**HARDY’S NIGHT SKIES**

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In one of his notebooks, Hardy recorded that ‘a smart paragraphist said that he was nearly deluded into a belief in Hardy’s verses after reading them one night; but he saved his critical credit by getting up on a cold wet morning and reading them again on an empty stomach. It happily cured his weakness.’[[1]](#endnote-1) Hardy obviously records this with some amusement, but there is a glimpse of something fundamentally true in the critic’s response. There is something about Hardy’s writing that particularly resonates at night, even for those who, it seems, are prejudiced against his poetry. Reckoning quantatively, thinking of hours and minutes, night is no different from day, but the qualitative experience of night and day are entirely different. Furthermore, how night time is understood as a phenomenon is historically contingent. As Timothy Clark writes: ‘The world in its crucial features ‘is’ in a different way for an ancient Greek, for a medieval monk and for a modern Westerner. What each sees and understands in the simplest object such as a river will differ, for the world – the whole sense of being human – in relation to which the river appears will differ drastically between one epoch and another.’[[2]](#endnote-2) My title ‘Hardy’s Night Skies’ points to time and space, concepts which changed radically over the course of Hardy’s lifetime. Hardy often wrote as one who is sleepless, and his mind often turned to existential questions prompted by the silence, stillness and vastness of night. Here I will be considering Hardy’s nightscapes not merely as backdrops for stories or poems, but as intrinsic to his post-Romantic examination of the human condition.

Vincent Van Gogh was someone who was enthralled by the night sky and in a letter of 1877, he described a particular night scene in the following words:

I looked out of the window of my room at the roofs of the houses you can see from there, and at the tops of the elms, dark against the night sky. Above the roofs, a single star, but a beautiful, big friendly one. And I thought of us all and I thought of my own years gone by and of our home.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Van Gogh then seems to be addressing the spirit of the night in the spirit of Romanticism in this letter, which continues in its metaphysical address ‘Thou art Love, cover all things. Without Thy constant blessing we shall succeed in nothing.’[[4]](#endnote-4) In looking up at the sky, invoking a blessing from the night sky, a sense of oneness between mortals and divinities and care for the earth and our community we see what Heidegger later conceived of as the fourfold sense of being. The desire for unity that we get in Van Gogh’s letter is also essentially a Romantic worldview. According to the Romantics’ conception of being - not merely the physical universe but the totality of all existence - was infinite and completely interconnected. However, as scholars including Pamela Gossin have examined in detail, Hardy’s conception of the world and humankind’s relationship with it was radically altered from that held by his Romantic forebears.[[5]](#endnote-5) In the 1880s popular handbooks containing the first ever photographs of the night sky, were published, showing stars and nebulae invisible to the human eye, which suggested that the earth and the heavens were not made for mankind, while theories emerged in the 1880s about stellar decay. And yet, to return to, Van Gogh’s painting of 1889, what we behold is not a nihilistic vision of the waste spaces of the sky, but rolling, nebulae swirling gently reflecting the peacefulness of the village below. The cyprus tree, with its associations with death, dominates the sky but nonetheless you can just see the steeple connecting the village with the sky, suggesting at the very least a desire to retain a belief in that sense of unity such as is revealed in Van Gogh’s letter. We might compare this with an illustration that Hardy drew to accompany his poem ‘A Sign Seeker’ for his 1898 volume, *Wessex Poems*. In Hardy’s illustration there are buildings just visible on the skyline, suggestive of a community such as is figured in ‘The Starry Night.’ In place of the cypress tree which dominates ‘The Starry Night’ there is comet hurtling toward earth and yet the predominant tone of ‘A Sign Seeker’ is a sense of nostalgia for belief in a sense of connection to be felt in looking up at the night sky. It is this Romantic longing for the restoration of this connection, I would argue, that is at the core of Hardy’s elegiac sensibility.

