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The Well-Beloved, or the Tyranny of Ideals

A Study of Thomas Hardy's Last Novel

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ABSTRACT

The novel "The Well-Beloved" has an ambiguous role within Hardy's literary production. Critics have long considered it as a minor work, but they could never ignore its signficant position between the end of the author's career as a novelist and his definitive shift to poetry. The main constitutive element of the plot is represented by Jocelyn Pierston's loving quest: his own pointless fantasies force him to search for the ideal of feminine beauty. This ideal, however, incessantly moves from woman to woman and exerts its power over Pierston, thus influencing his perception of physical reality and of the spatial-temporal dimension. Moreover, the compulsive pursuit of perfection and the attempt to fix it in perennial form are reflected in the equally frustrating trajectory of the protagonist as a sculptor. The novel can therefore be read as a veritable aesthetic investigation onto the relationship between love and art and onto the fundamental role of impressions and subjectivity, as opposed to any unequivocal interpretation of reality. The aim of this thesis is thus to analyse the novel with all its incongruities and dualisms, in order to demonstrate its importance as a synthesis of Hardy's scepticism towards any form of presumedly absolute objectivity, which is a common motif throughout his entire production.

INTRODUCTION

According to traditional literary criticism, Thomas Hardy is generally inscribed within the canon of Victorian novelists. This label as 'Victorian' mainly depends on the fact that critics and their studies of Hardy's fiction focused almost exclusively on those major novels, which were easier for critics to align with the conventions of the genre. However, choosing to face the difficulties of categorising and analysing minor works might help understand the complexity and inner tension which governs the totality of the author's production, both as a novelist and, later, as a poet, thus allowing critics to appreciate Hardy's uniqueness.

Among these minor novels is *The Well-Beloved*, listed by the author among the class called "Romances and Fantasies" of his novelistic production, which will be the object of analysis of this thesis. First published in instalments in 1892, it was then revised and re-launched as a volume in 1897 with some substantial variations in the general theme and in the narrated events. The novel provides the history of a sculptor named Jocelyn Pierston, who had left his birthplace, the Isle of Slingers, in order to join London's intellectual circles where he could get a proper artistic education. In London he develops a fascination for ideal forms of Beauty, which would determine the outcomes of the narrative. As a matter of fact, his Platonic idealism, which he thinks to be a timeless quality of his temperament as an islander, forces him to vainly pursue an invisible Muse both in his art and in his romantic life, thus triggering in him an increasing sense of frustration and powerlessness which would eventually transform into disillusion.

The aim of this thesis is therefore to provide a complete and organic study of the novel and its central themes, in order to reinstate its importance within Hardy's canon as an example, if not a veritable manifesto, of the theoretical assumptions which underlie his production, and which could be paradoxically be interpreted as a fundamental lack of a central philosophy. Indeed, through this brief but dense it is possible to witness how Hardy simultaneously challenges two of the main ideological stances of his period, which he deemed to be equally dictatorial: on the one hand, the attention to the character's imagination was essential to the critique of the excessive objectivity imposed by mimetic realism; on the other hand, his concern with sensory experiences was to contrast the exaggerated fancy of idealism, which would tyrannically overlook the beauty of physical reality in the attempt to conform it to ideal

standards. This thesis will thus be structured, so that each chapter will deal with a specific topic, which is relevant to the narrative, in order to provide a clear, and yet multifaceted, interpretation capable at once of identifying the main thematic linchpins of the novel and highlight their inevitable interdependence.

In the first chapter, it will be attempted to determine the exact position of this novel within the production of Hardy. Despite the uncertainties due to the existence of two essentially different versions, it should not be forgotten that, after the 1897 publication of *The Well-Beloved*, Hardy decided to abandon fiction in order to devote himself completely to poetry. Therefore, it will be argued that this novel could be a precious instrument to better understand Hardy's trajectory as a writer.

After this first overview on the text's history and reception, the following four chapters will provide a more specific analysis of the themes that lie at the core of the narrated events and of the novel's structure. In particular, the second chapter will focus on the romantic plot as the main constituent of the narrative. Firstly, the attention will be drawn onto Pierston's erotic desire in general, so as to define the metaphysical and psychological reasons which triggered his pursuit, according to the different hypothesis advanced by critics and by the author himself on the nature of his ideal Well-Beloved. Then, the study of romance in this novel will concentrate on the incredible fascination of protagonist with the three Avices, which is the fundamental trigger of his process of disillusionment.

The romantic plot, and especially the triple attraction of the Caro women, is profoundly related to the geographical setting, which will constitute the central topic of the third chapter. Geography will be interpreted as an essential part of Hardy's artistic project, and therefore the investigation upon it will start with an overview on the author's Wessex, which will be demonstrated to hold a specific theoretical and aesthetic significance beyond its providing a setting for the narrated events. After that, the principles which determined the creation of Wessex will be applied to the geographical background of *The Well-Beloved*, namely the Isle of Slingers, whose uniqueness as a social, geological and historical space mainly depends on the protagonist's perception of it.

The fourth chapter will study the incongruities between different interpretations of time: on the one hand, the novel records external time, which is conceived as a series

of stratified cycles which are however subject to a movement forward; on the other hand, the hero's consciousness, influenced by his idealism, seems to project him in an illusory dimension of timelessness. These incongruities, of course, have an impact onto the narrative sequence, which is therefore structured in order to reflect this internal tension, to the detriment of conformity to the requirements of traditional novel-writing.

Finally, the fifth and last chapter will be dedicated to reading the novel as a veritable aesthetic investigation onto the relationship between life and art. As a matter of fact, choosing an artist as the protagonist of *The Well-Beloved* gave Hardy the opportunity to disrupt aestheticism from within the individual's conscience accounts and to enhance the distance between the character and the narrator's points of view concerning the value of art. Unlike Pierston, who believed in the existence of abstract models of beauty, Hardy's narratorial voice constantly endeavours to ironically respond to the protagonist, by asserting the predominance of impressions, which the author considered as the only explicit, though ephemeral, manifestations of truth.

CHAPTER ONE

Locating the Novel within Hardy's Literary Production

In her introduction to the 1997 Penguin Classics edition of *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* and *The Well-Beloved*[1], Patricia Ingham immediately highlights the paradoxical position that this work occupies within the Hardy canon, by claiming that it "is and is not Hardy's last novel"[2]. Before attempting any interpretation of its contents and themes, it is thus necessary to understand its role in the totality of the author's *œuvre* as the last statement of his career in novel-writing and as a symptom of his definitive shift to poetry.

The oxymoronic character of Ingham's claim is primarily due to the existence of two versions of this novel, which was first published in instalments in 1892 and then in volume form in 1897. It should be acknowledged that all works by Hardy underwent the same type of double publication, yet the exceptional case of *The Well-Beloved* has been investigated upon by critics who tend to envisage the two versions as a unified whole. The abovementioned exceptionality lies in the fact that, usually, serialised publication forced the author to operate alterations in order to remove any potentially offensive content, which he would later restore in the definitive volume. Nevertheless, this text uniquely evolved following a trajectory which is opposite to that of the other novels. As a matter of fact, *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, which appeared in instalments on *The Illustrated London News* from October to December 1892 is deemed to be "distinctly cruder"[3] than its 1897 rewriting. However, it is not clear which version should be considered the result of Hardy's original and real intentions. What is certain is that the 1892 version presents a much more explicitly argumentative element, especially in the sarcastic treatment of the topic of marriage: the protagonist Jocelyn Pearston – changed into Pierston in 1897 – marries young Avice III at the age of sixty, without having properly annulled his first premature marriage to Marcia Bencomb, so he can be considered bigamous. Predictably, Hardy's positions determined the novel's lack of success and cost it accusations of frivolity, as it was obviously not aligned with the socio-cultural constraints imposed by Victorian morality. As a consequence, after the publication of his masterpiece *Jude the Obscure*

[1] Ingham, P., *Introduction to* Hardy, T., *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved and The Well-Beloved* (1892-1897), London, Penguin Classics, 1997, pp. xvii-xxxv

[2] *Ibidem,* p. xvii

[3] Beach, J.W., *The Technique of Thomas Hardy*, New York, Russell & Russell, 1962, p. 127

(1895), he accepted to publish a bowdlerised rewriting of his previous work. In his revision, Hardy included two major variations on the plot and a completely different ending, in order to omit the most controversial events and arguments: thus at the end of the novel Pierston marries Marcia – the only marriage which occurs in this version -, instead of attempting suicide because of his inability to escape his idealistic fantasies. Moreover, these variations are accompanied by an evident endeavour to elevate the novel to a more refined class, without compromising its almost impalpable nature: its "new 'literariness'"[4] is to be found in its focus on structural symmetry, in the numerous poetic quotations – i.e. the poetic epigraphs by Shelley, Crashaw, Wyatt and Shakespeare -, but mostly in the interest in the movements of Jocelyn Pierston's psyche as a lover and an artist, usually explained through references to classical mythology, which contribute to his ascent to the status of veritable literary hero.

As described by Anne C. Pilgrim in her discussion on the editorial history of *The Well-Beloved*[5], the revised novel was positively received by the contemporary literary audience: reviewers saw it as a much appreciated "'return of the native' to his old-time scenes and themes"[6], especially after the shocking impact that *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) had had on the Victorian readership, and the general indifference towards the 1892 serialised version. However, it never fully managed to enter the canon of Hardy's major works: *The Well-Beloved* long remained considered as a minor product, possibly because its unusual content and structure were difficult to locate - and thus easier to neglect - for critics, and in particular for those who had already shown hostility towards the author. Excessive superficiality in the reading of this novel led to the elaboration of thoughtless explanations of its lack of success: Hardy's attempt to tackle a more modern conception of fiction was misread as incompleteness or as a crisis in the author's creativity because "he tried to force a story from the barest of logical possibilities"[7]. The truth is that before the turn to metafictional analysis of the 20th century, critics were not able to acknowledge the deep dynamics which regulate this novel and its self-referential fascination with art in all forms, which had been clarified by Hardy in the preface to the volume version.

[4] Ingham, P., *Introduction*, cit., p. xxix
[5] Pilgrim, A.C., *Hardy's Retroactive Self-Censorship: The Case of "The Well-Beloved"*, in Kennedy J. (ed.), *Victorian Authors and their Works: Revision, Motivations and Modes,* Athens, Ohio University Press, 1991, pp. 125-39
[6] Payne, W.M., *Recent Fiction,* quoted in *ibidem*, p. 134
[7] Vigar, P., *The Novels of Thomas Hardy: Illusion and Reality*, London, The Athlone Press, 1974, p. 83

According to the 1912 classification advanced in the *General Preface* to the Collected Edition of the Wessex novels, the author placed *The Well-Beloved* among those works referred to as "Romances and Fantasies" and described it it as a "fanciful, tragi-comic, half-allegorical tale of a poor Visionary pursuing a Vision"[8]. As a matter of fact, the novel and its subject are undeniably distinguishable from the "Novels of Characters and Environment" characterised by the typical clarity of realist fiction:

> "As the story itself, it may be worth while to remark that, differing from all or most others of the series in that the interest aimed at is of an ideal or subjective nature, and frankly imaginative, verisimilitude in the sequence of events has been subordinated to the said aim."[9]

Therefore, the modernity of *The Well-Beloved* depends mainly on its construction, which allowed Hardy to draw the *Sketch of a Temperament* mentioned in the subtitle. In addition, this modernity is even enhanced by the time gap between the birth of the idea and the actual publication, because despite being the epitome of quintessential discussions and speculations of the 1890s, the novel was conceived years before, during the 1870s:

> "Not only was it published serially five years ago, but it was sketched many years before that date, when I was comparatively a young man, and interested in the Platonic Idea, which considering its charm and its poetry one could well wish to be interested in anyways."[10]

So, it might be concluded that at the time when this novel was first imagined by Hardy, the author himself could be identified with a visionary artist attracted by the Unattainable, similarly to the main character Jocelyn Pierston. Yet, this fascination with the Ideal does not translate into an encouragement of levity or, as one anonymous reviewer indicated, an immoral "sex-mania"[11]: it is rather to be interpreted as an aesthetic and philosophical investigation onto the interconnectedness between love and art thus planned, so as to make it both "the most intriguing and potentially most

[8] Hardy, T., *Letter* to Sir George Douglas, in Casagrande, P.J., *Unity in Hardy's Novels. 'Repetitive Symmetries'*, London, Macmillan, 1982, p. 117

[9] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., 1912 Preface, pp. 173-4

[10] Hardy, T., *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, Millgate, M. (ed.), Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 1985, pp. 303-4

[11] Anonymous review in *The World*, quoted in Pilgrim, A.C., *op.cit.*, p. 136

rewarding of Hardy's works"[12] and a radical response to the claims of the representatives of the contemporary aesthetic movement.

