Déjà vu with a difference : repetition and the tragic in Thomas Hardy's novels

Déjà vu with a Difference: Repetition and the Tragic in Thomas Hardy's Novels

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> Indeed, what would life be if there were no repetition?
> (Kierkegaard *Repetition*)

Thomas Hardy's work abounds with repetition of many different kinds.[1] Apart from the repetition on sentence or paragraph level, we find the recurrence of key words throughout his entire work. "Red" is one of them – it appears with striking frequence, e.g. in *Tess*, or *The Return of the Native*.[2] Another form of repetition, on a wider scale, is the recurrence of symbols. Some are everywhere in Hardy's writing, such as the bird, which stands for the cruel indifference of nature.[3] Others are of a more "local" character such as the "Roman Road," a token of both a remote and very personal past, which appears only twice in *The Return of the Native* and in two poems.[4] Then there are motifs such as that of lovers' hands touching

[1] The only large-scale investigation and by far the most astute treatment of repetition in Hardy remains without a doubt, more than ten years after its original publication, J. Hillis Miller's *Fiction and Repetition*.

[2] Perhaps this predilection itself is an instance of repetition – an echo of the biographical in the fictional. As Hardy recalls in the *Life*

> [in] those days the staircase at Bockhampton (later removed) had its walls coloured Venetian red by his father, and was so situated that the evening sun shone into it, adding to its colour a great intensity for a quarter of an hour or more. (20)

[3] See Pinion, *Hardy Companion* (162).

[4] *The Return of the Native* I, i and VI, ii (34, 352); the poems are "The Roman Road" (CP 264) and "The Well-Beloved" (CP 133). This and all subsequent

under water with the ensuing, pleasant confusion as to which fingers belong to whose hand. This is one of the first tokens of intimacy between Dick Dewey and Fancy Day in *Under the Greenwood Tree* (114-5) and the last one between Angel Clare and Tess in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (215).

Of course basic ideas keep reoccurring as well. The most prevalent of these, the *primum mobile* behind all Hardy's plots, is the pursuit of the ideal partner. To find and be united with this ultimate of all human beings is that "delicate dream . . . more or less common to all men."[5] The implications of this concept, which Hardy calls the "Well-Beloved," are explored in detail in a novel and a poem with the same title (CP 133).

The most typical form of repetition in Hardy's writing, however, manifests itself in his protagonists' experience of *déjà vu*. Revisiting familiar locations, repeating past actions, or chancing on old acquaintances, his characters frequently face their personal past. Tess, Eustacia, Henchard, or Jocelyn Pierston, to name but a few, all relive moments of their own past at one point or another. Occasionally, they experience the recurrence of a more remote past as the sudden awareness of their own ancestry impinges upon them. This is what happens to Tess during one of her early encounters with Angel Clare at Talbothays. Her view of the past is that of an endless repetition of lives, every single one of which is nothing but a distant echo, a simulacrum of a life already lived. Disquieted and perturbed by this notion she refuses to accept the past as a dimension of her own life:

> Because what's the use of learning that I am one of a long row only – finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad, that's all. The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands' and thousands', and that your coming life and doings'll be like thousands' and thousands'. (137)

As a result, she tries to eradicate all traces of the past, attempting to "put it out as one treads on a coal that is smouldering and dangerous" (193). This

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references to Hardy's poetry are to the Macmillan edition of the *Complete Poems*. The number in parentheses indicates the page number rather than the number of the poem.

[5] *The Well-Beloved* (xxii).

proves to be impossible, however, and both her own as well as her ancestral past force themselves upon her and irremediably alter the course of her life towards a tragic end.

The repetition of what took place in the past is a phenomenon Hardy regards as one of the basic conditions of human life itself – if not the fundamental law governing human existence. This repetition appears in two different but related forms. For one thing the protagonists' lives often turn out to be predetermined by events in the past. What appears to them as their own, independent existence, Hardy's texts insinuate, is only a reiteration of the lives of their ancestors or of past events in their own life.