In his *Poetical Matter* notebook, Hardy writes the following note on his interest in the night sky:

Why Orion, Pleiades, stars generally, & the Moon are of interest & beauty. Not for their size, brightness, distance, grandeur, &c. but \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Because on just such an evening … night … Shelley, Wordswth , Shakesp., Milton, Virgil, Homer, Paul of Tarsus, Jesus of Nazareth, Authors of Job, the Psalms &c., & all of that brotherhood, have mused on them as I do now.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Here, Hardy situates himself within a fraternity of nocturnal writers, but rather than mentioning Tennyson (another poet well-versed in the waste places of the sky), or acknowledging the latest findings in astronomy, Hardy aligns himself first and foremost with the Romantic poets who wrote numerous lyrical poems addressed to the night, attributing sentience to the night. In the Romantic era, we see the emergence of philosophy based on a pantheistic understanding of the world. Hegel conceived of ‘the Absolute Spirit’, a kind of world-soul or world consciousness. Following Hegel, Schelling conceived of an Absolute Spirit in terms of the darkness of night. For Novalis, who wrote ‘Hymns to the Night,’ night itself was a divinity. In the Romantic era, in reaction against the Enlightenment, the Romantics embraced darkness and we see the emergence of a nocturnal sensibility. John Field and Frederic Chopin each composed a series of nocturnes, evocative of night time, with melodies that were contemplative and melancholic, while artists and the Romantic poets took the night time as their muse. In his notebook entry, Hardy aligns himself with Shelley and Wordsworth whose poems ‘To Night’ and ‘To the Moon’, and ‘A Night Thought’, each anthropomorphise night, reflecting a belief in our oneness with divinities, whether that belief is of a monotheistic or pantheistic nature.

As Pamela Gossin has shown, Hardy was well-versed in the latest findings in astronomy from his earliest years as a writer, but alongside this interest, we see a concurrent interest in metaphysics. Notes that Hardy made in his *Literary Notebook* reveal that he was drawn to the Romantic philosophers. In a review of *The History of Modern Philosophy* that duly acknowledged the influence of scientists Leonardo da Vinci, Kepler and Galileo, Hardy underlined a note that: ‘Very much less space is conceded to the later Germans, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and the rest, who are classed as philosophers of Romanticism.’[[7]](#endnote-7) Hardy made notes from William Kingdom Clifford, who retained a Romantic conception of our relationship with nature, while positing a scientifically-theorised conception of the universe as ‘a vast brain’ with the stars ‘just atoms in some vast organism.’[[8]](#endnote-8) Clifford conceived of Nature as made up of ‘mind-stuff’, a theory derived from Hegel’s Absolute Spirit, and a concept that Hardy was to approximate with his own conception ofthe Immanent Will.[[9]](#endnote-9)

While Hardy confronted the conclusions of modern scientists on the origins and conception of the world, his notes from works of contemporary philosophers reveal a desire hold to the belief in a sense of unity that is reflected in his own notebook entries. In one note, also recorded in *The Life and Work*, Hardy remarks that there is a ‘difference between children who grow up in solitary country places and those who grow up in towns – the former being imaginative, dreamy, and credulous of vague mysteries.’[[10]](#endnote-10) The reason, he suggests, is that ‘The Unknown comes within so short a radius from themselves by comparison with the city-bred.’[[11]](#endnote-11) Hardy capitalizes ‘Unknown’, thus, in a sense, personifying the external medium of the outdoor world, to which those who grow up in the country have particular access. The relationship that individual characters in Hardy’s fiction have with the night sky often divides according to temperament, whether they are associated with urbanization and modernity, or if they have an affinity with nature. In a well-known passage of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Oak reads the time in the stars rather than by a watch, reflecting his Romantic affinity with sidereal time as opposed to the clock-reckoning of modernity. The narrator endorses Oak’s connection with nature, with a direct address to his reader: ‘stand on a hill at a small hour of the night, and, having first expanded with a sense of difference from the mass of civilised mankind, who are dreamwrapt and disregardful of all such proceedings at this time, long and quietly watch your stately progress through the stars.’[[12]](#endnote-12) Rather than conceiving of our existence within a Christian framework, the novel examines man’s connection with nature. Edward Young’s Christian poem, *Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality* is one of the ‘dismal books’ that Bathsheba rejects after her separation from Troy and the novel, on the whole rejects the Church and its teachings. The title of *Far from the Madding Crowd* is taken from Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy written in a Country Churchyard’, which invites us to think of it in relation to graveyard poetry, but, like Thomas Gray, Hardy is concerned with the individual and his relationship with the community and with nature in secular terms. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* Hardy holds a belief in man’s consonance with the natural world as we see in this description of the night sky. Here Gabriel Oak appears to be in communion with the stars, which are ‘throbs of one body, timed by a common pulse.’[[13]](#endnote-13) His feeling of oneness makes it hard to see his consciousness as separate from the vast, or the Absolute. Perhaps it might be going too far to suggest that the name Oak, suggests a connection between earth and sky (like the cypress tree in Van Gogh’s “The Starry Night’), but certainly Oak is at one with nature in a way that Troy, who prefers philandering under the night sky, rather than looking up at it, is not.