At the beginning of this chapter, it has been underlined that *The Well-Beloved* marks the end of Hardy's career as a novelist, which might be - at least partially - due to the widespread understatement of this novel, alongside the attacks of moralistic readers against the other two books of Hardy's final trilogy. This presumably fuelled the writer's mistrust both in his audience and in his abilities as a novelist. He gradually became aware of a constant discrepancy between his communicative intentions and the way his novels were understood[13], although in his prefaces he always attempted to provide his readers with some directions to encourage a correct interpretation. Unfortunately, these directions were generally overlooked in the name of a too rigidly compartmentalised approach to fiction, which was incessantly searching for moral and socio-cultural stances, failing to grasp they would never be retrieved in Hardy's novels:

> "Positive views on the Whence and the Wherefore of things have never been advanced by this pen as a consistent philosophy. Nor is it likely, indeed, that imaginative writings extending over more than forty years would exhibit a coherent scientific theory of the universe even if it had been attempted […] But such objectless consistency never has been attempted, and the sentiments in the following pages have been stated truly to be mere impressions of the moment, and not convictions or arguments."[14]

Hardy's artistic genius, primarily manifested in his incongruities in form and content, was thus criticised as a lack of consistency, but this is a misconception which prevented critics and reviewers from identifying the novelist's importance as a transitional figure between the Victorian and the Modern traditions in fiction. At the time Hardy published *The Well-Beloved*, fiction had started turning to itself: writers were becoming more and more conscious of the fictionality of fiction, and Hardy was no exception, so that "in 1888, in his essay on *The Profitable Reading of Fiction*, he

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[12] Donguk, K., *Thomas Hardy's "The Well-Beloved": A "Ghost Story"*, "College Literature", Vol. 41, No. 3, Summer 2014, p. 95
[13] More on this can be found in Benziman, G., *Thrust Beneath the Carpet: Hardy and the Failure of Writing*, "Studies in the Novel", Vol. 45, No. 2, Summer 2013, pp. 198-213
[14] Hardy, T. *General Preface to the Wessex Novels and Poems*, reproduced from Orel H. (ed.) *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, London, Macmillan, 1967, pp. 44-50

defended the novelist's right to be inconsistent and unequal"[15]. In an article concerning Hardy's relationship to the written medium, Galia Benziman focused on the contrasting visions of Victorians and Hardy with regard to literature: whereas the tradition promoted fiction with a "solid referential function"[16], for Hardy the physical world had to be 'disproportioned'[17] in order to create images which determined the author's vulnerability to the uncontrollable instability of reception[18]. If this last point is considered, negative reviews cannot thus be deemed the only cause for Hardy's decision to stop writing novels: they were probably the trigger of his crisis, but he neither ever addressed them directly, nor denied their meaning as results of literature's potential to generate multiple, sometimes even contradictory, interpretations.

Hence, there must have been another reason behind his choice, and it can be found in *The Well-Beloved*, more precisely in the main character's final renunciation to his art. The end of Pierston's career as a sculptor "may be taken as an emblem of (Hardy's) farewell to fiction"[19], and as his protagonist is eventually freed from his obsessive pursuit of the Ideal, Hardy is similarly "cured" from the novel-form after the eventual "exhaustion of narrative options"[20]. A suitable definition of *The Well-Beloved* is provided by John Fowles in the essay *Hardy and the Hag*, where he described it as "fiction at the end of its tether"[21]: the novel in question seems to be a comprehensive summary of Hardy's relationship with a genre which was "gradually losing artistic form, with a beginning, a middle and an end, and becoming a spasmodic inventory of items, which has nothing to do with art"[22]. Furthermore, this last product encourages an attentive reader to consider the author's novelistic production as a unified system. On the one hand, this novel represents the author's definitive statement on the vanity of the quest for the Unattainable, by eventually bringing Pierston to the same level of awareness as the author, and hence by deleting the distance between character and

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[15] Zabel, M. D., *Hardy in Defence of his Art: The Aesthetic of Incongruity* in Guerard A.J. *Hardy. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs. Prentice-Hall Inc., 1963, p. 40
[16] Benziman, G., *Thrust Beneath the Carpet: Hardy and the Failure of Writing*, cit., p. 199
[17] Cf Bullen, J.B. *The Expressive Eye. Fiction and Perception in the work of Thomas Hardy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 14
[18] Cf Benziman, G., *Thrust Beneath the Carpet: Hardy and the Failure of Writing*, cit., p. 204
[19] Miller, J.H., *Thomas Hardy. Distance and Desire*, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970, p. 215
[20] O'Toole, T., *Genealogy and Narrative Jamming in Hardy's "The Well-Beloved"*, "Narrative", Vol. 1, No. 3, October 1993, p. 221
[21] Fowles, J., *Hardy and the Hag,* in Butler L.S. (ed.), *Thomas Hardy After Fifty Years*, Totowa, Rowman and Littlefield, 1977, p. 30
[22] Hardy, T., *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, cit., p. 309

narrator which had characterised Hardy's previous novels. On the other hand, *The Well-Beloved* can be used as the key to retrospectively analyse the totality of Hardy's works, which are simultaneously reinterpreted and parodied[23]. The impropriety of this novel consists mainly of his interest in "the effect of event upon his personages, to their *feelings* about it"[24], rather than in the event itself, and of his covert but persistent attempts to emphasise the artificiality of his work. As it has already been mentioned, its concern with the structural aspect of the story as a work of art allows the author to dissolve and mock the illusion created by the verisimilitude of realism. Notwithstanding this, it would be incorrect to depict Hardy's novels, even this highly experimental one, as entirely metafictional as he

> "almost always preserves the illusion. Only in the brief prefaces affixed to later editions of his novels does he speak in his own voice as Thomas Hardy and recognize explicitly that the novel is something which he has made up."[25]

Hardy's response to the tyrannical constraints of Victorian realism should thus be found in the creation of circumstances and events which stand on the verge of credibility, without ever overcoming it. It is undoubted, however, that the author was feeling an increasing sense of frustration in the struggle to adapt his writings to the necessity of a totalising "slavery" to factual reality imposed by traditional novel-writing. As a consequence, *The Well-Beloved* simultaneously obeys to the generic conventions of 19th century fiction, namely to a mandatorily plausible portrait of society and human psychology, and pushes it to its limits by presenting a "clash of incompatible features, (that is to say) mimetic realism in the mode of representation and fantasy in the action"[26].

Unfortunately, it took some time for critics and other authors to acknowledge the uniqueness of Hardy's approach, as well as the real central point of his fiction. Marcel Proust was one of the first to be truly appreciative of Hardy's fascination for form, and he precisely refers to *The Well-Beloved* in a letter to Robert de Billy written in 1910, to show his respect and to underline the similarities with his own work:

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[23] Cf Miller, J.H., *The Well-Beloved. The Compulsion to Stop Repeating*, in *Fiction and Repetition. Seven English Novels*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 151
[24] Grundy, J. *Hardy and the Sister Arts,* London, The Macmillan Press, 1979, p. 13
[25] Miller, J.H., *Thomas Hardy. Distance and Desire*, cit., p. 40
[26] Miller, J.H., *The Well-Beloved. The Compulsion to Stop Repeating*, cit., p. 149

> "Je viens de lire une très belle chose qui ressemble malheureusement un tout petit peu (en mille fois mieux) à e que je fais: *La Bien-Aimée* de Thomas Hardy. Il n'y manque même pas la légère part de grotesque qui s'attache aux grandes œuvres."[27]

In addition, more recent literary criticism eventually managed accept Hardy's veiled rejection of realism and his double identity as a writer as part of his exceptionality, as pointed out by Penelope Vigar:

> "On the one hand we have Hardy the Sublime, author of *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the dUrbervilles*; on the other, Hardy the hack-writer, purveyor of lumpish serial 'thrillers' and romances."[28]

As a result, critics stopped considering the obscure nature of *The Well-Beloved* as a fault, but they rather transformed it into the novel's most relevant aspect, as the combination of conflicting elements and themes – i.e. traditional realism, pictorial descriptions and psychological introspection – paved the way to the recognition of the "stonemason's geometry" of Hardy's novelistic production. As a matter of fact, such an hypothesis had already been advanced by Proust in his masterpiece *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1913):

> "You remember this well enough in *Jude the Obscure*, but have you seen in *The Well-Beloved* the blocks of stone which the father takes from the island coming by boat to be set up in the studio of the son where they become statues; in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, the parallelism of the tombs, and also the parallel line of the boat, and the contiguous railroad cars in which are two lovers and the corpse; the parallelism between *The Well-Beloved*, where the man loves three women, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* where the woman loves three men, etc., and finally all those novels which can be superimposed on top of one another, like the houses vertically set up one above the other on the rocky soil of the island?"[29]

This renewed vision fostered an interpretation of Hardy's fiction as a complex and meticulously constructed network of parallelisms and repetitions, which had reached its apex in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. In this network, each novel both stood for itself and communicated with the others through the echoes of shared topics, characterisations and dramatic structures: for instance, Jocelyn's passion for the three Avices not only mirrors Elfride Swancourt's triple romance in *A Pair of Blue*

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[27] Proust, M., *Lettre* à Robert De Billy, quoted in Villari, E., *Il Vizio Moderno dell'Irrequietezza. Saggio sui Romanzi di Thomas Hardy*, Bari, Adriatica Editrice, 1990, p. 94
[28] Vigar, P., *op.cit.,* p. 58
[29] Proust M., *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, La Prisonnière,* quoted in Miller, J.H., *The Well-Beloved. The Compulsion to Stop Repeating*, cit., p. 152 (translation by Miller, J.H.)

Eyes (1873), but it also resembles Jude's relationship to Sue and Arabella. Moreover, *The Well-Beloved* contains the account of a veritable "return of a native", triggered by the idealising fancies of Pierston, whose name clearly reminds that of Fitzpiers in *The Woodlanders* (1887); similarly, Angel Clare's attitude towards Tess is marked by idealisation. It is evident that such a great number of recurrences is more than coincidental and is the expression of Hardy's natural inclination to plot-making which has assumedly been linked to his training as an architect in his early life. Although very similar principles of symmetry had been adopted by other authors, probably owing to the requirements of serialised publication, the characteristic "architectural balance of design"[30] both within and among Hardy's novels becomes functional to the externalisation of the author's major anxiety. As a matter of fact, Hardy's unique approach to the representation of social manners or moral issues as subjective experiences, was accompanied by his preoccupation with his central role as an author/narrator: the continuous, almost obsessive, rewriting of the same topics novel after novel can thus be also regarded to as his attempt at "casting his own private confusion into some sort of fictional order"[31]. Furthermore, J.H. Miller noticed how literature was for Thomas Hardy a precious instrument of self-expression for the artist, but the self-imposed insistence on intertextuality represented a threatening denial of his authority:

> "The story undermines Hardy's claim to authority as the generating source of the story he writes. The version of the pattern story of *The Well-Beloved* in Hardy's own life was not the 'original' one, but a 'terribly belated edition', since the pattern, as the novel shows is one that has occurred over and over from time immemorial, and will go on occurring. Hardy's attempt to possess himself or to found himself securely by telling Jocelyn's story, leads to dispossession."[32]

Therefore, this eventual 'dispossession' might have been the most powerful reason behind Hardy's decision to abandon fiction.

Nevertheless, *The Well-Beloved* should not be exclusively seen as the closure of a career since it also marks the transition to Hardy's evolution as a poet. In reality, he had already written poetry during the previous years, but after 1897 it officially became

[30] Miller, J.H., *Thomas Hardy. Distance and Desire,* cit., p. 205

[31] Fussell, D.H., *Do You Like Poe, Mr. Hardy?*, "Modern Fiction Studies", Vol. 27, No. 2. Summer 1981, p. 219

[32] Miller, J.H., *The Well-Beloved. The Compulsion to Stop Repeating,* cit., pp. 171-2

his predominant expressive medium as an author. Hardy's prose and poetry, however, cannot be considered as polar opposites: on the contrary, the two genres are inextricably merged as he always endeavoured to maintain a poetic element in his fiction as well as to give narrative coherence to his poems. This is the reason why *The Well-Beloved*, among other definitions, has been identified as a "novel-poem"[33], thus overlapping Hardy the novelist and Hardy the poet as the two facets of the same man. Indeed, this last example of the author's novelistic production possesses many elements which are related to Hardy's poetry, both in terms of content and of structure: the tripartition and the abundance of internal symmetries clearly recall a poem's division in stanzas and its focus on the formal aspect; the theoretical core of the novel, which revolves around the protagonist's restlessness, responds to the same motivations as the poetry, which appears as painful meditation on emotions. It must be highlighted that Hardy always had a predilection for poetry, which he saw as a much more adequate vehicle of his concerns, especially because of an increased freedom mainly depending on the different attitude of the readers towards poetry. As a matter of fact, although his fiction had already explored the same themes, it had been generally misunderstood because of its lack of verisimilitude. Contrarily, the readership of poetry, apart from being more selected and intellectual by definition, would already be aware of the primacy of the speaker's inner life and thus draw their attention to the non-literal aspect of the text in order to grasp the poet's communicative intention, making it less vulnerable to, though not completely free from, misreading[34].