In addition, the same heroes and heroines sadly discover that the past never repeats itself unchanged, particularly not in situations in which such knowledge might enable them to make the right decisions. Repetition with a difference unfailingly prevents them from learning from their own mistakes and reminds them with exasperating clarity that the past cannot be undone.

The Present as a Repetition of the Past

To shed some light on Hardy's conception of human life as repetition I would like to use the illustration which accompanies the poem "Her Dilemma" in the original edition of the *Wessex Poems*, published by Harper & Brothers in England in 1898. The drawing, which is now, fortunately, once more included in the 1982 Oxford edition, depicts the diminutive figures of a woman and man in a church, holding hands:[6]

The ground underneath the church floor on which they stand is shown in cross-section. It contains numerous human skulls and other bones as well as two crypts. The lovers are separated from the ground underneath only by a thin floor. Their feet almost touch the bones of those buried underneath them.

Although the poem for which the illustration was made is often considered an instance of the Hardyan issue of honesty in the relationship between man and woman, the much more basic issue it raises is that of the relation between human life and the past, or, in the light of Hardy's understanding of the past, the role of repetition in human life.

The imagery used in the introductory stanza strongly emphasizes the assertive presence of the bygone years. Its most obvious representation is the burial ground beneath the lovers, which occupies as much as one third of the picture. The church itself, too, bespeaks the proximity of the past. The "mildewed walls" the "uneven paving-stones," the "wasted carvings" and the "wormy poppy head" are tell-tale signs of the passing of time. Moreover, one of the lovers embodies the past through his own very old age. In the words of the anonymous narrator he is "[s]o wan and worn that he could scarcely stand" – he is expected "soon to die." In a short while, the illustration suggests, he will have become part of the soil on which he presently still stands. Eventually, the woman, though much younger at the time, will follow him.

Read from this angle, the poem tells not only of the lovers' plight – as tragical as it may be for the two individuals concerned – the real tragedy, the illustration suggests, is more fundamental. It lies in the particular view of the human condition it suggests; one that is characterized by familiarity and strangeness at the same time. Innumerable couples, the illustration documents, have lived through the same moments of joy and despair and yet, apart from these circumstantial parallels, nothing whatsoever links them with each other. Hardy's illustration depicts them as perfectly alone, helplessly on their own, "thrown into being" in the Heideggerian sense, and repetition becomes a cipher for the tragic.[7]

That the generic rather than the specific – the *repetition* rather than the *individual occurrence* – is Hardy's concern here, finds expression in several ways. Both the title and the subtitle provide only generic information.

[7] Cf. *Sein und Zeit* (135).

Instead of names, the reader is offered mere placeholders. The woman is referred to as "her" and the name of the church is represented by a horizontal line: "——". With this they become perfectly interchangeable, merely links in a chain of unknown length. This perspective is further emphasized by "the clock's dull monotones," which tick away mercilessly, thus forming a perfect emblem of repetition.

In the illustration, repetition appears in the form of stratification: there is a top layer, occupied by those presently alive. Underneath this layer – merely inches away from the lovers – are the untold strata created by the remains of those who lived and died before them. Such a view of human life as merely the uppermost in a potentially infinite number of layers occurs frequently in Hardy. It is how Eustacia Vye is introduced in that magnificent passage early in *The Return of the Native*:

> There the form stood, motionless as the hill beneath. Above the plain rose the hill, above the hill rose the barrow, and above the barrow rose the figure .... Such a perfect, delicate, and necessary finish did the figure give to the dark pile of hills that it seemed to be the only obvious justification of their outline. (38)

