirely wiser! Why didn’t I tell him pleasant untruths, instead of half realities? It was my want of self-control, so that I could neither conceal things nor reveal them!” (327-28). No longer a visionary nor a vision herself, she feels she has become a spectacle for others’ loveless eyes to watch, transfix, and judge; she sacrifices herself as a spectacle for a new master-eye other than Jude’s: she repeats quoting the Bible, “We are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men!” (327, 331). Her “mental volte-face” (344) consists of a series of her self-consciously chosen visual acts: fleeing from the vision-sharing with Jude, seeking her own blindness, and disappearing from his visual field into a fog. Right after the children’s deaths, she says, “My eyes are so swollen that I can scarcely see” (328), and, when somewhat recovered, she wants to see
not Jude but the children’s corpses (330). To Jude who depletes her self-
degradation as “a woman-poet, a woman-seer,” she insists that it is Jude
who does not “see how things are,” not she who “see[s] marriage differently
now”: “My babies have been taken from me to show me this! Arabella’s
child killing mine was a judgment; the right slaying the wrong” (338). 

While Jude accuses her of an “extraordinary blindness now to [her own] old
logic,” she says, “I am convinced I am right – that I see the light at last” (339,
340), a new master-light that reveals to her the sacramental truth that she is
not his wife, but Phillotson’s. Jude finds her in a church, prostrate under “a
huge, solidly constructed Latin cross … suspended in the air by invisible
wires” in “the obscurity, which was broken only by the faintest reflected
night-light from without” (338). She comes to Jude as “a figure [moving]
through the white fog,” “a mere cluster of nerves … through the fog like
Achrontic shades” (348) to tell him that she is going back to Phillotson,
Jude’s wet eyes just barely see that her “once keen vision was dimmed” (349),
and she disappears into the fog, to marry Phillotson again in a church with
“the tower [looming] large and solemn in the fog,” wedding being “like a
re-enactment by the ghosts of their former selves of the similar scene” (357).

What she calls the light of the sacramental truth is a construct suspended
by artificial wires invisible to her dimmed vision in obscurity; the white
fog in which she appears and disappears is an obscured human visual field
in which the real and its truth appear and disappear like a Cheshire cat in a
dark phantasmagoric woods of human desires and despairs, love and loss,
in an obscure “book of humanity,” in which even Mrs. Edlin’s tautological
– axiomatic – expression that “the truth’s the truth” (355) cannot ascertain
anything real or true about Sue’s heart, or about anyone else’s.

Sue’s disappearance from Jude’s visual field marks the end of their shared
vision-seeing, which alone could have proved their shared vision as real, and their shared visionary act as a love fulfilled. Sue, now seeing another vision alone, cannot prove this new vision real except as the “reality” of a terrifying god who demands her self-immolation at his altar; Jude, still a visionary but now with no vision, “sees” the impossibility of any vision-sharing, the absence of any vision, as an ultimate object of his vision-seeing. Their movement to each endpoint is slow and hesitant, but irretrievable and inexorable.