> "Poetry. Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion – hard as a rock – which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting. To cry out in a passionate poem that (for instance) the Supreme Mover or Movers, the Prime Force or Forces, must be either limited in power, unknowing, or cruel – which is obvious enough and has been for centuries – will cause them merely a shake of the head; but to put it in argumentative prose will make them sneer, or foam […]"[35]

Moreover, his poetry was based on the identity between the author and the speaker, as opposed to the disjunction between narrator and character in his fiction. Thus, the typically poetic process of recollection seemed to be a more suitable method,

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[33] Pulham, P., *From Pygmalion to Persephone: Love, Art, Myth in Thomas Hardy's The Well-Beloved*, "Victorian Review", Vol. 34, No. 2, Fall 2008, p. 235

[34] More on this can be found in Benziman, G., *Thrust Beneath the Carpet: Hardy and the Failure of Writing*, cit.

[35] Hardy, T., *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, cit. p. 302

instead of the direct contact with a univocal reality demanded by a novel, to confront and freely express his scepticism.

In conclusion, the ambiguities surrounding the status of *The Well-Beloved* within the Hardy canon due to the exceptional treatment of unusual contents are just the least part of a duality which is deeply embedded in the novel. An investigation upon its themes and structure, which has already been taken into consideration in this first chapter, will contribute to bring these dichotomies to the light, but this is something which will be done through a much more thorough analysis in the following chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

Chasing the Well-Beloved

2.1 The Nature of Jocelyn's Desire

After the analysis of the novel's status and reception provided in the previous chapter, it should not be surprising to observe that early readings of the text have offered a superficial understanding of the main constitutive element of the plot. In fact, *The Well-Beloved* is not merely the history of Jocelyn Pierston's frivolous liaisons with different women: it is the account of the protagonist's fascination with an evanescent feminine ideal, namely the "migratory, elusive"[36] Well-Beloved, and of his enslavement to it, as the title of this thesis suggests. Moreover, Patricia Ingham underlined the special role of both versions of the novel within the discussion on gender issues:

> "What both texts of this novel do is to reflect upon (the) artistic process of an attempt at a misogynistic perspective and Hardy's own lapses from it: the alternative plots of the double texts of *The Pursuit* / *The Well-Beloved* figure plainly that breakdown of the conventional gender power-hierarchy."[37]

The focus is thus shifted onto Pierston's own seemingly misogynistic approach, as he is proved not to love women as such, but the idea of a woman which he calls his 'Well-Beloved'. In a brilliant study concerning female sexuality in Hardy's last novels, Lyn Pykett reinforces the interest in the character and in the text as the manifestation of

> " […] a complex network of male fears and anxieties about sexual relationships, about the unpredictability of women (as opposed to the predictability and malleability of a masculine construction of an image of woman), and about women's reproductivity."[38]

In general, the novel can be considered as a complex and abstract rendition of the dynamics of romantic and erotic desire, as well as "the introduction of the subjective theory of love into modern fiction"[39], a theory based on the primacy of sensual impressions, which are then manipulated by the subject's psyche.

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[36] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved,* cit., Part 1, Chapter I, p. 182

[37] Ingham, P., *Introduction*, cit., p. xx

[38] Pykett, L., *Ruinous Bodies: Women and Sexuality in Hardy's Late Fiction*, "Critical Survey", Vol. 5, No. 2, 1993, p. 164

[39] Hardy, T. *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, cit., p. 304

Before properly dwelling on the possible interpretations of Pierston's idealising fancy, it is necessary to identify the biographical congruences between the character and its creator, since Hardy's own relationships with women and his sensibility to their beauty might have inspired the temperament of his last novel's hero. In particular, critics have highlighted a possible germ of the plot in Hardy's passion for Tryphena Sparks, which has been fully described in Ralph Pite's biography of the author[40]. Pite's account starts with an acknowledgement of the uncertainties with regard to this aspect of Hardy's life. In spite of the general lack of information about it, this relationship represents a relevant example of the writer's experience with women, especially since it follows a similar pattern to Jocelyn Pierston's pursuit. Martha Mary, Rebecca, and Tryphena Sparks were Hardy's maternal cousins, who are all deemed to have triggered a romantic interest in the novelist, thus echoing Pierston's attraction for the three Caro women. Among them, Tryphena occupies an undeniably preeminent position, as her brilliant yet humble personality would, on the one hand, mitigate Hardy's cynical approach to life and, on the other hand, epitomise the joys of a tranquil rural life. Nevertheless, the significant age gap between the two and an excessively idealised vision of the woman operated by Hardy, which failed to recognise her individuality, prevented their relationship from ever becoming truly intimate. The biographer hence attributes to Hardy the full responsibility for the end of this affair: after the composition of *Desperate Remedies* (1871), he retrieved an interest in the urban life of London, so the recession from his place of origin contributed to the disappearance of his passion for Tryphena, who eventually lost her idealised aura and became to him an empty and unrefined simple girl. As a matter of fact, the sudden vanishing of love and affection is another fundamental linchpin of *The Well-Beloved*, as Pierston is doomed to constant disappointment after idealising the women he loves, by defining them exclusively as the successive embodiments of his Well-Beloved. This last aspect might be referred to the discussion on Hardy and gender issues and to the protagonist's presumed misogyny, for it stands for women's imprisonment within the boundaries of men's language and the consequent impossibility for them to possess an identity of their own, apart from that which is imposed by men.

As a consequence, Jocelyn's romantic idealism is to be considered as the moving principle which determines the unfolding of the novel's plot. The protagonist,

[40] Cf Pite, R., *Thomas Hardy: The Guarded Life*, London, Picador, 2006, pp. 136-48

moreover, shows a remarkable propensity for self-analysis, so he is aware of the tyranny exerted by his fancy and attempts to cast himself as the powerless victim of a tormenting and indescribable force "of pagan and demonic derivation"[41] for which he pointlessly attempts to provide a metaphysical and theoretical definition:

> "To his Well-Beloved he had always been faithful. […] God only knew what she really was; Pierston did not. She was indescribable. […] the discovery of her ghostliness, of her independence of physical laws and failings, had occasionally given him a sense of fear. […] Sometimes at night he dreamt that she was 'the wile-weaving Daughter of high Zeus' in person, bent on tormenting him for his sins against her beauty in his art."[42]

Predictably, Pierston's Platonic pursuit for the divine Idea of female beauty is not an easy mission to complete and is soon transformed into a consuming and frustrating quest, which engages the protagonist from a very young age until almost the end of his life. The frustration is mainly due both to Jocelyn's fear to confront the fallacies of human individuality and to Hardy's fundamental assumption that "Love lives on propinquity, but dies on contact"[43]. This statement hermetically summarises the notion that desire can only exist as long as subject and object are separated and yet close enough to allow mutual perception of each other. It is highly probable that 'contact' should be interpreted by Pierston as sexual intercourse, as his passions, however strong, always remain enclosed within a purely intellectual domain: a direct confrontation with the female body would in fact deprive the woman of the ideal glow the hero has attached to her. Paradoxically, this replacement of human intimacy with the dream of spiritual ascent inherently contradicts the platonic character of the protagonist's desire since traditional Platonism saw in sexual excitement "the most potent way to engage the senses"[44]. Therefore, not only do Pierston's sexual drives remain unsatisfied, but they almost stand at the limits of asexuality. Partially, the absence of an active interest in physical love has been interpreted as a response to reviewers by the author, who created a caricature-like character in order to mock the prudery of the Victorian reading public – still shocked by the immoral content of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. However, Jocelyn's idealistic fantasy represents much more than

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[41] Bizotto, E., *'The Well-Beloved': The Persistence of Liminality*, "The Hardy Review", Volume XV, No. 1, Spring 2013, p. 60

[42] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 1, Chapter II, pp. 184-5

[43] Hardy, F.E., *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy: 1840-91* quoted in Schur O., *Desire in 'The Well-Beloved'*, "CEA Critic", Vol. 57, No. 2, Winter 1995, p. 81

[44] Donguk, K., *op.cit.*, p. 100

just a reaction by Hardy to some negative reviews: the physical dimension of those women who are deemed to embody the Well-Beloved is often neglected, because the hero does not need them as material surrogates of the Ideal; he loves in them an image of an image, namely the representation of his own vision of archetypal perfection. This is particularly evident in the sequence where his love for the first Avice Caro is not ignited by the woman herself, but by a photograph of her, which he observes after being informed of her death:

> "[…] Jocelyn drew a little portrait, one taken on glass in the primitive days of photography, and framed with tinsel in the commonest way. […] A long contemplation of the likeness completed in his emotions what the letter had begun. He loved the woman dead and inaccessible as he had never loved her in life."[45]

The image of the photograph, moreover, evokes an idea of multiplicity and reproduction: it simultaneously recalls the plurality of Jocelyn's relationships, and, as noticed by Pykett, the widespread notion of femininity as intimately linked with the reproductive process – in this respect, it must be noted that all the women idealised by the protagonist eventually marry and procreate.[46]

There is however another aspect to which attention should be drawn while considering Pierston's search for the Ideal, namely the abovementioned concept of separation as the necessary conditions for desire. In the case of the protagonist, distance becomes "a function of…Pierston's 'sexual economy'"[47], as he feels the "compulsion to find a love object that is virtually unattainable, held out at a distance"[48]. Therefore, by idealising the woman, he automatically, almost unwillingly, places her in a remote dimension of divinity, and his desire presents itself in the endeavour to gradually move closer and closer to her. Expectedly, this need for distance complicates the pursuit and hinders its fulfilment: if love entails a non-possession, it disappears as soon as Jocelyn obtains the woman, thus causing her goddess-like quality to fade and leaving the lover defeated. The contradictory nature of Pierston's impulses, however, is a substantial exemplification of Eros as it is described by traditional Greek mythology: in his analysis of Plato's *Symposium*[49], philosopher and historian Giovanni

[45] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit. Part 2, Chapter III, pp. 230-1
[46] Cf Pykett, L., *op.cit.,* p. 164
[47] Schur, O., *op.cit,* p. 81
[48] Ivi
[49] Reale, G., *Eros, Demone e Mediatore. Il Gioco delle Maschere nel Simposio di Platone*, Milano, Bompiani, 2013

Reale briefly outlines the Platonic tale of the birth of Eros, who was not only a disciple of Aphrodite but also the son and the synthesis of Porus, the god of resourcefulness, and Penia, the goddess of poverty. Concurrently incorporating possession and lack, Eros is thus an unstable power driven by opposites, and especially by the tension between ideas and materiality, as emphasised by this passage from the novel, where Pierston attempts to define the Well-Beloved by using increasingly physical and sensual metaphors:

> "Each individuality […] had been merely a transient condition of her. […] Essentially, she was perhaps of no tangible substance; a spirit, a dream, a frenzy, a conception, an aroma, an epitomized sex, a light of the eye, a parting of the lips."[50]

Consequently, erotic desire acts as an effort to mediate between the world of perennial ideas and the contingency of the physical world, namely an attitude which Reale associates with the typical role of the philosopher or the artist, thus giving significance to Jocelyn's double identity as a lover and as a sculptor. In addition to this, his artistic inclinations are to be found in his tendency to observe his beloved from a distance, an act which provides a constantly mediated encounter and which usually determines the beginning of a new passion, such as that for Nichola Pine-Avon who is met through a system of glimpses and looks:

> "He looked for her (the Well-Beloved) in the knot of persons gathered around a past Prime Minister […]. The two or three ladies forming his audience had been joined by another in black and white, and it was on her that Pierston's attention was directed. […] Jocelyn, wrought up to a high tension by the aforesaid presentiment that his Shelleyan 'One-shape-of-many-names' was about to reappear, paid little heed to the others, watching for a full view of the lady who had won his attention."[51]

The element of the eye is in fact extensively used by Hardy to illustrate the protagonist's attitude as a *voyeur* who is often caught in the role of a spectator watching the scene around him as if through a window. The window – be it a real or a metaphorical one - represents a barrier which exacerbates desire by separating the character from the real world and from the objects of his passion. Undoubtedly, this detachment from the corporeality of the world is integral to Pierston's personality and might be envisaged as a response to a modern pathology, which Hardy calls "the

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[50] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit. Part 1, Chapter II, p. 184

[51] *Ibidem*, Part 2, Chapter I, pp. 219-20

modern vice of unrest"[52], and which Enrica Villari describes as the oppressing belief that perfection always lies somewhere else[53]. This inherent restlessness seems to be what triggers Pierston's constant sense of languor: in a society which compels him to choose one person and one person only to become his point of reference, the visionary artist is prevented from living his dream of the ideal, which inexorably leads him towards other places and people.