The threefold anaphoric repetition of "above . . . rose," strongly reminiscent of biblical language, suggests the statement of a simple truth: hill, barrow and woman are part of the same vast continuum. As she stands on the ground in the "Wessex" landscape, Eustacia coexists with an immense past, a past that is ever-present in the now. Only a few pages later, in the opening description of the November 5th bonfires on Egdon Heath, Hardy links the "present" events with those of an infinitely long chain of similar celebrations, a chain that reaches far back, into the origins of mankind itself:

> The ashes of the original British pyre which blazed from that summit lay fresh and undisturbed in the barrow beneath their tread. The flames from funeral piles long ago kindled there had shone down upon the lowlands as these were shining now. Festival fires to Thor and Woden had followed on the same ground and duly had their day. (40-1)

Human activities in the present are a mere repetition of what has happened innumerable times in the past.

The past, then, must be omnipresent. In certain locations it even shapes

the appearance of the present. The city of Casterbridge bears such testament to the past:

> Casterbridge announced old Rome in every street, alley, and precinct. It looked Roman, bespoke the art of Rome, concealed dead men of Rome. It was impossible to dig more than a foot or two deep about the town fields and gardens without coming upon some tall soldier or other of the Empire, who had lain there in his silent unobtrusive rest for a space of fifteen hundred years. (79)

The past, this passage tells us, is perfectly contiguous with the present, not only temporally, but also spatially. This propensity of Hardy's to see the ground under his feet populated with the remains of the generations before him doubtless has biographical roots. Working as an assistant-architect to the later famous Arthur Blomfield, he had to supervise in 1865 the removal of "many hundreds of coffins and bones in huge quantities" from Old Saint Pancras Churchyard, through which the Midland Railway was about to make a cutting (*Life* 47).

The question that arises now is that of the influence of the past on the present. As it turns out, Hardy's texts claim with equal force that the past has no influence on the present, and that it does. Often it seems that the dead have nothing to tell the living; the living have nothing to learn from the dead. The passage I have just quoted above continues:

> They [i. e. the Roman soldiers] had lived so long ago, their time was so unlike the present, their hopes and motives were so widely removed from ours, that between them and the living there seemed to stretch a gulf too wide for even a spirit to pass. (80)

The past cannot communicate with the present. This becomes evident in that passage from *Two on a Tower*, which describes how St. Cleeve prepares in his little cabin to depart for Bath where he intends to be secretly married to Lady Constantine:

> What events had been enacted in that earthen camp since it was first thrown up, nobody could say; but the primitive simplicity of the young man's preparations accorded well with the prehistoric spot on which they were made. Embedded under his feet were possibly even now rude trinkets that had been worn at bridal ceremonies of the early inhabitants.

> Little signified those ceremonies to-day, or the happiness or otherwise of the contracting parties. (89)

Other passages claim the exact opposite, namely that the past does indeed influence the present. A case in point is the spot upon which Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* chooses to meet his wife after nineteen years of separation. Called *The Ring* by the local inhabitants, it represents "one of the finest Roman Amphitheatres, if not the very finest" (79) in the whole of Britain.[8] Although the Ring is an "airy, accessible, and sequestered spot for interviews" (80), lovers as a rule avoided the place. They felt that there was "something sinister" about the place – an assessment that could be easily validated, Hardy hastens to add, if one considered the history of the Ring. Not only had the town-gallows stood here for scores of years, the Ring had also seen the gruesome execution of a woman who had murdered her husband (80).

There are a host of other instances in which the past is seen as clearly exerting an influence on the present. I shall quote just one more, from *Jude the Obscure*, where Sue Bridehead complains of a strange uneasiness she feels in Grove's Place at Shaftesbury: "Such houses are very well to visit, but not to live in – I feel crushed into the earth by the weight of so many previous lives there spent" (170).

The ambiguity about the influence of the past on the present pervades all Hardy's novels. A particularly apt example is the ending of *A Laodicean*. When Stancy Castle burns down, Paula Power's attitude towards the loss of that domineering symbol of the past is perfectly equivocal. On the one hand she wishes to be rid of the past in order to be capable of a new beginning and, thus, decides that it would be best not to reconstruct the castle, and that she should start her married life in a different location, "unencumbered with the ghosts of an unfortunate line" (408). Like Sue Bridehead by Old-Grove Place in *Jude the Obscure*, she feels oppressed by the presence of the past in her home.