Hardy also uses the night sky metaphorically to differentiate a natural way of being from living by the social and moral constructions that frame his characters’ lives. We see this in *The Return of the Native*. While the Egdon furze cutters light bonfires as though in rebellion against the night they live entirely according to nature, the opening pages of the novel emphasise that they work according to sidereal time and the epilogue highlights that those who have survived the tragic events of the night of the 6th of November, live in consonance with nature. The difference between Clym and Eustacia in *The Return of the Native*, is made clear by their very different readings of a lunar eclipse. Rather than retaining a Romantic affinity with Nature as a divinity, Eustacia usurps this role and she herself is ‘Queen of Night’. Observing Clym in the light of the eclipse Eustacia says: ‘Clym, the eclipsed moonlight shines upon your face with a strange foreign colour, and shows its shape as if it were cut out in gold. That means you should be doing better things than this.’[[14]](#endnote-14) But Clym’s feelings as he looks up at the eclipse, are focalised by the narrator:

More than ever he longed to be in some world where personal ambition was not the only recognized form of progress – such, perhaps, as might have been the case at some time or other in the silvery globe then shining upon him.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Hardy’s fiction examines the constraints − whether they be economic, religious or social − imposed upon individuals and societies by artificial systems of being, but yet there these transcendent moments that are glimpses of something above and beyond civilization, that suggest that a Romantic affinity with the world can be recaptured by looking up at the night sky. Tess Durbeyfield uses the night sky metaphorically when she describes the world as a ‘blighted star’, but she is also able to describe a truly transcendental experience when she speaks of how souls can become removed from bodies.[[16]](#endnote-16) ‘A very easy way to feel ‘em go,’ [she says] ‘is to lie on the grass at night and look straight up at some big bright star; and, by fixing your mind upon it, you will soon find that you are hundreds and hundreds o’ miles away from your body, which you don’t seem to want at all.’[[17]](#endnote-17) The narrator endorses the shared reality of such a transcendental experience as Tess describes when writing of the dairymaids of Trantridge returning home at night from the local village:

They followed the road with a sensation that they were soaring along in a supporting medium, possessed of original and profound thoughts; themselves and surrounding nature forming an organism of which all parts harmoniously and joyously interpenetrated each other. They were as sublime as the moon and stars above them.[[18]](#endnote-18)

This passage is not entirely satirical at the expense of the drunken dairymaids as they return from dancing at Trantridge, as the description is not merely focalising their thoughts. It is given from without by the narrator, who expresses in words what they may intuit through sensation, and thus suggests the narrator’s own belief, or desire to believe, that we are at one with surrounding nature. It is not unlike Gabriel Oak envisioning the stars and feeling in communion with them as with the Absolute or Clifford’s ‘mind-stuff’. And it is a reminder that the shadow plot of Tess is pastoral. The narrative repeatedly invokes a sense of fatalism behind Tess’s tragedy, with statements like ‘It was to be’. And yet, there is always the sense that it could have been otherwise. The narrator points explicitly to the difference between constructed systems of morality and the natural environment in pointed reminders that ‘she had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly.’[[19]](#endnote-19)

This transcendental escape from ‘social law’ is again expressed with reference to a metaphor taken from the night sky to contrast convention with nature in *Jude the Obscure* when Sue says: ‘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.’[[20]](#endnote-20) *Jude the Obscure* is far from being a pastoral novel, but there is one moment, early in the novel, when Jude is walking home at night reading Horace’s ‘Carmen Sæculare’.

On a day when Fawley was getting quite advanced, being now about sixteen, and had been stumbling through the ‘Carmen Sæculare,’ on his way home, he found himself to be passing over the high edge of the plateau by the Brown House. The light had changed, and it was the sense of this which had caused him to look up. The sun was going down, and the full moon was rising simultaneously behind the woods in the opposite quarter. His mind had become so impregnated with the poem that, in a moment of the same impulsive emotion which years before had caused him to kneel on the ladder, he stopped the horse, alighted, and glancing round to see that nobody was in sight, knelt down on the roadside bank with open book. He turned first to the shiny goddess, who seemed to look so softly and critically at his doings, then to the disappearing luminary on the other hand, as he began:

‘Phœbe silvarumque potens Diana!’

The horse stood still till he had finished the hymn, which Jude repeated under the sway of a polytheistic fancy that he would never have thought of humouring in broad daylight.