Nevertheless, questions about what Jocelyn's Well-Beloved is, or what the precise reasons for his desire consist of, are not answered by the character, who is unable to provide a precise definition of the impalpable substance he is pursuing. This lack of a proper explanation has thus allowed critics to formulate a wide variety of interpretations beside the traditional reference to Platonism, according to different theories which had already been applied to other novels of the 19th century. For instance, both Schur[54] and Deangelis[55] base their analysis of *The Well-Beloved* on René Girard's theory of triangulated desire. According to Girard, desire is initiated in by a third element conceived by the lover's mind, which acts as an intermediary between the subject and the object, in the form either of a model to emulate or of a rival to compete against; the closer the three elements move to one another, the greater the passion. In the novel, such a triangulation is mirrored first by the tripartite structure of the plot, but it is also evident in Jocelyn's romantic enterprises, which take the following configuration:

Mediator: the Well-Beloved

Object: woman

Subject: Jocelyn Pierston

[52] Hardy, T., *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Taylor D. (ed.), London, Penguin Classics, 1998, Part 2, Chapter II, p.85
[53] Cf Villari, E., *op.cit,* p. 56
[54] Schur, O., *op.cit.*, pp. 77-85
[55] Deangelis, R., *Triangulated Passions: Love, Self-Love, and the Other in Thomas Hardy's 'The Well-Beloved'*, "Studies in the Novel", Vol. 34, No. 4, Winter (2002), pp. 403-421

In this structure, the mediator is of course the Well-Beloved, the idealised female image that Pierston creates for the real women he falls in love with, which is simultaneously the principle of beauty to which the women should aspire and their opponent in the battle to win Jocelyn's heart. Alongside Girard's theory, Schur also advances another hypothesis based on the observations of Leo Bersani, who "argues that the nineteenth-century novel of realism is a response to the *fear* of desire"[56]. Desire, as it has already been argued, develops owing to an absence which is inscribed in the imagination of the subject: it is "disruptive"[57], and it stands for a "disease of disconnectedness"[58] contrasting contemporary morality, which was conversely based on self-containment and structures, such as the marriages which usually occur at the end of novels. *The Well-Beloved* can obviously be listed among the works which close on a wedding, though an atypical and controversial one, which accounts, among other interpretations, for the restoration of social conventions after Pierston's licentious quest.

Another language which is particularly suitable to study this novel is that of psychoanalysis which has been exploited[59] to tackle Jocelyn's desire as an assumed necrophiliac fascination with dead bodies. As a matter of fact, these are not only present as the evident examples of the first Avice's death and of old Marcia's appearance at the end of the novel, but they constitute a motif which underlies the totality of Pierston's search and characterises it, as all women he courts are "intrinsically associated with death"[60]. According to the protagonist's vision, the Well-Beloved leaves the body of the woman an empty "human shell"[61] after flying from it, as he explains to his friend Somers:

> "Each shape, or embodiment, has been a temporary residence only, which she entered, lived in a while, and made her exit from, leaving the substance, so far as I have been concerned, *a corpse*, worse luck!"[62]

The sense of vacuity which accompanies the migration of the Well-Beloved has thus been read as the externalisation of an unconscious death drive, which means that the

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[56] Schur, O., *op.cit.*, p.78
[57] Bersani, L., *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature*, quoted in *ibidem*, p.78
[58] ivi
[59] More on this can be found in Pulham, P., *op.cit.*
[60] Pulham, P., *op.cit.*, p. 228
[61] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit. Part 1, Chapter I, p. 182
[62] *Ibidem*, Part 1, Chapter VII, p. 200, my emphasis

character is unable to envision his own death and, therefore, makes it "visible when directed outwards towards another person"[63]. This is particularly true if one considers Jocelyn's permanence of throughout the novel in a state as a "Young Man" as the sign of his incapability to accept his own decay. In addition to that, the concern with Pierston's necrophilia, and especially with the dead corpses of the desired women, has allowed J.H. Miller to establish an extraordinary association between the volatile female ideal of the novel and language:

> "The real women […] are signs for the goddess, the well-beloved. The goddess is the spiritual woman who seems to enter into the body of each mortal woman as a meaning enters into a word or some other sign. […] That body is like a word which has been repeated so often it becomes an empty sound."[64]

To push this interpretation even further, it could be said that the women are in fact the sign of *the absence* of spirituality, because their physical nature is by definition incompatible with any "transcendent referent"[65].

Nonetheless, the emptiness that Jocelyn attaches to the body of his beloved does not depend on her: it has been observed that it may correspond to a projection onto the woman of the hero's own sense of incompletion[66], thus stressing a narcissistic component of his desire. Primary narcissism, as Freud would define it[67], is precisely the love of oneself in the object of desire, so Pierston's desperate search for the ideal woman might conceal a hidden tension towards an ideal self, which could be attained through the union with a female counterpart, who possessed the same temperament as him. The notion of a double perfectly fits both the Platonic conviction that lovers were the two halves of a single entity and the Shelleyan idea of the 'epipsychidion' – one of Hardy's probable sources of inspiration -, which the Romantic author elaborated in the homonymous poem and in his essay "On Love", in which he talks of "a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness; a soul within our soul"[68]. Love

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[63] Downing, L., *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature,* quoted in Pulham P., *op.cit.*, p. 230

[64] Miller, J.H., *The Well-Beloved. The Compulsion to Stop Repeating*, cit., p. 162

[65] ivi

[66] Cf Fussell, D.H., *op.cit.*, p. 21

[67] According to psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in his essay *Zur Einführung des Narzißmus* (1914), "it is said, that man has two primal sexual objects: himself and the woman who takes care of him, and each man sets forth this primary narcissism, which might become dominant in the choice of his object." (p. 19, my translation)

[68] Shelley, P.B., *On Love*, in *The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley in Verse and Prose* (1880), Forman H.B. (ed.), London, Reeves & Turner, 1880

thus becomes the individual conscience's endeavour to fill a void, in order to achieve completion, but in the case of *The Well-Beloved*, Pierston's rejection of the corporeality of his objects of desire implies his failure at self-fulfilment. Moreover, there is a further contradiction in the pursuit of a unified identity, because the nature of the self *is* incompleteness and any form of union with another person would merely temporarily relieve its sense of ontological insufficiency. As a consequence, Pierston's desire for a centre to refer to, be it internal to himself or external in the woman, is inherently impossible to satisfy.

Despite the diversity of the theoretical assumptions on which they are founded, all hypothesis which have been advanced so far share a common element, which is the notion of an internal conflict within Jocelyn's conscience. Therefore, this dualism is mirrored by the divergence between the character and the narrator – which is to be retraced in the totality of Hardy's novel -, especially in the terms they use to describe Pierston's subjection to the Well-Beloved. Although the protagonist's ability to confront his emotions has already been underlined, he repetitively fails to grasp the imaginative nature of his fantasy: his references to mythological – e.g. the association between the Well-Beloved and Venus – and biblical language, when he is defined as the "Wandering Jew of the love world"[69], are consequently ironically contrasted by the description provided by the narratorial voice. This description, however, does not respond to the typical model of the character study, as Jocelyn is represented as an "*experiencing* creature"[70], who is observed while he is facing circumstances and is filtering them through his own imagination. Therefore, Pierston's metaphysical depiction of his love pursuit, and the need to idealise the woman's individuality are constantly contradicted and parodied by the reality of his subjective fascinations, which is deeply rooted in the physical world. As a matter of fact, Jocelyn's ideal is only the illusion of a spiritual essence, whose presence is paradoxically always manifested by physical traits, by various sensual "impressions of the same thing"[71]. It is a "masquerading creature"[72] which is only imaginatively embodied in different women, namely the three Avices, Marcia Bencomb and Nichola Pine-Avon. Hence,

[69] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 2, Chapter II, p. 225
[70] Grundy, J. *op.cit.*, p. 10
[71] Donguk, K., *op.cit.*, p. 107
[72] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved,* cit. Part 1, Chapter II, p. 185

when Pierston perceives that the Well-Beloved is exiting their bodies, it is because their corporeality inevitably resists the man's compulsion to idealisation.

Naturally, Hardy is also perfectly aware that his protagonist is not really in love with a goddess, but only with his idea of her divine power which is transiently cast onto the woman. This is particularly well-explained in one of his poems, which significantly carries the same title as the novel:

> "The sprite resumed: 'Thou hast transferred
> To her dull form awhile
> My beauty, fame, and deed, and word,
> My gestures and my smile.
>
> 'O fatuous man, this truth infer,
> Brides are not what they seem;
> Thou lovest what thou dreamest her;
> I am thy very dream!'"[73]

Similarly to the speaker of the poem, Pierston operates a "transmogrification (of the woman) into the idolised love object"[74] and this process, enhanced by the exclusively cerebral character of his pursuit, leads him to transform it into a quasi-religious desire. However, according to Hardy's sceptical and agnostic view, any attempt to assign a role of divinity to another person is a mere "formula, a superstition"[75] which is destined to fail. The author only believed in the existence of a force which he calls the Immanent Will, which exerts its control over nature and events, and of which men only gradually gain awareness. It is thus impossible that any independent supernatural entity existed, which would put its curse on Pierston: the Well-Beloved is nothing more than "the reification of tyrannical tendencies in man's mind"[76]. As a matter of fact, the quotation from P.B. Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* (1817), chosen by Hardy as the epigraph for the volume version of the novel, relates to an evil power conceived within man's mind, but which is depicted as something external to it.

To confirm the relevance of subjectivity in Pierston's love life, Hardy's "theory of the transmigration of the ideal beloved one"[77] affirms that this ideal "only exists in

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[73] Hardy, T. *The Well-Beloved*, in *Collected Poems by Thomas Hardy,* London, Macmillan, 1919, p. 122, ll. 45-52
[74] Fowles, J., *op.cit.*, p.33
[75] Hardy T., *The Well-Beloved,* cit., Part 3, Chapter II, p. 291
[76] Miller, J.H., *Thomas Hardy. Distance and Desire*, cit., p. 150
[77] Hardy, T., *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, cit., p. 303

the lover"[78]. Consequently, the Well-Beloved is to be read as the effort of Pierston's own psyche to create an objective and universal notion of Beauty through the presumption of the existence of a divine power. However, being his pursuit founded on his own subjective vision of the ideal and not on the actual presence of such a goddess, the contact with the human nature of the woman inescapably denies any form of spirituality. Moreover, the constant movement of the Well-Beloved prevents Jocelyn from fixing his eyes, not only on a single woman, but neither on a single type of female beauty, for the Ideal is embodied as soon as the woman shows an element of newness capable of breaking the dullness of habit and of counteracting the accessibility of what is familiar. Kim Donguk[79] interestingly emphasises how the inconstancy of Jocelyn's emotional state is enhanced by the diversity among the women he courts, who might be inscribed in binary couples: the self-controlling first Avice, who refuses to meet Pierston for fear of a pre-marital sexual intercourse, is opposed to the impulsive Marcia Bencomb, who readily agrees to marry him and then leaves him. Likewise, the worldly and intellectual Nichola Pine-Avon represents the contrary of the almost illiterate Ann Avice, and the youthfulness of the third Avice is counteracted by the ruinous body of an aged Marcia. These incoherent migrations thus determine the liminal character of the Ideal, for it moves freely from one type of woman to the other without ever being translated into specific traits. However, the central element of change and metamorphosis[80], which accounts for the fleeting nature of Jocelyn's idea – "nothing was permanent in her, but change"[81] -, also implies a further complication, namely the paradoxical establishment of a repetitive and predictable pattern, becoming itself a habit from which the hero must escape. Indeed, each relationship which Jocelyn experiences follows the same sequence of embodiment-courtship-failure in an "ever renewed rhythm of desire and disgust"[82]. As a result, his passion is always ignited by an element of unfamiliarity, which triggers Pierston's attention after a period of ennui and creates the necessary distance from the object of desire. This passion is then transformed into idealisation ignoring the woman's physical nature and her identity, namely the elements which disrupt the illusion as soon as they are acknowledged. As Fowles perfectly summarises:

[78] ivi
[79] Cf Donguk, K., *op.cit.*, p. 96
[80] Cf Villari, E., *op.cit.*, pp. 105-6
[81] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved,* cit., Part 1, Chapter IX, p. 212
[82] Miller, J.H., *Thomas Hardy. Distance and Desire,* cit., p. 146

> "[…] we realise that the Well-Beloved is never a face, but the congeries of affective circumstances in which it is met; as soon as it inhabits one face, its erotic energy (that is, the author's imaginative energy) begins to drain away. Since it cannot be the face of the only true, and original Well-Beloved, it becomes a lie, is marked for death."[83]

The exaggerated repetition of this pattern hence initiates Pierston's final recognition of the vanity of his quest and of its purely subjective character, and it is enhanced when it assumes an even more compulsive and quasi-pathological connotation in the protagonist's desire for the three Avices. However, the exceptionality of this generational passion deserves a deeper analysis, which will be provided in the following section of this chapter.