Yet at the same time it is impossible for her to break with her past completely. Instead of moving away from Stancy Castle in order to free herself from it, she wants to live in a mansion "hard by the old one" (408).

[8] The Maumbury Ring is a pre-Roman earthwork, oval-shaped, about 220 feet long and 160 feet wide, just south of Casterbridge (Dorchester).

And a part of her soul still yearns for that past which she has just lost when she confides to Somerset: "I wish my castle wasn't burnt; and I wish you were a De Stancy" (408). This inextirpability of the past is also echoed in the description of the smoldering ruins, which never clearly states if the castle is really destroyed beyond repair. It seems as though the signs of the remote past were indestructible. "The thicker walls of Norman date," the reader learns, "remained unmoved" (407) and "the main walls were still standing as firmly as ever" (408).

After this brief consideration of Hardy's conception of the past, I would like to take a closer look at the two notions of repetition I mentioned above to observe how they manifest themselves in his texts.

Two Kinds of Repetition

Firstly, to the present as a duplication of the past. A pivotal example of this kind of repetition materializes (quite literally) in the following poem, entitled "Heredity" (CP 434):

> I AM *the family face*;
> Flesh perishes, I live on,
> Projecting trait and trace
> Through time to times anon,
> And leaping from place to place
> Over oblivion.
>
> The years-heired feature that can
> In curve and voice and eye
> Despise the human span
> Of durance – that is I;
> The eternal thing in man,
> That heeds no call to die.

What is remarkable here is that the focus in these lines is not, as one might expect, primarily on the potential immortality which the genotype imparts to the individual. Instead it is, rather, on the sinister effects that such a possibility might entail. "Heredity" leaves the reader with a curious feeling of uneasiness. This anxiety originates in the scornful, sinister tone in which the face arrogantly states its supremacy over the individual human life, and

it is intensified in heredity's final claim that it "heeds no call to die" with which it demonstrates not only recalcitrance but even potential violence. Any "thing" capable of overcoming death, the metaphor insinuates, must possess limitless power.

As it turns out, this is precisely the aspect of heredity that Hardy is most concerned with. Rather than being pleased by the prospect of potential immortality, he is worried by the restriction the genotype imposes on the individual's freedom of choice. In the poem "The Pedigree" (CP 460) the speaker ponders upon his family tree late at night. From an accretion of names, titles and relations, the pedigree suddenly turns into a mirror in which he discerns the familiar faces of innumerable ancestors of his "mien, and build, and brow." By degrees, the speaker begins to be troubled by the identity that links him to his forebears:

> And then did I divine
> That every heave and coil and move I made
> Within my brain, and in my mood and speech,
> Was in the glass portrayed
> As long forestalled by their so making it;
> The first of them, the primest fuglemen of my line,
> Being fogged in far antiqueness past surmise and reason's reach.

What he shares with his ancestors, the speaker begins to suspect, is more than their physical features – it is their fate. His "every heave and coil and move" is preprogrammed, as it were, in the lives of his ancestors. In the final stanza the implications of this discovery hit the speaker with full force, utterly destroying any conception of his selfhood as an independent, individual, and unique existence. His life – and with this his "I" – are nothing but a repetition, a rehash of what generations of his forebears have already experienced

> Said I then, sunk in tone,
> "I am merest mimicker and counterfeit! –
> Though thinking, *I am I*,
> *And what I do I do myself alone*."
> . . .