Reaching home, he mused over his curious superstition, innate or acquired, in doing this, and the strange forgetfulness which had led to such a lapse from common sense and custom in one who wished, next to being a scholar, to be a Christian divine. It had all come of reading heathen works exclusively. The more he thought of it the more convinced he was of his inconsistency. He began to wonder whether he could be reading quite the right books for his object in life. Certainly there seemed little harmony between this pagan literature and the mediæval colleges at Christminster, that ecclesiastical romance in stone.[[21]](#endnote-21)

In one sudden moment of forgetfulness, Jude draws on his pagan reading to address Diana, the Roman goddess of the moon. In doing so, as the narrator makes clear, he temporarily rejects ‘common sense and custom’ and feels a sense of freedom. Jude and Sue’s one moment of happiness is in a pastoral landscape, but other than this pastoral interlude, and Jude’s moment of Romantic pantheism, the novel is a diatribe against conventional morality and constructed systems of thought far removed from nature. As his career progressed, Hardy increasingly refused to close his novels with a comforting pastoral resolution. The idea of nature as a moral norm is very problematic in *Jude the Obscure*, as it is in *Tess*. To be in tune with nature, in these novels, is a cause of suffering. But Jude is not at one with nature beyond this point, after which he returns to his Christian books. It is interesting to see subtle differences between this scene and moments of nocturnal transcendence in Hardy’s earlier fiction. Jude does not in fact feel at one with the night sky, and while he apostrophises the moon, we are told that the moon ‘seemed to look so softly and critically at his doings.’[[22]](#endnote-22) Rather than affinity, we have a critical self-consciousness here. And the narrator does not endorse a Romantic view of the world as interconnected. Furthermore, Jude’s moment of Romantic pantheism, such as it is, can, in hindsight, be seen as part of the naivety that makes Jude unfit for the world. It is an interlude in the course he is on, that he returns to, namely the study of Christianity. Jude does not, here or elsewhere, feel at one with the world, and the apostrophe to the moon is poetic, rather than truly pantheistic. Sue conceives of the world in terms that are anthropomorphic, but this changes from a positive to a negative conception of their position in the world. The narrator notes that when Sue’s intellect ‘scintillated like a star’, that ‘the world resembled a stanza or a melody composed in a dream.’[[23]](#endnote-23)Whether a stanza or a dream, this implies a creator and a benevolent sentient life-force, but following the tragedy of the deaths of their children, the narrator notes that ‘those ideas are exchanged for a sense of Jude and herself feeling from a persecutor.’[[24]](#endnote-24) When Jude and Sue are described as having formerly conceived of the world as ‘a stanza or a melody composed in a dream’ this is one of Hardy’s last Romantic visions of the world in his fiction. It is noteworthy that once Hardy abandons this vision, he changes the modality of his writing, returning to poetry.

Although he abandoned a Romantic conception of being, in writing lyric poetry, Hardy adopted a form closely associated with the Romantics. Jacqueline Labbe has identified one of the great Romantic projects as that of ‘stag[ing] a Romantic persona for whom loss and recovery and diffusion are the rhetorical work at hand and the labour of poetic speech.’[[25]](#endnote-25) In tracing characters’ responses to the night sky I have been looking at the loss of a Romantic world-view, but one that can still be accessed intermittently. I have argued that for writers and artists influenced by Hegel, night time offered itself as a pantheistic metonym for the Absolute Spirit. But it is worth emphasizing that fundamentally, in Hegel, the Absolute Spirit is a collective consciousness of which each individual consciousness remains a part. The collective consciousness evolves through individual contributions to it in the realms of religion, philosophy and art. The realm of the Absolute Spirit became important for Hegel because individuals and institutions, customs and conventions pass away and perish. Only the inner content of people’s strivings and more or less conscious ideals outlive them, to be passed to posterity in the creation of art. To conceive of the Absolute as a world soul or collective spirit furthered by artistic endeavour potentially allows for the restoration of a sense of wholeness of the individual artist or writer through secular means. For Schiller the imaginative faculty which produces art can reconcile man to his natural state, and this concept of recovery came to be a central tenet of Romantic faith. Thus, artistic expression can be said to recover the completeness entailed in transcendence. In *Jude the Obscure*, such a consonance with nature can only be accessed through literature, as seen in his nocturnal effusions from ‘Carmen Sæculare.’ Eventually, it is not through literature but *in* literature that Hardy can attain transcendence.