2.2 The Three Avices[84] and the Resistance to Idealisation

As anticipated, this section will focus on Jocelyn Pierston's curious triple attraction for three women named Avice, who belong to successive generations of the same family. The reason for this preoccupation with this specific experience does not only lie in the fact that it constitutes the core of the novel's plot and structure. Above all, it accounts for a drastic change in the principles which govern the protagonist's search for the Ideal, for the cultural and family ties which bond the three women to Pierston no longer permit the association of love with the unfamiliar. The genealogical system which underlies this repeated fascination, however, remains coherent with the interpretations of Jocelyn's desire which have been previously provided. On the one hand, the protagonist is extremely aware of his own heritage, "which characters in (traditional) family sagas so often manifest (that it) frequently amounts to a sort of monomania"[85], thus explaining and reinforcing the obsessive aspect of his pursuit. On the other hand, the existence of a shared ancestral origin between Jocelyn and the Avices contributes to their identification as the man's "wraith in a changed sex"[86], hence deceitfully offering an opportunity to satisfy his narcissistic impulses. In addition to this, the implicit incestuous character of these three romantic liaisons complicates the inner mechanisms of Pierston's conscience because its moral

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[83] Fowles, J., *op.cit.*, pp. 36-7

[84] Due to the homonymy of the three characters, identification will be facilitated by referring to them as Avice I, Avice II and Avice III, following a chronological order.

[85] O'Toole, T., *op.cit.*, p. 213

[86] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 3, Chapter II, p. 292

implications impose a separation between subject and object which both fuels his desire and discourages it.

When Pierston meets Avice I at the beginning of the novel, after his return to his native land, their common origin provokes an immediate attraction, which is however described as "rather comradeship than love"[87], thus denying the presence of the Well-Beloved in her. What immediately leads him to reject Avice I is the physical contact entailed by the impulsive kiss she gives him, which makes her so accessible that the unattainable idea would never be infused in her. Nonetheless, the question on whether the Well-Beloved would migrate into Avice I's body is never clearly answered in the first part of the novel, mainly because Pierston feels simultaneously drawn towards her, thanks to her belonging to the culture of the Isle of Slingers, and away from her, because of the infiltration of modernity:

> "He observed that every aim of those who had brought her up had been to get her away mentally as far as possible from her natural and individual life as an inhabitant of a peculiar island: to make her an exact copy of tens of thousands of other people, in whose circumstances there was nothing special, distinctive or picturesque. […] By constitution, she was local to the bone, but she could not escape the tendency of the age."[88]

He eventually convinces himself that the Ideal has never inhabited Avice I, when she dismisses him because she thought their appointment was the pretext for a trial sexual encounter, as promoted by local tradition. Pierston then leaves her for Marcia Bencomb and returns to London. Not until he receives a letter communicating Avice I's death after twenty years, does Pierston understand his mistake. The news of her departure has an unexpectedly powerful impact on his imagination, so as to transfigure the external world. The London room where he is having dinner is transformed into the Isle of Slingers and into the face of Avice, in a brilliant sequence with extreme poetic traits:

> "By imperceptible and slow degrees the scene at the dinner-table receded into the background, behind the vivid presentiment of Avice Caro, and the old, old scenes on Isle Vindilia which were inseparable from her personality. The dining-room was real no more, dissolving under the bold stony promontory and the incoming West Sea. The handsome marchioness in geranium-red and diamonds, who was visible to him on his host's right hand opposite, became one of the glowing vermilion sunsets that he had

[87] *Ibidem*, Part 1, Chapter II, p. 184 1-II-184
[88] *Ibidem,* pp. 186-7

> watched so many times over Deadman's Bay, with the form of Avice in the foreground."[89]

In that moment, Pierston realises that the sense of intimate connection he felt with Avice I could be seen as the only long-lasting form of love he had ever experienced, and which he now regretted:

> "He loved the woman dead and inaccessible as he had never loved her in life. He had thought of her but at distant intervals during the twenty years since that parting occurred, and only as somebody he could have wedded. Yet now the times of youthful friendship with her, in which he had learnt every note of her innocent nature, flamed up into a yearning and passionate attachment, embittered by regret beyond words."[90]

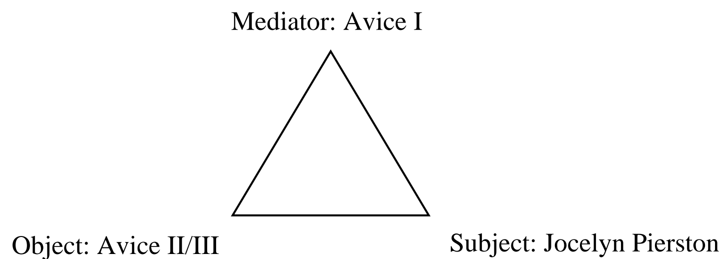
As suggested in this last quotation from the novel, it is death which determines the uniqueness of Jocelyn's love for the three Caro women. Other embodiments of the Well-Beloved were solely an attempt to find an ideal of feminine beauty permanently incarnated in a living person, but death manages to "put an infinite distance between lover and beloved, so it raises love to a measureless intensity of longing"[91]. Moreover, parting from life would allow Avice I to both incorporate the familiarity of her peculiar regional origins and the unknown towards which Pierston was constantly driven to. It might be concluded that the protagonist falls in love with what is lost of Avice I, but it should be retained that her essence had previously been remodelled by his sensibility, as any other representation of the Well-Beloved.

As a consequence, after Avice I's funeral, his sense of melancholy for the loss of the beloved woman is suddenly relieved by the possibility to find her when he notices the figure of Avice II, who holds a strong resemblance to her late mother:

> "Neither did he know, though he felt drowsy, whether inexpectant sadness – that gentle soporific – lulled him into a short sleep, so that he lost count of time and consciousness of incident. But during some minute or minutes he seemed to see Avice Caro herself, bending over and then withdrawing from her grave in the light of the moon."[92]

[89] *Ibidem*, Part 1, Chapter III, p. 229
[90] *Ibidem,* p. 231
[91] Miller, J.H., *Thomas Hardy. Distance and Desire*, cit., p. 169
[92] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 2, Chapter IV, p. 235

However, the pattern of his loving has been modified by death, for Avice II – as well as her daughter Avice III twenty years later – are no longer seen as individuals, nor just as embodiments of the Well-Beloved, but as the instruments through which the essence of Avice I could be resurrected in a combination of presence and absence. By referring to Girard's triangulation of desire, which has been presented in the previous section, it might be assumed that there is a radical change in the configuration of Jocelyn's passion for Avice II and III:



In these cases, the mediator is no longer the transient Idea which Jocelyn calls his Well-Beloved, but the late predecessor of the two women. Attraction is fuelled by the memory of Avice I, which exacerbates the distance and allows the protagonist to love her descendants, but always indirectly and without the necessity of consummation. The identity that Pierston draws between Avice I and II thus goes beyond physical appearance, as he presupposes a congruence of their personalities, in order to justify the reincarnation of the dead. His tyrannical imagination as well as his artistic inclinations push him to obliterate Avice II's own individuality in order to mould her according to the identity he wants her to have: this enterprise starts from their first encounters when he chooses to rename her – from 'Ann Avice' she becomes 'Avice' -, and is continued in the attempt to educate her to the refinement of London manners. However, the protagonist's idealisation is immediately counteracted by the actuality of Avice II's character:

> "The voice truly was his Avice's; but Avice the Second was clearly more matter-of-fact, unreflecting, less cultivated than her mother had been. This Avice would never recite poetry from any platform, local or other, with enthusiastic appreciation of its fire. There was disappointment in his recognition of this; yet she touched him as few had done."[93]

His endeavours, moreover, are frustrated in the compulsive wish to marry her and settle down, which is in contrast with the metamorphic principle underlying his pursuit

[93] *Ibidem,* p. 238

of the Ideal. As a matter of fact, the relationship of Pierston with Avice II and the illusion of fulfilment of his desire are dramatically interrupted after the woman's refusal to a union. In an unexpectedly ironical manner, Jocelyn's dream for a mirror female image of himself is turned into a reality and triggers his awareness of the universal character of his condition – i.e. his sense of incompletion. Pierston acknowledges the fact that Avice II shares his same subordination to a phantom creature which is embodied in different men:

> "'Tis because I get tired o' my lovers as soon as I get to know them well. What I see in one young man for a while soon leaves him and goes into another yonder, and I follow, and then what I admire fades out of him and springs up somewhere else; and so I follow on, and never fix to one. I have loved *fifteen* a'ready! Yes, fifteen, I am almost ashamed to say,' she repeated, laughing. 'I can't help it, sir, I assure you. Of course it is really, to *me*, the same one all through, on'y I can't catch him!'"[94]

The similarity between Jocelyn and Avice II, of course, is possibly due to their common origin, but it entails a complete reversal of roles between subject and object, which lies at the basis of the protagonist's process of disillusionment and decay: "To be the seeker was one thing: to be one of the corpses from which the ideal inhabitant had departed was another; and this was what he had become now, in the mockery of new Days."[95]

The new pattern of love, accompanied by an increasing self-awareness, is eventually confirmed by Pierston's renewed passion for a third member of the Caro family, namely Avice III, who in her fleshly form is deemed to combine her grandmother's "ground-quality"[96] and the beauty of her mother:

> "She was somewhat like her mother, whom he had loved in the flesh, but she had the soul of her grandmother, whom he had loved in the spirit – and, for that matter, loved now. Only one criticism had he to pass upon his choice: though in outward semblance her grandam idealized, she had not the first Avice's candour, but rather her mother's closeness."[97]

Again, Pierston's idealisation is contrasted by the girl's accessibility, but this last embodiment of the Well-Beloved carries further significance because the romance between her and the protagonist is the one which leads him to become fully aware of

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[94] *Ibidem,* Part 2, Chapter VIII, pp. 253-4
[95] ivi
[96] *Ibidem*, Part 2, Chapter III, p. 232
[97] *Ibidem*, Part 3, Chapter V, p. 308

his futile pursuit of a chimera and finally brings the novel to its conclusion. It must be underlined that Jocelyn's attraction to Avice III was already founded on slightly different preconditions, as he was starting to develop some sort of moral conscience:

> "He was fully aware that since his earlier manhood a change had come over his regard of womankind. Once the individual had been nothing more to him than the temporary abiding-place of the typical or ideal; now his heart showed its bent to be a growing fidelity to the specimen, with all her pathetic flaws of detail; which flaws, so far from sending him further, increased his tenderness."[98]

Moreover, the age gap between the two does not favour inaccessibility but rather determines Jocelyn's recognition of his own aging and of the possibility that Avice III might choose not to correspond his love. As a matter of fact, the girl's right to choose is strongly asserted in her decision to elope with her lover Henri Leverre, who is ironically the stepson of Marcia Bencomb – for whom Pierston had left Avice I -, thus bringing the plot of the novel full circle. Moreover, this resolution accounts for Avice III's modernity in affirming the primacy of her own desires over social constraints and male dominance. She thus refuses to marry Pierston, as imposed by her mother's ambitions, because she "does not see marriage as a merger"[99] and "education has allowed her some measure of economic freedom and has served as the impetus for self-realization, choosing self-fulfilment over filial duty."[100]

In general, Jocelyn's pursuit of the Caro women allows readers to witness and reflect upon the conflicting forces which dominate his loves. On the one hand, his conception of the female Ideal compels him to reduce the three Avices to one single idea of womanhood, as the genealogical thread which connects them is interpreted by the protagonist as the sign of their merging. In this case, genetics becomes a potential expression of Platonic idealism, for the living descendant reproduces the memory of the dead ancestor as the real thing is a copy of the Idea. Naturally, the analogical juxtapositions of the three Avices is merely the effect of Pierston's delusion, and it is fostered and intensified by the adhesion of the ideal Well-Beloved to the members of the same family, which he associates with its perennial nature and immutability. Thus, the similarities among the three Avices are melded and transformed into identity: Avice II and III are to Pierston the perfect replicas of Avice I, who thus gains

[98] *Ibidem,* Part 3, Chapter I, p. 286
[99] Deangelis, R., *op.cit.*, p. 416
[100] ivi

immortality. On the other hand, Jocelyn's fixation with the existence of a unifying principle is finally treated for what it is, namely the illusory conviction that Avice I could be repeatedly retrieved in her daughter and granddaughter. Instead of adapting themselves to the depersonalisation operated by the sculptor, they come forth as individuals thus implying a fragmentation of the inherently unified feminine ideal[101]. Despite Pierston's attempt to focus on the common elements among them, each resists unification by retaining the distinctive traits which separate her from the others: "the first (is) a romantic ingenue, the second a knowing coquette and the third a shy, well-educated and virginal creature"[102].