The most conspicuous materialization of the idea that the fate of the individual might be determined by that of his or her ancestors can certainly

be found in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The passage I have in mind is set at Wellbridge Manor, once seat of a d'Urberville, where Tess and Angel Clare are to spend their honeymoon. Almost immediately after entering the house, Tess discovers the life-size portraits of two of her forebears:

> As all visitors to the mansion are aware, these paintings represent women of middle age, of a date some two hundred years ago, whose lineaments once seen can never be forgotten. The long pointed features, narrow eye, and smirk of the one, so suggestive of merciless treachery; the bill-hook nose, large teeth, and bold eye of the other, suggesting arrogance to the point of ferocity, haunt the beholder afterwards in his dreams. (214)

While Tess is very much disturbed by the physical appearance of the two "horrid women" as she calls them, Angel Clare is more disturbed by his secret observation that Tess undeniably resembles her ancestresses:

> The unpleasantness of the matter was that, in addition to their effect upon Tess, her fine features were unquestionably traceable in these exaggerated forms. (214)

In a way, then, the murder she is to commit later, is the result of the very ferocity present in the features of her forebears. This cruelty will eventually well up again in her, two hundred years later, bringing her to stab the man who raped her. The tragedy of her fate lies thus in its perfect inevitability. What she does is predetermined in the past. This brings to mind Hardy's own definition of the finest tragedy as "that of the WORTHY encompassed by the INEVITABLE" (*Life*, Oct. 24th, 265, Hardy's emphasis). Two further indications in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* support this view of the past as determinant force in human life.

The first, and the more subtle, is the charwoman's explanatory comment that the portraits of the two women cannot be removed because they are "builded into the wall" (214). Trifling as the circumstance may seem, in the context of Hardy's understanding of heredity, the impossibility of removing the women's images reflects the inextirpable presence of ancestral hereditary matter in Tess' blood. The same ferocity that pervades the faces of the two women is also present in Tess. However slight its potential influence might be, it forms an inalienable part of their

descendant.[9]

The second piece of evidence occurs much earlier, in Hardy's wry comment on the possible causes for Tess's rape:

> One may, indeed, admit the possibility of a retribution lurking in the present catastrophe. Doubtless some of Tess d'Urberville's mailed ancestors rollicking home from a fray had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time. (89)

With this observation Hardy posits the possibility that the past might – in some inexplicable way – exert an influence on the present. Significantly enough, Tess's entire misfortune begins at the very moment her father learns that he is the descendant of an ancient knightly family – and begins to behave as he feels one of his ancestors would have done.

To the other major form of repetition, repetition with a difference, Hardy devoted an entire novel: *The Well-Beloved*. It is the story of a man – Jocelyn Pierston who is on a lifelong search for his ideal love. In the course of his quest he falls in love with many embodiments of this "Well-Beloved," only to discover that "Lucy, Jane, Flora, Evangeline, or whatnot had been merely a transient condition of her" (8). However, the most significant feature of Hardy's treatment of this time-honoured topos is that Pierston falls in love with a particular Portland woman and two subsequent "repetitions" of her, one might say, namely 20 years later with her daughter and 40 years later with her granddaughter. The Christian name of the first woman is Avice, that of the second Ann Avice, and that of the third again Avice. While the second Avice is by no means an exact duplicate of the first, she does nonetheless remind him vividly of the first. The third Avice again so closely resembles the original Avice that she appears to Pierston as "the very she, in all essential particulars, and with an intensification of general charm, who had kissed him forty years ago" (107).

Pierston's tragedy is now that, although given three chances at a quasi-identical embodiment of the Well-Beloved, he fails three times. Even the third time, when he is only a hair's breadth away from marrying the

[9] The portraits Tess is so horrified by actually exist. Affixed to the walls of the staircaise at Wellbridge Manor they depict Julia and Frances Turberville. In a letter of June 5, 1906, Hardy describes the pictures as "built into the wall" (*Letters* III, 210).

"elusive idealization he called his Love" (6), fate turns against him as Avice Three elopes with another man on the very eve of her wedding.