Jude criticizes Sue’s “new and transcendental views” (336) as “her weakness – a sick fancy” (332), crying, “All wrong, all wrong! ... Error – perversity!” (349). He does so on the ground of her own former vision of human love and human nature, reminding her that she “used to say that human nature was noble and long-suffering, not vile and corrupt” (333), asking her, “is there anything better on earth than that we should love one another?” (334), declaring, “But surely we are man and wife, if ever two people were in this world? Nature’s own marriage it is, unquestionably!” (339). But Sue sees differently now. She accuses Jude of his blindness to the light she has found, his deafness to the word she has heard: Jude is “like a totally deaf man observing people listening to music. You say ‘what are they regarding? Nothing is there!’ But something is” (340). He is so exasperated as to doubt her sanity (“Is a woman a thinking unit at all, or a fraction always wanting its integer? [339]), or her love for him (“You have never loved me as I love you – never – never! ... You are, upon the whole, a sort of fay, or sprite – not a woman” [341]). Their shared vision of human love is rent in two, the two visionaries fall asunder from their mutually cherished vision, accusing oneself or the other as false: at their parting, he says, “perhaps I spoilt one of the highest and purest loves that ever existed
between man and woman! … Then let the veil of our temple be rent in two from this hour!” (342), and Sue, “rending [the nightgown she had bought to please him] with all her might, the tears resounding through the house like a screech-owl,” cries, “It is adulterous! It signifies what I don’t feel” (353). Their last meeting in life is the last chance for the truth of their shared vision to be revealed in its fullest clarity: the moment comes when Jude asks, “Now, in the name of all you hold holy, tell me the truth and no lie. You do love me still?” and Sue answers, “I do! You know it too well!” (378). However, the moment of truth is obfuscated by various refracted, fragmented, opaque, partial visions: the moment is preceded by his suspicion that after all she is “not worth a man’s love,” her confession about her merely “apparent,” “nominal” marriage with Phillotson, and it is followed by his comment on his being “gin-drunk” and her being “creed-drunk” and on how “either form of intoxication takes away the nobler vision” (ibid.). And the moment of truth is gone, extinguished, silenced, for good when she says, “don’t look at me. Leave me, for pity’s sake!” and she “stop[s] her ears with her hands till all possible sounds of him [departing] had passed away” (ibid.). Sue kills the life of her own vision and vision-seeing by an ultimate act of penance: to see her “half-marriage” completed with “a quick look of aversion” (385, 386). Jude kills his own by ceasing to be a “Joseph the dreamer of dreams” (197) and becoming instead a dreamless Job with only one ultimate vision of a visionless, absolute darkness: “Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it” (392). A god, Christian or not, may regard it, but his vision, transcendental or immanent, will only be that of a somnambulist indifferent to the reality of human sufferings, as the narrator has noted, commenting on the “vague and quaint imaginings” haunting Sue after her third child by Jude is born still: “the First Cause
worked automatically like a somnambulist, and not reflectively like a sage; […] at the framing of the terrestrial conditions there seemed never to have been contemplated such a development of emotional perceptiveness among the creatures subject to those conditions as that reached by thinking and educated humanity” (331).

* 

*Jude the Obscure* is an obscure work. When first published, the work was felt to be unashamedly coarse and scandalous enough to provoke Mrs. Oliphant’s outcry for shame (Clarke 248-252), or a victorious public report by a bishop of Wakefield that he had thrown the book into the fire for his disgust with its “insolence and indecency” (Clarke 293). Besides Jude, who is a mere helpless victim of female seducers, Mrs. Oliphant finds faults with “the fleshy animal Arabella,” “the fantastic *raisonneuse*, Susan” and “the absurd little gnome, nicknamed Old Father Time”; she deplores “the tremendous downfall” of the book from the artistic level achieved by *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, and suspects that the author’s “emancipation from prejudices of modesty” urged him to betray his secret motive: “an assault on the stronghold of marriage.” In a sense, Mrs. Oliphant’s ferocious attack negatively defined more or less the direction the following, more calm and sympathetic readers of the book would take. Their focus would naturally be placed upon the characterization of Sue as *the* cause for Jude’s downfall, and they tried to acquit her of the charge by critically re-interpreting – re-envisioning – her as a victim herself. And the text itself apparently supplied ample supports in her defense. For instance, Jude on his deathbed says to Mrs. Edlin: “As for Sue and me when we were at our own best, long ago –
when our minds were clear, and our love of truth fearless – the time was not ripe for us! Our ideas were fifty years too soon to be any good to us” (388). Jude’s comment silently influences and modifies the reader’s perception of Sue’s earlier comment which is in fact expressive of another kind of truth, her fear of love and marriage: “We are a little beforehand, that’s all. In fifty, a hundred, years the descendants of these two will act and feel worse than we. They will see wretting humanity still more vividly than we do now” (276). That is to say, it is only through Jude’s concluding comment that Sue becomes an image of a clear-minded fearless lover of truth, or a New Woman, brutally victimized by the repressive social establishment. A similar kind of usefulness, or expediency, is offered to the readers by the book’s epigraph, “The letter killeth.” At his last interview with Sue, he says, “Sue, Sue: we are acting by the letter; and ‘the letter killeth!’” (376). For him, it is Sue who is “acting by the letter,” merely repeating a meaningless legalistic fiat upon who is whose proper spouse. But he believes that she is rather being acted on by the letter in an intellectual torpor into which the shock of the children’s deaths has driven her mind, her “dear, sad, soft, most melancholy wreck of a promising human intellect” (377). Being of the weaker sex and devastated, she just blindly allows the inhuman legal system to ruin her life and his. This kind of view would be easily reinforced by interpreting her hysterical rending of the nightgown she had bought to please Jude, and her “quick look of aversion” when she sacrifices herself up to her “proper” husband, as psychic and almost pathological symptoms of masochistic perversions of her “natural and healthy” female sexuality under the repressive male-dominated sexual regime. In the modern critical perspectives on the work, Mrs. Oliphant’s denunciations have been turned around from the disgusting characters and author, and redirected toward
society at large at the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, the creation — re-
visioning — of the villains has rescued the dignity and splendor of a tragedy
of Sue, Jude, and Hardy.