Attaining the Well-Beloved was only possible through fusion, by preventing each reincarnation of Avice I from erasing the heritage of the previous ones and of the local traditions embodied by the original. Yet, "Avice Caro and her descendants […] exhibit a rivalry or resistance to fusion despite their close resemblance"[103] and the coexistence of difference and similarity is what ultimately triggers Jocelyn's paralysis. At the core of the conundrum, with which he is finally confronted, lies the polarisation between his faithfulness to the migratory Ideal and his loyalty towards the real woman, expressed in the repeated search for Avice I. This division within the protagonist's consciousness, which can no longer remain unresolved, might only have two possible solutions, each represented in the alternative tragi-comic endings of the two editions of the novel. The 1892 serialised version closes on Pearston's failed attempt at suicide in the Race, and on his hysteria at the final realisation that his desire will always remain unfulfilled:

> "An irresistible fit of laughter, so violent as to be an agony, seized upon him, and started in him with such momentum that that he could not stop it. He laughed and laughed, till he was almost too weak to draw breath. Marcia hobbled up, frightened. 'What's the matter?' she asked; and, turning to a second nurse, 'He is weak – hysterical.' 'O – no, no! I – I – it is too, too droll – this ending to my would-be romantic history!' Ho-ho-ho!"[104]

[101] Cf Bizotto, E., *op.cit.*, p. 60
[102] Ingham, P., *Introduction*, cit., p. xviii
[103] Donguk, K., *op.cit.*, p. 107
[104] Hardy, T., *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, cit., Chapter XXXIII, p. 168

Conversely, in the volume edition of 1897, Jocelyn eventually recovers from a fever and realises that his idealistic, yet sensuous, fantasy has disappeared and that he now refuses what has previously been the object of his desire:

> "Pierston was conscious of a singular change in himself, […] He was no longer the same man that he had hitherto been. […] recollections of Avice's good qualities alone had any effect on his mind; of her appearance none at all. […] (Marcia) found out herself in the course of his convalescence this strange death of the sensuous side of Jocelyn's nature. She had said that Avice was getting extraordinarily handsome, and that she did not wonder her stepson lost his heart to her […] He merely answered, however, 'Yes; I suppose she is handsome. She's more – a wise girl who will make a good housewife in time…I wish you were not handsome, Marcia.'[…] 'O – I as a woman think there's good in it.' 'Is there? Then I have lost all conception of it. […] I have lost a faculty, for which loss Heaven be praised!"[105]

Pierston's "growing fidelity to the specimen"[106], triggered by the three Avices and closed by his wedding to old Marcia Bencomb, completes the process of de-legitimation of his fancy by rupturing the pattern of his compulsive desire, and by reversing it into an ironic conclusion, which is utterly antithetical with regard to his idealism. As a matter of fact, his marrying Marcia might also be interpreted as the re-establishment of legal relationships, in order to replace the incestuous passion for the Caro women with a socially acceptable structure, in which sexual intercourse is only a remote possibility due to the old age of the couple. However, the ceremony which marks the union between Jocelyn and Marcia is not the happy ending of a fairytale, for it creates a disturbing atmosphere of "sterility, resignation and death"[107]. Jocelyn has transformed into an elder, and Marcia's appearance has undergone a radical change, which entailed the shift from her status as "Juno"[108] to that of a "decrepit Venus"[109], thus subverting the canons of female beauty.

All things considered, the status of *The Well-Beloved* as the final summary of Hardy's fiction allows readers and critics to regard its quasi-implausible romantic plot as "an implicit commentary on the design of loving in his other fiction"[110]. The pattern which is so clearly recognisable in this novel, has been associated with the rest of

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[105] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 3, Chapter VIII, p. 330
[106] *Ibidem*, Part 3, Chapter I, p. 286
[107] Bizotto, E., *op.cit.*, p. 57
[108] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 1, Chapter V, p. 196
[109] Bizotto, E., *op.cit.*, p. 60
[110] Miller, J.H., *Thomas Hardy. Distance and Desire*, cit., p. 170

Hardy's work as a novelist, in which a recurrence can be observed of love as a subjective phenomenon and as a source of suffering, when absent. According to what the author shows in this narrative, repeatedly falling in and out of love is a dramatic experience for it entails modifications in both the lover and the beloved, who is formerly conceived as a divinity and then loses her aura and her significance all of a sudden. As it has already been underlined, Jocelyn Pierston is by far the most imaginative and intellectual among Hardy's lovers, and the strength of his characterisation mainly depends on his unique temperament, which allows him to translate his erotic and sensual desire into a metaphysical quest. However, philosophical interpretation is not sufficient to motivate him throughout the entirety of his life, and he is eventually so tired of suffering that he chooses to start living on the surface, instead of fuelling his frustration in the attempt at understanding the deep secrets of reality. This ultimate inversion of Pierston's inclinations is nothing more than the necessary conclusion of his trajectory, as well as the final destination of Hardy's exploration of human nature: the author was perfectly conscious of this and, as a consequence, he exploits this last narrative as the means to bring the mechanisms of Jocelyn's tension for the ideal to the light. In this way, the "ideal or subjective nature"[111] of the content allows Hardy to make the novel "more legible in its governing matrix"[112], thus justifying the narratorial voice's detached tone and his choice to be involved in the life of the protagonist only as an observer.

In addition, the control that Jocelyn's imagination exerts over his perception of women has favoured the already established connection between Hardy's *œuvre* and gender issues, which were progressively gaining relevance in the panorama of late 19th century society. Predictably, Hardy's response is far from unequivocal as he was torn between the need to support equality between the sexes and to depict his female characters according to social standards. On the one side, he had concerns about marriage as an institution – which is evident in the 1892 version of this novel, and in the ending of the one of 1897 –, for he saw it as an artificial construction of modern civilization which "magnifies and distorts the natural struggles between the sexes"[113]. These positions identified Hardy as an advocate of the Free Love debate: as Lyn Pykett

[111] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., 1912 Preface, p. 174
[112] Miller, J.H., *Thomas Hardy. Distance and Desire*, cit., p. 170
[113] Sandlin, A., *Fear and Fascination: A Study of Thomas Hardy and the New Woman*, "Electronic Theses & Dissertations", Paper 184, p. 85

describes in her article, "Free Love unions […] were championed by feminists and other sex reformers as a means of restructuring male/female relations that would give women control of their own lives and bodies."[114] The independence of women from male authority, in this novel, is clearly exemplified in the character of Avice III, but it can be generally observed that Jocelyn lives in a condition of subordination to a feminine power, especially in the 1897 version, which is made manifest when both Avice II and III refuse him, and not vice versa. However, this presumed female potential for self-assertion is constantly counteracted by the influence of the environment and by their fundamental flexibility, which leads them to become the passive recipient of definitions created by men. This fascinating combination of power and subjection in the representation of women, is what makes Hardy's female heroines so exceptional, and unfortunately so misunderstood by the contemporary readership, who was not yet ready for such an innovative approach. Hardy's preoccupation with sexuality was generally held "sensational, violent, pagan, and bestial"[115], for it challenged the traditional conceptions of male/female relationships, depicted by the author either as a durable coexistence of love and friendship or as an ephemeral attraction. The shock of reviewers was especially considerable when physicality was associated to women, and characteristically treated by the author with the same attention as that of men. The Victorian reading public suffered from an unconscious rejection of female sexuality, and Hardy's feminine models profoundly undermined the traditional conceptual dichotomy of women as either angelic or utterly immoral, for they were simultaneously amiable and active individuals, such as Avice II. As Penny Boumelha remarks,

> "the radicalism of Hardy's representation of women resides, not in their 'complexity', their 'realism' or their 'challenge' to convention', but in their resistance to reduction to a single and uniform ideological position."[116]

Any unequivocal model of femininity, be it positive or negative, is seen by Hardy as a form of tyranny, so not even one is to be found in the totality of his narratives. None of his women, among which one might include those represented in *The Well-Beloved*,

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[114] Pykett, L., *op.cit.*, pp. 161-2

[115] Brady, K., *Thomas Hardy and Matters of Gender* in Kramer, D. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 94

[116] Boumelha, P., *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*, quoted in *ibidem*, p. 100

responds fully to the paradigm of passivity for their potential is always explicit. Nevertheless, their imperfection becomes the source of their pain, thus nurturing their sense of subordination. In her study on the relationship between Hardy and the woman question[117], Sandlin highlights how his entire novelistic production shows an exploration on the theme of love and marriage, which is complicated by the problematic social and sexual imbalance among characters and by their internal struggle between their natural instincts and their intellectual faculties. Similarly, Pykett puts an emphasis on Hardy's last three novels – i.e. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Jude The Obscure* and *The Well-Beloved* – and notices how all three "tend both to focus on women as bodies and to constitute the body as a problem"[118], inscribing these works in the traditional Western discourse on the duality between body and spirit. The narratorial voice and regard thus endeavours to register these incongruities in order to provide an accurate depiction of life, and especially of male/female relations, as a phenomenon to be experienced, which would enrich the representational range of fiction with a positive impact on English literature, even though not without creating sometimes confusion in his readers.

[117] Sandlin, A., *op.cit.*
[118] Pykett, L., *op.cit.*, p. 158

CHAPTER THREE

Thematising the Setting

3.1 The Meaningful Geography of Hardy's Novels

In the previous study of Jocelyn's romantic idealism, and of the unique case of the three Avices, there is an element which has been willingly overlooked, for it needs a more specific exploration. This element is the regional setting, which does not solely serve as a backdrop for the plot, for Hardy filled it with a particular significance. Indeed, geography represents the connecting motif which links all his production, thus creating a veritable "great web"[119]. Before Hardy, regionalism had proven a successful approach to fiction during the 19th century, so as to favour the popularity in the English literary panorama of a specific subgenre, i.e. the regional novel. Despite the diversity among the authors who chose to conform to this genre, all regional novels shared an interest in the "distinctiveness and typicality of a historical and provisional 'here and now'"[120], and in the work of the inhabitants on the land where they lived. The daily life of a specific place thus becomes the engine of the plot and the most influencing element in the creation and evolution of the characters.

Among regional novelists, Thomas Hardy undeniably occupies a position of pre-eminence and singularity, because in the construction of Wessex he managed to condense the same tensions and dualisms, which characterise his entire production. This is possibly due to his own experience of provincial life, which is reflected onto his geographical creation, therefore determining the fundamental function of Wessex as a precious instrument to unveil the foundations of Hardy's fiction. As a matter of fact, Wessex has been demonstrated to be a manipulated fictive version of Dorsetshire, namely the place where the author grew up. Interestingly, Pite's account of Hardy's challenging relationship with his native county[121] highlights how a relevant analogy can be traced between Hardy's inner division and the historical evolution of Dorset. The 19th century had been a period of radical changes in Britain, since the Industrial Revolution had triggered a widespread optimism and faith in progress. However, Dorset long remained marginalised during this process of transformation of British

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[119] This metaphorical definition of Hardy's production is to be found in the title of Gregor, I., *The Great Web. The Form of Hardy's Major Fiction*, Totowa, Roman and Littlefield, 1974
[120] Bezrucka, Y., *'The Well-Beloved': Thomas Hardy's Manifesto of 'Regional Aesthetics'*, "Victorian Literature and Culture", Vol. 36, No. 1, 2008, p. 232
[121] See Pite, R., *A Railway Bore Him Through,* in *op.cit.,* pp. 11-24

economy and society, and Hardy belonged to the first generation of young people who acknowledged the advent of modernity. This provoked a separation both within and without the author, for he felt detached from the traditional lifestyle of his birthplace, but also not fully included in the rhythm of urban life:

> "The place where he was born and the time when he was born gave him the opportunity to feel immediately the self-division, the deracination and lack of certainty that afflicted so many other people at the time."[122]

A similar condition is depicted in one of his masterpieces, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, where he brilliantly describes the discrepancy between the heroine's modern education and the ancestral knowledge of her mother:

> "Between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folklore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained National teaching and Standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. When they were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were just juxtaposed."[123]

Moreover, Hardy's career as a novelist took him further and further from Dorset and its rural culture, so that he increasingly became an outsider in the eyes of his native community. The separation from the region was never a smooth process for Hardy, but neither was his inclusion in the metropolitan culture of the urbanised middle-class. His refusal to completely abandon his provincial identity kept him caught halfway between two different frames of mind, and complicated his relationship with fiction, especially with the delineation of rural characters in his novels. Indeed, he was willing to provide the reading public with an accurate portrayal of life in the province, but he was aware of the stereotyped image of the 'rustic' that the refined middle-class had in mind. Faithfulness would be seen as misrepresentation, so he always felt it as an obligation, that he had to adapt his personages to his readers' expectations: thus, as it is predictable for Hardy, he created enigmatic figures who would at once conform to the accepted standard, and threaten its authority.