The significance of repetition throughout the entire novel is, then, that the reappearance of the same situation does not imply a genuine second chance in the present with the help of the past. These repetitions are always repetitions with a difference, however slight, which in the end makes it impossible for the individual to take advantage of his or her past experience.

The text of *The Well-Beloved* holds many hints that Pierston's search for the ideal woman must be futile – an endless repetition. The first occurs in Hardy's singling out of a geological particularity of the island on which most of the action is to take place. His visual account of the locale culminates in the line "and the sun flashed on infinitely stratified walls of oolite" (3). Together with the fragment from Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound," which Hardy quotes immediately afterwards "The melancholy ruins / of cancelled cycles, . . . " – the action which is to follow is placed against the backdrop of infinite stratification, infinite repetition.[10] Thus what happens to Jocelyn Pierston is nothing but the addition of yet another cycle to an already infinite number of "cancelled cycles."

What should perhaps be mentioned here, too, is that the threefold repetition of the name Avice creates a meaning of its own: it mocks Pierston's futile efforts at attaining the unattainable. The similarity of the three names stands in sharp contrast to the infinite web of differences that surround the three women, and which, in the end, thwart Pierston's ambitions. It is the same mechanism that is at work in *The Return of the Native* where the child of the wretched marriage between Thomasin Yeobright and Damon Wildeve is named Eustacia Clementine. Clym immediately perceives the cruel absurdity in this repetition as he exclaims "What a mockery . . . This unhappy marriage of mine to be perpetuated in that child's name!" (302). Eustacia, it goes without saying, is a repetition of Eustacia Vye's name and Clementine is the female version of his own name, Clement, of which "Clym" is a shortened form.

Under the Greenwood Tree tells of another individual thwarted in his attempts to understand his own life better with the aid of repetition. Dick Dewey is hopelessly in love with the pretty schoolmistress Fancy Day. Yet,

[10] Shelley, "Prometheus Unbound," Act I, ll. 288-9.

he is not sure if she loves him in return because he is unable to make head or tail of her answers. When he meets his father soon afterwards, he tries to learn how to interpret Fancy's ambiguous assertions by asking him about his own experiences. As it turns out, his father distinctly remembers the moment when he proposed to his future wife. However, when asked about her reactions he is finally forced to admit that he cannot remember:

> "And what did mother say to you when you asked her?" said Dick musingly.
>
> "I don't see that that will help 'ee."
>
> "The principle is the same."
>
> "Well – ay: what did she say? Let's see. I was oiling my workingday boots without taking 'em off, and wi' my head hanging down when she just brushed on by the garden hatch like a flittering leaf. 'Ann,' I said says I, and then, – but Dick, I am afeard, 'twill be no help to thee . . ."
>
> . . .
>
> "What came next I can't quite call up at this distance o' time. . . ." (119)

At the very moment Dick is closest to those details that might help him in his own wooing, his father's memory fails him and Dick's inquiry comes to nought.

Yet repetition with a difference may not only prevent the individual from taking advantage of his/her or someone else's past experience, it may also lead to disaster and annihilation. Such an incident is described in *The Return of the Native* in the chapter aptly entitled, "An Old Move Inadvertently Repeated." The little boy, Charley, observes the sadness and listlessness in Eustacias's demeanour when she returns to her grandfather's house after she decided to leave Clym. Charley, who had, a little while before, prevented her from committing suicide, understands the seriousness of the situation and decides to cheer her up. He remembers that over the two previous years, his mistress had seemed to enjoy the lighting of a bonfire on a particular spot in celebration of the fifth of November. Perfectly unaware of the fact that this fire used to be a signal for Eustacia's secret lover, Wildeve, Charley builds a bonfire and lights it. With this the innocent youngster, who has nothing but Eustacia's well-being on his mind, inadvertently initiates the final stage of the tragedy. As in the previous years, Wildeve calls on her and the two have a secret meeting. When Eustacia expresses her wish to "escape" to Paris, Wildeve

offers her his assistance. Together they decide on a plan, which, when it is executed the following night, entails their death.