In his *Poetical Matter* notebook, we have seen that Hardy links himself to the Romantic poets as a writer of night time, but in the very act of situating himself in a literary tradition of nocturnal philosophers, Hardy considers the phenomenology of night and how his response to the night must necessarily be historically contingent. Like the Romantics, Hardy often invokes the night and the moon as his muse, or he apostrophises the moon or the stars. But more often it is *the consciousness of writing at night* that is the subject matter of his night-time poems. We see this, for example in Hardy’s poem ‘An August Midnight’

‘An August Midnight’

I

A shaded lamp and a waving blind,   
And the beat of a clock from a distant floor:   
On this scene enter — winged, horned, and spined —   
A longlegs, a moth, and a dumbledore;   
While ’mid my page there idly stands   
A sleepy fly, that rubs its hands . . .

II

Thus meet we five, in this still place,   
At this point of time, at this point in space.   
— My guests besmear my new-penned line,   
Or bang at the lamp and fall supine.   
“God’s humblest, they!” I muse. Yet why?   
They know Earth-secrets that know not I.

The scene occurs in a constructed internal space, lit by a lamp and governed by a regulated sense of time with the scene featuring a beating clock, − but the waving blind reveals that is a space that is permeable to the natural, outdoor world of night-time. The speaker is joined by visitors from this world. They are ‘winged, horned and spined’ − adjectives that evoke a sense not merely of the natural world, but of the *ancient* natural world. The speaker of the poem then projects his own human consciousness onto these insects. The words ‘On this scene enter…’ evoke the world of the theatre; the fly is sleepy and rubbing its hands, and yet, the ellipsis suggests a dawning realisation, a question perhaps – can a fly be idle, or sleepy? Can these insects be actors, in the way that we humans act, in a way that is world-forming? This is a poem that is fundamentally about our sense of *being* in a Heideggerian sense; a study of what it means to be human, and the stanzas demarcated by Roman numerals register a monumental shift of understanding in the speaker’s sense of his being in the world. The poem ends on a reflection on the insects, or guests, as the speaker sees them: ‘They know Earth-secrets that know not I.’ This seems, at first glance, to be a simple reflection that animal life is intrinsically closed off from human understanding as it lacks precisely that which is essential to understand it: consciousness. But in the last line Hardy inverts the expected syntactical arrangement of the line to emphasise the final word ‘I’. This reordering emphasises the ambiguity of the last line, which could mean that the insects know not the speaker, the ‘I’ of the poem, or, it could mean, that they know not *the concept of* ‘I.’ Their being in the world is of a different order to that of the speaker, whose consciousness suggests a radical separation from the natural world. This is a poem that reflects Hardy’s realisation of mankind carrying the burden of a post-Romantic consciousness, and a separation from the natural world, in contrast to the insects that remain part of a single, unified and interconnected whole.

In ‘An August Midnight,’ in a moment of nocturnal epiphany, the speaker suddenly becomes aware of the division between nature and culture, or what has been described by Schiller as a fall into consciousness. Drawing on Rousseau, Schiller observed that the development of civilization constitutes for man a kind of fall from Eden, but he saw this as a happy accident. Man, in his divided state, contains an inherent dialectic which presses on to a higher unity. Here, in ‘An August Midnight’ the recovery of a sense of completeness is attained paradoxically through loss as what we see is Hardy’s nocturnal epiphany transmuted into art. The insects may have trampled through Hardy’s ink, leading him to reflect on the difference between the worlds to which they belong, but he did, nonetheless, write the poem. The use of dialect in the poem - 'longlegs’ and ‘dumbledore’ - reflects a world-view that to some extent is reaching backwards to a time of consonance between man and nature but it is also an assertion of consciousness that is emphatically, perhaps uniquely, Hardyan.

We see this process of loss and recovery again staged within Hardy’s poem ‘Four in the Morning’ another poem about a loss of the Romantic sense of being and again a poem about writing at night time.

‘Four in the Morning’

At four this day of June I rise:

The dawn-light strengthens steadily;

Earth is a cerule mystery,

As if not far from Paradise

At four o’clock,

Or else near the Great Nebula,

Or where the Pleiads blink and smile:

(For though we see with eyes of guile

The grisly grin of things by day,

At four o’clock

They show their best.)…In this vale’s space

I am up the first, I think. Yet, no,

A whistling? And the to-and-fro

Wheezed whettings of a scythe apace

At four o’clock? ...

- Though pleasure spurred, I rose with irk:

Here is one at compulsion’s whip

Taking his life’s stern stewardship

With blithe uncare, and hard at work

At four o’clock!