And yet, the novel remains as obscure as ever, in spite of its apparent
tragic clarity. Sue’s “mental volte-face” is “transcendental” (344, 336); it
is not a direct or immediate effect of any forms of social coercion, legal,
religious, or sexist. Rather, if she is a victim, she is a victim of her own
ultimate envisioning — a vision of the First Cause as a somnambulist.
Her “sick fancy” sharpened by her afflictions generates the various
“anthropomorphous” forms of opposing forces, such as “the world,”
“angels” and “men” unto which she feels she is made a “spectacle” (331).
Her shocked fancy makes her almost automatically accept the children’s
killings as a judgment, and her self-immolation as its inevitable punishment.
Jude, alerted by her sick fancy, tries to comfort her by attributing the killing
to the personal peculiarity of Father Time, telling her that “it was in his
nature to do it,” but he finds himself quoting a medical examiner’s view
that the killing is symptomatic of “the beginning of the coming universal
wish not to live” (326), and finally accepts that “Thing are as they are, and
will be brought to their destined issue,” quoting from the chorus of the
Agamemnon (328). The fancy — envisioning — is contagious and prevails
in the end, leading up to Jude’s ultimate wish for an absolute darkness,
an absolute blindness. The sickness of such fancy would be seen by some
critics, more or less following Mrs. Oliphant’s line, as indicative of the
author’s pessimism and decadence as opposed to his alleged faith in the
cause of ameliorism or social reformism. However, Hardy’s cause, if any,
looks much more obscure, and darker. His vision of the First Cause does not
replace the traditional Christian God of the New Testament with an older
god, “the Power” with “all the ancient wrath” (331) of the Old Testament, or of the ancient Greek tragedy. A god suffering for human sufferings has disappeared, yes, but so does another god with divine wrath; both are regarded as none other than images projected by the “anthropomorphous” imaginings of the human mind. Otherwise, after the disappearance of God, people could have upheld a full variety of god-free, secular, purely humanistic, modern thoughts, the kind Sue has dabbled in one after another. However, all these modern fashionable -isms come and go through the modern mind as if they are nothing more than floating and fleeting images, verbal and visual, projected onto the screen of a mental kaleidoscope. The real disappears, and the human mind becomes a somnambulist, as Hardy pointed out in 1887, eight years before *Jude the Obscure*: “[P]eople are somnambulists – that the material is not the real – only the visible, the real being invisible optically. [I]t is because we are in a somnambulistic hallucination that we think the real to be what we see as real” (*The Life* 243). You can never see the real, because when you see something, that something would already have corrupted into the merely visible, and if you still insist on seeing it as the real, equating the visible and the real, you can do so only under your “somnambulistic hallucination.” The schism or rupture between the visible and the real destroys the very possibility of seeing, and makes the real disappear into an absolute darkness, and the human vision into an absolute blindness. This is the ultimate endpoint of its journey Jude’s eye has reached.

Jude’s journey has been completed, his visual field has found its own truth. Then, in spite of its “tragedy of unfulfilled aims” defined in the author’s preface, we could say a certain aim has been fulfilled here – an aim which, whether self-consciously or not, perhaps all Hardy’s novels have
been working for, and which, being achieved, has allowed no room for him to write novels any more, except for a rewriting of his previous novel, *The Well-Beloved*. It would be pointless, of course, for us to speculate what kind of novel Hardy might have written after *Jude the Obscure*, just as it would be meaningless for us to imagine what Jude might have seen in his sleep of death. But it is irresistible for the reader, who is, after all, a sort of textual somnambulist, looking for verbal images under somnambulistic hallucination, and mistaking them for the real.