Not infrequently do Hardy's protagonists experience repetition with a difference when they find themselves in places they know from past experience. Thus Clym Yeobright passes familiar territory on his return to the house of his mother:

> The expression of the place, the tone of the hour, were precisely those of many such occasions in days gone by; and these antecedent similarities fostered the illusion that she, who was there no longer, would come out to welcome him. (291)

The sad truth is that his mother has since died from a snakebite and will never come out to welcome him again. While the place is doubtless the same, time and circumstances are very different now, and the contrast between this and earlier instances of his presence at this very location sadly highlights the irredeemable absence of his mother. In most instances, such revisitations bring back painful memories, as for Eustacia after her separation from Clym:

> The room in which she had formerly slept still remained much as she had left it, and the recollection that this forced upon her of her own greatly changed and infinitely worsened situation again set on her face the undetermined and formless misery which it had worn on her first arrival. (305)

In fact, the immense contrast between her former happiness and her present despair weighs her down so much that she considers suicide. If little Charley had not removed the pistols from her uncle's room, she would have put an end to her misery.

How closely repetition with a difference is connected with the notion of the tragic is illustrated at the end of the fifth book of *The Return of the Native*, where Diggory Venn dries his leggings at the fireplace of the Quiet Woman Inn:

> The last occasion on which he had lingered by that fireplace was when the raffle was in progress; when Wildeve was alive and well; Thomasin active and smiling in the next room; Yeobright and Eustacia just made husband and wife, and Mrs. Yeobright living at Blooms-End. It had

> seemed at that time that the then position of affairs was good for at least twenty years to come. (338)

For Venn seeing once more the familiar fireplace intensifies the devastating losses the closely-knit Egdon community has suffered. Now Wildeve, Eustacia and Mrs. Yeobright are dead, Clym barely alive, and Thomasin sick and widowed. As Venn continues his reflections, musing that he is the only one "whose situation had not materially changed," the terrible irony of his lonely presence in front of the fireplace comes out in full force. As if this were not enough, the text uses one more form of repetition to heighten the sense of tragedy. The contrast between "before" and "after" is reiterated and intensified rhetorically in the fierce pun on the word "sleep" as Venn deliberates whether he should stay at the inn for the night:

> Venn was loth to depart, for all on earth that interested him lay under this roof. As nobody in the house had any more sleep that night, except the two who slept forever, there was no reason why he should not remain. (338)

* * *

The way in which Hardy's protagonists experience repetition continually undermines one of the fundamental mechanisms that would allow them to come to terms with life. Repetition is an essential epistemological factor as it paves the way for the acquisition of knowledge: without repetition learning is impossible. It is thus certainly no coincidence that the Greek word for "to know" – *οἶδα* – is really an aorist form that signifies "I have seen." What I have seen I can call up before my inner eye; it is familiar to me.

By way of familiarity, repetition leads to security, stability, to meaning. As Kierkegaard asserts, "If one does not have the category of recollection or of repetition, all life dissolves into an empty, meaningless noise" (*Repetition* 149). According to Hardy the systematic exploitation of repetition as a means of learning about life is denied us; we are nothing but "bond-servants of Chance."[11] As a result, Hardy's protagonists find

[11] "What bond-servants of Chance / We are all" ("Ditty," CP 17).

themselves in a state of epistemological entropy and find themselves constantly threatened by the suspicion that life might be nothing but "meaningless noise." And just as no generation may learn from the mistakes of their predecessors, no individual may do so from his/her own errors. They are all doomed or damned to err repeatedly. All that repetition has to offer Hardy's protagonists is the painful realization that the past cannot be undone. Clym Yeobright speaks for them all on the last pages of *The Return of the Native*, when he begs "would to God that I could live my life again" (364), knowing full well that his wish can never be fulfilled.

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