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[122] *ibidem*, p. 23

[123] Hardy, T., *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), Dolin T. (ed.), London, Penguin Classics, 1998, Phase 1, Chapter III, p.23

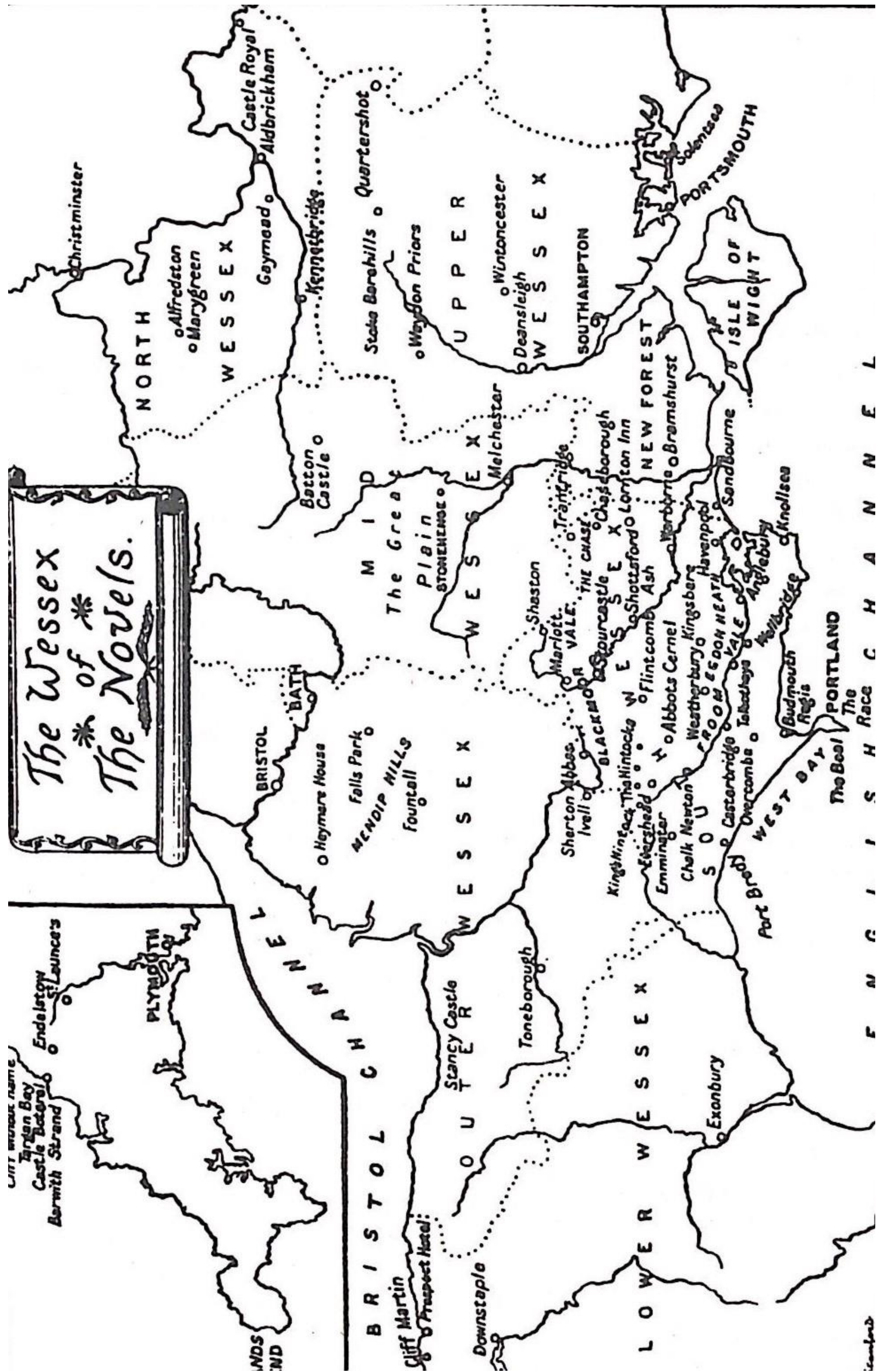

Figure 1 - Map of Hardy's Wessex taken from the Wessex Novels Edition (1895-6) and reproduced in the Penguin Classics editions of all his novels

Naturally, the ambiguity which he infused in his characters was to be embedded in the setting itself, which is defined as a "half-real half-imagined location"[124]. As stated above, Wessex is the result of a fictional remodelling of Dorsetshire, a region in the South-West of England, and it is possible to operate several associations between the imaginary and the actual places, thanks to Hardy's details about a geography which is sometimes very accurately reproduced. The term Wessex was first formally used by Hardy in 1874 in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, where he mentions "Wessex nooks"[125], and it is an appropriation of the name of the old Saxon kingdom, which extended over a territory including the current county of Dorset. Of course, Hardy's decision to exploit this term gave it a denser meaning and draw the attention onto the entire system of toponymy of the novels, which seems to be ruled by one basic principle: on the one hand, natural sites and large towns are reported with their real names; on the other hand, smaller centres were referred to by using invented or ancient names. However, attempts at reconstructing a map of Hardy's settings have demonstrated that such identifications are not always possible, for Wessex is not merely a translation in literary form of the real county, but a fictional construction which exists alongside its physical equivalent. Instead of only taking into consideration the "something real for its basis – however illusively treated"[126], it should be also acknowledged how Hardy's geographical setting is both

> "purely his own creation, […] a process of vision and interpretation that developed through his novel writing life; […] (and) partially at least independent of himself, with a reality beyond his own fiction, with a life of its own which he had borrowed, concentrated, shaped […]. In any case the main thrust is to call Wessex wholly a dream-country realistically presented."[127]

As a matter of fact, the creation of a common setting for all his novels was primarily a response to the author's exigency for a unity of space, which could transform Wessex into a central core around which all his novels and his characters could gravitate. However, Gatrell underlines that the systematisation of Wessex was not a project that Hardy had undertaken since the beginning of his novelistic career[128]: at an early stage,

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[124] Ingham, P. *General Editor's Preface to* Hardy, T. *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved and The Well-Beloved,* cit., pp. viii-x, p. viii
[125] Hardy, T., *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), Furbank P.N. (ed.), London, Macmillan, 1974, Chapter XXII, p.177
[126] Hardy, T., *General Preface to the Wessex Novels and Poems*, cit.
[127] Gatrell, S., *Wessex,* in Kramer, D. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, cit., p.30
[128] Cf *ibidem*, p. 29

he endeavoured to conceal the reality of the places behind fiction, but he gradually became conscious of the potential of Wessex, especially while writing *Tess*. Probably, a reason for this increased awareness lay in the gradual disappearance of the ancestral culture of Dorset, due to Victorian innovations: the vanishing of the real counterpart of the literary setting thus entailed the transformation of the author into an historian of a past Wessex, though without the necessary detachment of such a figure, due to his intimate relationship with local traditions. Consequently, in the 1912 *General Preface to the Wessex Novels and Poems*, he eventually declared the plan underlying his conception of the literary space:

> "It has sometimes been conceived of novels that evolve their action on a circumscribed scene—as do many (though not all) of these—that they cannot be so inclusive in their exhibition of human nature as novels wherein the scenes cover large extents of country, in which events figure amid towns and cities, even wander over the four quarters of the globe. I am not concerned to argue this point further than to suggest that the conception is an untrue one in respect of the elementary passions. But I would state that the geographical limits of the stage here trodden were not absolutely forced upon the writer by circumstances; he forced them upon himself from judgment. I considered that our magnificent heritage from the Greeks in dramatic literature found sufficient room for a large proportion of its action in an extent of their country not much larger than the half-dozen counties here reunited under the old name of Wessex, that the domestic emotions have throbbed in Wessex nooks with as much intensity as in the palaces of Europe, and that, anyhow, there was quite enough human nature in Wessex for one man's literary purpose. So far was I possessed by this idea that I kept within the frontiers when it would have been easier to overleap them and give more cosmopolitan features to the narrative."[129]

From this quotation, it is evident that the establishment of geographical boundaries was a choice freely made by the author, as well as one of the central elements of his writing: the setting plays a primary role in the definition of the narrative structure and contents, for it contributes to the creation of a common pattern, capable of enriching each novel. However, it should also be remembered that space is always constructed by merging the visions of the characters, of the narrator and of the reader, and never as an objective reality independent from them. Thus, the geography of Hardy's novels

[129] Hardy, T. *General Preface to the Wessex Novels and Poems*, cit.

is inscribed in the author's preoccupation with subjectivity, as opposed to the realist mimetic concern with facts.

As a matter of fact, the inner struggles faced by the protagonists of Hardy's fiction are reflected by the depiction of Wessex as a microcosm of social conflict, where economic issues overcome personal needs.[130] As a setting, it responds to the canons of early 19th century regional fiction, for its marginalised position – both geographically and socially – from the frenzy of Victorian society, determined the permanence of rural traditions and hindered the explosion of urbanisation and industrialism. A perfect example of Wessex as the cradle of a non-industrial civilisation, is provided by Hardy in the description of Mellstock in *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872):

> "Mellstock was a parish of considerable acreage, the hamlets composing it lying at a much greater distance from each other than is ordinarily the case. Hence several hours were consumed in playing and singing within hearing of every family, even if but a single air were bestowed on each. There was East Mellstock, the main village; half a mile from this were the church and the vicarage, called West Mellstock, and originally the most thickly-populated portion. A mile north-east lay the hamlet of Lewgate, where the tranter lived; and at other points knots of cottages, besides solitary farmsteads and dairies."[131]

However, throughout Hardy's novels, the reader is gradually introduced to the changes that modernity was imposing onto the countryside, which did not fully overthrow local traditions, but certainly distorted them. Thus, the novels are not the elegies to a dead and forgotten agricultural society but an account of the rupture between different generations, as is evident in the previously quoted passage from *Tess*. The author is interested in social mobility as an increasingly widespread phenomenon, especially among young people, who had access to a regulated education system and who were witnessing the introduction of machinery to replace manual work in the countryside. The constant movements of characters from place to place, especially in an environment which was traditionally associated with tranquillity and with a static

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[130] As Villari states in *Il Vizio Moderno dell'Irrequietezza. Saggio sui Romanzi di Thomas Hardy*, "(Il) peso delle necessità economiche nei momenti cruciali delle vite dei personaggi conferma la improponibilità dell'immagine del Wessex come idillico universo pre-borghese e induce piuttosto a considerare questa contrada romanzesca, al pari di quasi tutte le altre province del romanzo inglese ottocentesco, *come un microcosmo nel quale si ripropongono conflitti sociali analoghi a quelli che si verificano nella realtà contemporanea*.", (cit., p. 38, my emphasis)

[131] Hardy, T., *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), Dolin T. (ed.), London, Penguin Classics, 1998, Part 1, Chapter IV, p. 20-1

lifestyle, might potentially act as a form of education which could help them expand their perspective. However, the acknowledgment of different spaces often causes the protagonists of Hardy's fiction to eventually lose a centre to refer to. For example, young Tess successively settles in multiple places both physically and culturally, so that by the end of the novel she is found completely disoriented and deprived of an identity. This gradual loss of character is thus mirrored by the landscape, which becomes increasingly anonymous:

> "Every leaf of the vegetable having already been consumed, the whole field was in colour a desolate drab; it was a complexion without features, as if a face, from chin to brow, should be only an expanse of skin. The sky wore, in another colour, the same likeness; a white vacuity of countenance with the lineaments gone. So these two upper and nether visages confronted each other all day long, the white face looking down on the brown face, and the brown face looking up at the white face, without anything standing between them but the two girls crawling over the surface of the former like flies."[132]

As a result, Hardy's analysis of social issues is substantially different from a report on their implications in terms of class and economy, for it is functional to his investigation on the possibility of progress for mankind, and on human existence. As a matter of fact, as Villari notices, the ambition which characterises his protagonists is not the typical middle-class drive towards social and financial stability, but rather an intellectual desire of self-fulfilment which transcends the boundaries of class[133]. Therefore, these characters embody the same deracination which tormented Hardy, as they no longer belong to the tradition, but still their nature is opposed to the ethics of the bourgeoisie, for it has been moulded by their native landscape. For them, there are few opportunities to gain satisfaction, since an ever-changing space inexorably leads them to lose the centre of their local geography and of their own identity.