In his *Thomas l’obscur*, in a passage immediately preceding the part used for an epigraph for the present paper, Maurice Blanchot describes Thomas’ night-vision, as follows:

> It was the night itself. Images which made up its obscurity filled him up. He did not see anything, but, far from being overwhelmed by it, he made this absence of vision the ultimate point of his gaze. His eye, useless for seeing, took on extraordinary proportions, developing itself in an immeasurable manner, and, extending itself over the horizon, it let the night penetrate its center to receive the day there. In this void, the gaze and its object were fused together. Not only this eye which saw nothing perceived something, but it perceived the cause of its vision. (17)

Blanchot also comments on the night in his *L’espace littéraire*, as follows:

> The night, the essence of the night, does not allow us to sleep. In this essence, no refuge is found in sleep. If you resist sleep, the exhaustion infects you in the end; and this infection prevents you from sleeping, and it shows itself in the insomnia, in the impossibility of making sleep a free zone, a clear and true decision. In the night we cannot sleep. (“The Dream,” Addenda III, “The Sleep, the Night” 361)
And on the light of darkness, he writes in the same book, as follows:

The [artistic] work draws out a light from the darkness. It forms a relation with what does not allow any rapport, it encounters the being before any encounter becomes possible, and at the point where there is no truth. An essential risk. There, we touch the abyss. There, we connect ourselves, by a link which could not be any stronger, with the non-truth, and we try to connect with what is not true an essential form of authenticity. (“Literature and the Primary Experience” 320)

Obscure statements indeed, about the eye, blindness, night, being, an abyss, light, and darkness, by the author who obscurely adumbrates a realm of literature as a space of death, traversed by himself as well as such men of letters as Hölderlin, Mallarmé, and Kafka. An eye gazing at its own blindness as the ultimate object for it to see; the death of images which allows one to see the seeing as such for the first time, the seeing as an installment of the relation of re-presentation between a seeing subject and a seen object; sleep, which is only a required supplement for a day’s labor in a rational and free world of decision, production and usage; a sleepless night, which seduces one enticingly to a dangerous encounter with the being in the abyss luckily hidden from the day of labor, ratiocination, and projection; a blinding, a killing, of the seeing as the very condition for the visibility of a world, for the foundation of a truth, which, therefore, could never be nothing but a compromising of the real as such before it is made visible and knowable; a light of darkness which alone enables one to see the real, or non-truth, in its authenticity, before it gets falsified into a reality intelligible, accessible, and expendable for us, etc., etc.

Hardy did not, of course, become a Thomas the Obscure, but stopped writing novels altogether. He did not wake up Jude on his deathbed into
a space of literature as a space of death – a space of the letters that kill – . Instead, in a final masterstroke of irony and compassion, he chose to make Arabella testify to the true love between Jude and Sue as the real: “‘[Sue] may swear that [that she has found peace] on her knees to the holy cross upon her necklace till she’s hoarse, but it won’t be true,’ said Arabella. ‘She’s never found peace since she left his arms, and never will again till she’s as he is now!’” (397).

Notes

1 All the quotations from the novel are from the Oxford edition, which is based on the text in the 1912 “Wessex Edition,” with emendations both from the manuscript and from later editions.

2 The story of Sue’s parents is not clearly stated in the text, which says that after their separation, it is her mother that went away to London (65) or rather it is her father (82).

3 “Dover Beach,” published in 1867, was composed probably late June 1851, shortly after Arnold’s visit to Dover with his wife, Fanny Lucy Wightman, whom he married on 10 June 1851.

4 Kenneth Allott, Arnold’s editor, suggests in his note that Arnold’s sources for the image of the “night-battle” are Newman’s sermon of 6 Jan. 1839, University Sermons (1843) as well as Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War, and quotes Newman as follows: “Controversy, at least in this age, does not lie between the hosts of heaven, Michael and his angels on the one side, and the powers of evil on the other; but it is a sort of night battle, where each fights for himself, and friend and foe stand together” (243).

5 The mechanism of externalization or projection by which “the spirit-seers place some imagined things among the external objects which they really perceive” (77) is explained by Kant in terms of optics, as follows: “our soul locates the perceived object at that point where the different lines indicating the directions of the impression, meet. That is why we see a radiating point at the meeting-place of
those lines which we draw from the eye back in the direction of the rays. This point, which we call the point of vision, is, in its effect, the scattering point, but, in the way it is perceived, it is the point which collects the lines of direction determining the sensation (focus imaginarius)” (77-78).