The poem opens with the speaker luxuriating in his sense of oneness with the night sky which he feels is his alone. When this sense of the speaker as Adam viewing Paradise is modified by astronomical references it is hardly less of a sense of wonder that is felt in the recognition that at night the constellation known as the Pleiads show their best. The ellipsis that follows signals a transition in thought from the sky to the earth, when the speaker recognises that he has been outdone in his early rising by a labourer working with his scythe whose work he can hear. At this point, the speaker acknowledges the difference between them. The labourer is in tune with nature and has arisen to work with ‘blithe uncare,’ while the speaker has risen with ‘irk.’ And yet ultimately the labourer has been outdone. This is the nature / culture divide we have seen in ‘An August Midnight,’ but here it is in relation to labourer and poet, much like that internal conflict we see in Seamus Heaney’s poem ‘Digging.’ The labourer is working at ‘compulsion’s whip’ and while he is at one with the natural world he has not the time nor the inclination to take note of the night sky. Nor is he likely to have the lexicon to describe the night sky as does the speaker. As much as the speaker luxuriates in his affinity with the night sky in those first two stanzas, he takes pleasure in finding just the right word − *cerule*, − a Latinate word, to describe exactly the blue of the sky. Like the use of dialect in ‘An August Midnight’ this is a particularly Hardyan stamp, as is his neologism ‘uncare.’ While ‘An August Midnight’ reflects on our sense of being in the world, ‘Four in the Morning’ considers ways of being at one with the earth and sky. Again, we see the Romantic project of loss and recovery, with recovery enacted through writing as an assertion of self.

As a writer of night time Hardy situated himself in a tradition of writers who looked up to the night sky and associated it with divinities. But in situating himself alongside Christian writers and Romantic writers Hardy was also conscious of the scientific advances that have led to the loss of a sense of affinity with the night sky. In the poem ‘At a Lunar Eclipse,’ published in *Poems of The Past and The Present* (1901), the appearance of the moon darkened by the earth’s shadow leads the speaker to ask to what extent the ‘imperturbable serenity’ of the image reflects the reality of life on earth? A sense of affinity felt in the contemplation of the sky is particularly ruptured in times of war, as Hardy notes in the penultimate line of the poem; but even in the same line Hardy moves on to consider ‘brains that teem.’ The poem does not close with a sense of nihilism but ends by focusing on human intellect and on ‘Heroes, and women fairer than the skies’. And in this poem, Hardy ultimately takes such subject matter and turns it into perhaps the most self-consciously artistic form of poem: a sonnet. The form perfectly suits the content and can usefully be seen as suggesting recovery in the face of loss. The speaker views the symmetry of earth, sun and moon that have caused the eclipse, and it has caused him to reflect on the disparity between the appearance of ‘imperturbable serenity’ and the ‘moil and misery’ of the world. The symmetry of the alignment of the planets highlights the disparity between earth and sky, a loss that can only be recovered aesthetically in the symmetry of the poem in its flawless adoption of the form of the sonnet. On a personal level we can read this poem in terms of loss and recovery also, as the sonnet not only aesthetically restores order that is perceived to have been lost in the situation described, but also, the sonnet is frequently recognised as the preeminent form for self-canonization.

‘At a Lunar Eclipse’ mentions war in the abstract and thus the poem is a metaphysical reflection on the night and on writing at night, rather than a poem about war itself as we see in other Hardy poems set at night. In the poem ‘Drummer Hodge,’ Hardy writes of a victim of the Boer War, who has been buried under foreign constellations in an unmarked grave. The thought that has prompted the poem has derived from thoughts of the loss of connection with the night sky. On first consideration, this poem can seem to fit a loss and reparation model that is altruistic in its purpose. The poem purports to be redemptive in that it aims to give the soldier a reality to the poem’s readers. When it was first published in the literary magazine, *Literature*, in 1899 the poem bore the title ‘The Dead Drummer’ and was accompanied by a note that ‘One of the Drummers killed was a native of a village near Casterbridge [Dorchester].’[[26]](#endnote-26) It is somewhat strange that Hardy writes *Casterbridge*, seemingly linking a real boy with a fictional world. It seems to undo the endeavour of giving the unknown soldier a reality in the very act of undertaking it. The poem briefly renders the young boy’s experience of the unhomeliness of looking up at foreign stars, and yet the poem does not name the boy and finally resigns him, still as Hodge, to the unknown plain in the final stanza. The configuration of the stars as foreign, can only be from the point of view of the speaker and it is from the perspective of the speaker that the poem closes. And notably while the poem does not name Hodge, when it appeared in *Literature* it did name the writer of the poem as Thomas Hardy.