6 In his note on the source of this quote, Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*, Harold Orel, Hardy’s editor, refers to William Blake’s comment against Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses*: “Every Eye sees differently. As the Eye, such the Object” (n23, 272).

7 This is a proper place, I believe, for acknowledging a valuable reminder by one of the readers of my first draft for the journal of the arguments about Hardy’s literary impressionism by Jesse Matz and Peter Widdowson. I have found their arguments quite helpful for clarifying my notion of the relationship between realism and impressionism within Hardy’s novels as well as of the problem of how to place Hardy in the history of literary realism and modernism. Jesse Matz in his *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* virtually defines Hardy as a modernist manqué, and Peter Widdowson in his *On Thomad Hardy: Late Essays and Earlier* characterizes him as a postmodernist and a deconstructionist avant la lettre.

Matz first locates the origin of modernist aesthetics in Proust’s “deathless analogy,” in which the impression, as distinct from an idea and from a sensation, is made a criterion of eternal truth. The impression transcends the two distinct modes of perceptions — the timeless intellectual cogitation and the momentary sensory perception —, and makes possible the discovery of eternal truth in time as the work of collaborative selves synthesizing the past and the present moments of perception. Against this aesthetic ideal of Proustian impressionism, Matz finds Hardy’s impressionism as only “defensive,” a mere self-protective evasion against Mowbray Morris’s critique of the aesthetic anarchy at the end of the century brought by the duplicitous coexistence of “brazen didacticism” and “primal passion.” Hardy’s impressionism may place itself against both the mere ideas and the mere sensations, or against the theory-driven symbolism and the literal-minded naturalism, but, Matz argues, the possible collaborative of the two in the characterization of Tess, for example, has failed, and rather it just dwindled into “the melodrama of gender difference” only to be eventually retrieved safely back into the conventional cultural plot about a “fallen woman.”

Widdowson, on the other hand, debunks the critics’ myth of Hardy as the novelist of his major “Novels of Character and Environment,” or the great humanist-realist tragedian of the mythological rural Wessex. The essentialist assumptions in the
notion of character and environment, Widdowson points out, has been constantly undermined by Hardy’s chronic novelistic “flaws” and “defects” in his minor as well as even major works. For example, the “character” of Tess is nothing but an “amalgam” of her images seen or created by other characters, the narrator, and the reader, or the “tragedy” of Jude and Sue is constantly deflated and mocked by the ominously satiric presence of Arabella. The nineteenth-century bourgeois humanist-realist notion of character or tragedy – the bulwark of Victorian realism represented by George Eliot – is deconstructed by Hardy the postmodernist, and, Widdowson concludes, precisely in this respect Hardy is still our contemporary.

In the following pages, my argument will trace the shiftings of the locus of the real and its eventual disappearance in Hardy’s last novel. I will be reading the novel as a record of the historical bankruptcy of literary realism from within. If not an outright assault upon realism, the novel certainly witnesses the gradual but inevitable demise of realism, of the faith in the very presence of the real. The death of realism – Hardy’s outgrowing of his own realist assumptions – has been negatively understood by Matz as his failure to move forward toward the new, genuine modernist aesthetics for the true instead of the real, and positively aligned by Widdowson with postmodernist deconstruction of the Victorian ideology of realism. In a way similar to Widdowson, but more extreme, I am afraid, my conclusion will be associating this death of realism in Hardy’s last novel with the death of literature, or the literature of death, as they are propounded by Maurice Blanchot, who, under the influence of Heidegger, declared the bankruptcy of Kantian reason and its handmaid realism, and announced the birth of ontological realism of being. In Blanchot, the light of reason has been replaced by the obscurity of being, and in his novel *Thomas l’obscur* he undauntedly practiced his ontological realism which could not be expected to be other than an abysmal obscurity in the eyes of the traditional Kantian reason now bankrupt. My reading of Hardy’s last novel as announcing the death of realism and the death of novel for him, in a proleptic relation to Blanchot’s later notion of the death of literature, will, of course, require that we should turn our critical eye to Hardy’s poetry, another, apparently still viable form of literature for him in his later years.

8 Cf. “When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality – the reality, I tell you – fades. The inner truth is hidden – luckily, luckily” (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 49).
Works Cited and Consulted