Hardy was conscious when writing of war, of the self-aggrandizement involved in the act of writing as we see in the poem ‘I Looked Up from My Writing’:

I looked up from my writing,

And gave a start to see,

As if rapt in my inditing,

The moon’s full gaze on me.

Her meditative misty head

Was spectral in its air,

And I involuntarily said,

‘What are you doing there?’

‘Oh, I’ve been scanning pond and hole

And waterway hereabout

For the body of one with a sunken soul

Who has put his life-light out.

‘Did you hear his frenzied tattle?

It was sorrow for his son

Who is slain in brutish battle,

Though he has injured none.

‘And now I am curious to look

Into the blinkered mind

Of one who wants to write a book

In a world of such a kind.’

Her temper overwrought me,

And I edged to shun her view,

For I felt assured she thought me

One who should drown him too.

This is a very complex and self-conscious poem that is not so much about the night sky as it is about the loss and recovery model that can be identified in lyric poetry. Hardy does not so much personify the moon as project his own feelings onto the moon, and then deny the projection to justify the writing of the poem. He acts as though the moon *is* in fact chastising him, so that he can acknowledge his guilt as a writer. This is a poem about guilt from which there is no escape as you cannot make reparation for the guilt by writing about it. Tim Kendell has argued that in this poem writing is a hostile act.[[27]](#endnote-27) And the poem in fact makes no attempt at reparation. Rather than referring to war, or to the moon, the title ‘I Looked Up from My Writing’ doubly asserts the selfhood of the speaker, as well as the writing he has composed. In the last line, Hardy projects the idea of himself as a writer-murderer on to the moon, and thus makes himself the object of the moon’s temper, but as in ‘An August Midnight’ nature’s implicit criticism of the act of writing — whether it is the insects trampling his ink, or the moon’s expression of temper — do not stop Hardy in the act of composition, but actually becomes the subject matter of his poetry.

On 28 November 1878, Hardy recorded: ‘Woke before it was light. Felt that I had not enough staying power to hold my own in the world.’[[28]](#endnote-28) In *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, intermittent references to Hardy’s sleeplessness and, at times, his desire for death, are often bound up with his anxieties as a writer, and night time is when we see a heightened self-consciousness in Hardy as a poet. But it is also a time when we see Hardy overcoming that self-consciousness and most resistant to the death drive. Many of Hardy’s night poems were written at times of war and it was during the Great War that Hardy began writing his autobiography, his ultimate act of self-assertion as a man and a writer, entitled as it is *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*. For Hardy, to write is not only an assertion of self, but a bastion against death. We can see an example of this in ‘Lying Awake’, a poem that he wrote a month before he died.

‘Lying Awake’

You, Morningtide Star, now are steady-eyed, over the east,   
I know it as if I saw you;   
You, Beeches, engrave on the sky your thin twigs, even the least;   
Had I paper and pencil I’d draw you.   
  
You, Meadow, are white with your counterpane cover of dew,   
I see it as if I were there;   
You, Churchyard, are lightening faint from the shade of the yew,   
The names creeping out everywhere.

There is something very painterly about this poem. Like ‘At a Lunar Eclipse’ it is very consciously a work of art. The first stanza seems to be seeking to offer a poetic equivalent of one of Whistler’s nocturnes, and yet the second stanza is not merely evocative of night time, but is a reflection on mortality. The second stanza is suggestive of graveyard poetry and shifts from the visual arts to the linguistic and from the evocative to the figurative, the earth imagined as a bed with a counterpane and the last line a gothic reflection on the names on gravestones. The tombs may contain the dead, but the words on the tombstones are somehow alive. Ultimately, the poem is about artistic creation in the face of death and a reflection on language outliving the dead. It is a nature poem, but it is also a poem about how Hardy wanted to be remembered, as one who used to notice such things and capture them with the precision of a painting. There is an interesting balance between ‘you’ and ‘I’ in this poem. Hardy addresses the Morningtide Star, the Beeches, the Meadow, the Churchyard, each personified by capitalization, — but yet the effect is not that at all that of an apostrophe to sentient nature. The effect is that each item is an object to be captured and rendered through the speaker’s imagination. Rather than the ‘you’ predominating, it is the ‘I’ that has the sentient power, to the point that a balancing ‘I’ is not needed in the last line. What predominates is the effect of the creative power of the poet.

Hardy never quite gave up a belief that what happens after we die involves some kind of reintegration of our fundamental selves into the natural world, like a return to the cosmos. We see this in the poem ‘I Am the One,’ which was published posthumously in *Winter Words*.

‘I Am the One’

I am the one whom ringdoves see   
Through chinks in boughs   
When they do not rouse   
In sudden dread,   
But stay on cooing, as if they said:   
‘Oh; it’s only he.’   
  
I am the passer when up-eared hares,   
Stirred as they eat   
The new-sprung wheat,   
Their munch resume   
As if they thought; ‘He is one for whom   
Nobody cares.’   
  
Wet-eyed mourners glance at me   
As in train they pass   
Along the grass   
To a hollowed spot,   
And think: ‘No matter; he quizzes not   
Our misery.’   
  
I hear above: ‘We stars must lend   
No fierce regard   
To his gaze, so hard   
Bent on us thus, —   
Must scathe him not. He is one with us   
Beginning and end.’

The title ‘I am the One’ seems to be an act of self-assertion, and yet, as the poem progresses, it becomes increasingly unclear who or what the speaker actually is. The ringdoves see the speaker through chinks in boughs in the first stanza. In the second stanza he is a passer. In the third he is not situated in a place, the focus being on mourners by a grave-side, but the final stanza situates the speakers below the stars, in conversation with them. This appears to be a poem quite literally about passing away. The cosmic landscape had long-held associations with the posthumous journey of the soul, stretching back to Plato and in Hardy’s poem ‘I am the One,’ the speaker conceives of the stars returning his gaze with the sense of a fundamental affinity between them, revealing that continued desire for posthumous existence if not within a night sky, within his posthumously published volume, *Winter Words* (1828).

The reflection on the passage on Hardy’s writing by the ‘smart paragraphist’ on amused the poet enough for him to jot it down in a notebook, but it is an episode that was ultimately excised from his ghost-written autobiography, that final monument he left for posterity of his life and work.[[29]](#endnote-29) It is a characteristic move to conceal his sensitivity to criticism and reflects his controlled response to how he will be perceived as a writer. Hardy’s reflections on night and at night at times reveal a tension between his materialist response to the world and that Romantic inclination toward a belief that something may remain of us at the end of our earthly experience that we see in a poem as late as ‘I Am the One.’ Increasingly, faith in those nocturnal moments of transcendentalism is shaken. What we see in depictions of the night sky over the course of Hardy’s literary career is the development of a post-Romantic self-consciousness reflected in his nightscapes, but while Hardy may struggle in his late fiction to share his predecessors’ faith in an inherent unity behind all existence that can be accessed in moments of transcendence, what has been lost spiritually can still be regained within the aesthetic realm. What we see in the realm of Hardy’s poetry is a new form of transcendence, within the secular, temporal world.

**TRISH FERGUSON**

**NOTES**

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3. Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Wednesday, 31 May 1876, vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let083/letter.html [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Pamela Gossin, *Thomas Hardy’s Novel Universe: Astronomy, Cosmology and Gender in the Post-Darwinian World*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Thomas Hardy, *Thomas Hardy’s Poetical Matter Notebook*, edited by Pamela Dalziel and Michael Millgate, Oxford University Press, 2009, p.39. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Thomas Hardy, *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, vol. II, edited by Lennart A. Björk, London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2016, p. 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Hardy’s notes are cited by Tom Paulin in *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1986, p. 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Hardy, *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, vol. II, p. 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, edited by Michael Millgate, Macmillan, 1984, pp. 210-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, p. 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, edited by Suzanne B. Falk-Yi with an introduction by Linda M. Shires. Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., p. 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, edited by Nancy Barrineau and Simon Gatrell with an introduction by Margaret R. Higgonet, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 195. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p. 191. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, edited by Simon Gatrell, Oxford University Press, 2008, p 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
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18. Ibid., p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., p. 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, edited by Ralph Pite, W. W. Norton and Co., 2016, p. 168. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., p. 277. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., p. 277. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Jacqueline Laabe, *Writing Romanticism: Charlotte Smith and William Wordsworth, 1784-1807*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, volume I, edited by Samuel Hynes, Oxford University Press, 1983, p.122. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Tim Kendall, 25 September 2010, war-poets.blogspot.com/2010/09/until-geoffrey-hill-started-giving.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, p. 127. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Hardy, *Personal Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, p. 252. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)