Far from being a mere scenery, Wessex can hence be conceived as a veritable laboratory of composition, where Hardy could conduct his narrative experiments. Despite the lack of homogeneity among novels with respect to the density and the accuracy of geographical descriptions, all corners of Wessex which are represented in his works, share the same antiessentialism: not only is Hardy's regionalism a reaction against the tyranny of canonical beauty, but also a rejection of stereotyped

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[132] Hardy, T. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, cit., Phase 5, Chapter XLIII, p. 285
[133] Cf Villari, E., *op.cit.,* pp. 39-40

representations of rural life. His main goal as a writer was to express the plurality of beauty, which could be found "in Wessex nooks with as much intensity as in the palaces of Europe"[134], or in other peculiar spaces. As a result, Wessex and the communities it consists of are only a small portion of a totality, a series of self-confined microcosms which formed a cultural whole, capable of epitomising "the universal laws which govern the universe everywhere at all times"[135]:

> "Thus, though the people in most of the novels are dwellers in a province bounded on the north by the Thames, on the south by the English Channel, on the east by a line running from Hayling Island to Windsor Forest, and on the west by the Cornish coast, they were meant to be typically and essentially those of any and every place […] beings in whose hearts and minds that which is apparently local should be really universal."[136]

This contrast between the notions of locality and universality is, however, not reduced to a mere geographical question: since Hardy's geography is profoundly meaningful, the duality it embodies becomes a veritable thematic core, related to the question of knowledge. In a study of Hardy's notion of geography, J. Barrell[137] asserts that:

> "[…] we cannot describe this idea of a local geography; and the words we reach for, and that Hardy often reaches for, in attempting to comprehend it, instead conceal it from us. We may think of labourers working in the fields of their native village as 'at one with', or 'in harmony with', or 'a part of' something we describe as 'the landscape' or as 'Nature' […] but these words and phrases can make sense, in such contexts, only to those whose experience is wide and therefore de-localized. 'Nature' refers to a notion of the *essential* that we abstract from the range of her *accidental* manifestations, but for that local sense that Hardy tries to apprehend, the local is at once accidental only, and yet not perceived as such by those for whom it is the whole."[138]

This implies that Hardy's rustics live in the conviction that their knowledge is the only one possible, and that what does not belong to their specific 'here and now' can exclusively enter it through the intervention of someone external. Each community appears isolated – as Hardy visually demonstrates in the bonfire scene in *The Return*

[134] Hardy, T. *General Preface to the Wessex Novels and Poems*, cit.
[135] Miller, J.H., *Thomas Hardy. Distance and Desire*, cit., p. 53
[136] Hardy, T. *General Preface to the Wessex Novels and Poems*, cit.
[137] Barrell, J., *Geographies of Hardy's Wessex*, "Journal of Historical Geography", Vol. 8, No. 4, 1982, pp. 347-61
[138] *ibidem*, p. 350

of the Native (1878)[139] -, and is conceived by its inhabitants as such, but this does not stop Hardy the narrator, who is known to be conceptually detached from his characters, from establishing connections with the other communities depicted in his novels. The same alienation from local culture is shared by the narratorial voice and the reader, traditionally identified with an expert traveller, to whom Hardy tries to describe the geography of Wessex. However, Hardy knows that using a language which could be comprehensible for the reader, namely a language based on abstraction and pictorial references, is not sufficient to truly grasp the idiosyncrasies of that specific locality and its culture. This privilege is only reserved to characters, who have full access to the culture of their birthplace, and therefore the narrator's role as mediator is not enough to fill the gap between the character's and the reader's experiences. Therefore, Hardy's regionalism is in reality a "critical regionalism"[140], which would refuse to idealise and pictorialize rural life in middle-class terms, in order to preserve its peculiar traditions, without however resulting in an excessively conservative approach. Abstraction and reality must coexist in the novels, and it is the narrator's task to mediate between them and to represent the conflict between local and universal which is embodied by the characters, who are simultaneously at the margins of society and the recognisable representatives of mankind. It is only their movement which allows them to interact with a 'somewhere else' and expand their knowledge, but this movement paradoxically implies the absence from the centre of their sense of space, and the consequent inner rupture in the character's consciousness which underlie their existential dilemmas.

3.2 The Isle of Slingers: The Space of Fancy

The intimate relationship between geographical space and identity, which is increasingly strengthened throughout Hardy's work as a novelist, reaches the highest point of abstraction precisely with *The Well-Beloved*, which Bezrucka defines as "the manifesto of Hardy's regional aesthetics"[141]. Indeed, the Wessex which is represented through the Isle of Slingers in this novel lacks the substantiality of the other settings

[139] Cf Hardy, T., *The Return of the Native* (1878), Woodcock G. (ed.), London, Penguin Classics, 1978, Book 1, Ch. III, pp. 65-7
[140] The notion of 'critical regionalism' was first applied by K. Frampton to architecture, and reprised with reference to Hardy's Wessex in Bezrucka, Y., *op.cit.,* p. 231
[141] Bezrucka, Y., *op.cit.*, p. 227

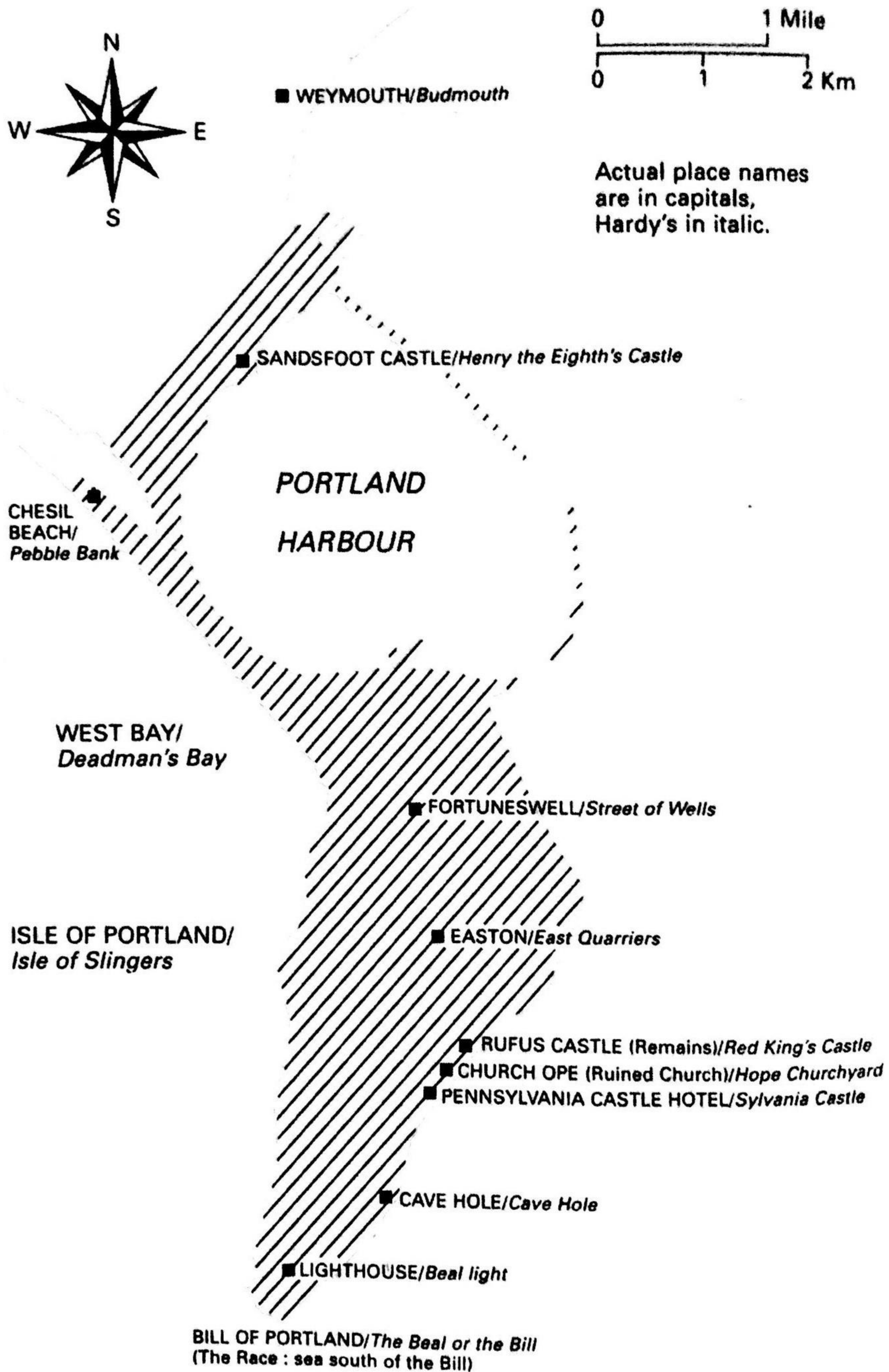

Figure 2 - Map of Portland/the Isle of Slingers reported in the Penguin Classics edition of *The Well-Beloved*

by Hardy and is perceived, both by the protagonist and the reader, more for its atmosphere than as a physical location. However, the nature of the literary space is coherent with the general theoretical character of this work and thus stimulates the reader to retrospectively connect it to the spatial dimension of Hardy's previous novels, thus obtaining a better comprehension of it. For example, an analogy has been identified between *The Well-Beloved* and *The Return of the Native*: not only does the former start with the protagonist's return to his birthplace, but also, in both novels, the Isle of Slingers and Egdon Heath are associated with 'Thule'[142], namely an ancient mythological island.

Despite its name, the Isle of Slingers is a "peninsula carved by Time out of a single stone"[143], which has been identified with Portland in Western Dorset. This discrepancy alone between its name and its reality would be sufficient to recognise its dual nature, which is common to all instances of Hardy's Wessex. A narrow and fragile strip of land connects the place to the mainland, but as an 'Isle', its singularity is emphasised as a synonym for unity and confinement. Its isolation from the rest of the country accounts for the uniqueness of its culture and of its inhabitants, among which Jocelyn can be listed, whose temperament inevitably depends on the regional culture which has generated him:

> "Hence it (i.e. the Isle of Slingers) is a spot apt to generate a type of personage like the character imperfectly sketched in these pages – a native of natives – whom some may choose to call a fantast (if they honour him with their consideration so far)…"[144]

As a matter of fact, characterisation is mainly constructed around the dichotomy islander/outlander, since identities in the novel are primarily defined by whether a person comes from the Isle of Slingers or not. Consequently, on the one hand, there are characters who are deeply engaged in the life of the island, such as Pierston's father, and other characters, who conversely cannot be inscribed in the island's tradition, namely the mundane Nichola Pine-Avon and Jocelyn's friend Somers. Nonetheless, such a sharp distinction can only be applied to marginal personages, for

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[142] In *The Well-Beloved* Jocelyn meets Nichola Pine-Avon on the Isle of Slingers and describes her as "a lady […] whose attire […] was of a cut which rather suggested London, rather than this *Ultima Thule"* (cit., Part 2, Chapter VII, p. 248); in *The Return of the Native*, after a long description of Egdon Heath, the narrator says "The new Vale of Tempe may be a gaunt waste in Thule" (cit., Book 1, Chapter I, p. 54)
[143] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., 1912 Preface, p. 173
[144] ivi

Hardy's protagonists are generally known as non-conformable to any strict category. Above all, Jocelyn Pierston is at once defined as "a native of natives"[145] and as "a young man from London and the cities of the Continent"[146]. Nonetheless, "his urbanism sat upon him only as a garment"[147], for the island is the true source of his artistic sensibility and is even inscribed in his name which echoes the stone the peninsula is made of. Indeed, Pierston's artistic education and career in London are depicted as a threat against his traditional local culture, for it has persuaded him into believing in a universally acknowledged notion of Beauty, which also distorts his sense of space and makes him translate the singleness of the Isle of Slingers into uniformity, as soon as he starts idealising his birthplace. His search for unequivocal absolutes is thus counteracted by the narratorial voice, for whom beauty is to be found in the typical and in the characteristic, and must escape generalisations to embrace incongruences and mutability: "Jocelyn (as well) will […] have to appreciate that the Many cannot be subsumed unto monisms or hypostasizations of the Ones of any sort (in this case physiognomic and geopolitical typologizations)"[148]. In addition to this, as Pierston's doubles, the three Avices are delineated as embodiments of the same paradoxical relationship to the peninsula and its culture. Avice I is described as "local to the bone, but she could not escape the tendency of the age"[149]. Secondly, Avice II, despite her embodying the local essence of her mother, and her marriage to an islander, is always drawn towards an 'elsewhere' by a similar fancy as Jocelyn's. Then, Avice III is still physically – and to Jocelyn, also metaphysically - rooted in the Isle of Slingers, but her education brings her closer to modernity.

In general, the Isle of Slingers is for young Pierston the place to escape from, in order to nurture his intellectualism, which would not find its place among the Isle's "many an old-fashioned idea"[150]. The novel opens on his return to his birthplace with a full set of mannerisms, which derive from his access to the urban culture of London and of its intellectual circles. The twenty-year-old Jocelyn, to whom the reader is first introduced, thus epitomises the disjunction between his traditional upbringing and the education he received beyond the borders of his homeland. However, despite his

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[145] ivi
[146] *ibidem*, Part 1, Chapter I, p. 179
[147] ivi
[148] Bezrucka, Y., *op.cit.*, p. 233
[149] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 1, Chapter II, p.187
[150] ivi

attempt to enter in the frame of mind of London aesthetes, he never manages to detach himself completely from the Isle of Slingers, which exerts a sort of magnetism over him, compelling him to return repeatedly. Therefore, readers can witness throughout the novel the progressive contraction of Jocelyn's geographical horizons, which significantly reaches its point of no return after Avice I's death. In the highly metaphorical sequence which opens chapter III of the second part of the novel[151], and which has already been quoted in the previous chapter of this thesis, the memory of the beloved immediately causes Pierston to associate her with the landscape where she had lived. His imagination aligns the body of the woman with the Isle of Slingers, blurring the boundary between human and nonhuman and merging the woman and the place into a single entity:

> "Now suddenly the world has a focus. That center has the power to radiate outward, shedding a 'glory' on the earth and transfiguring everything into a sign of its presence. […] When the loved one is there, he seems to permeate everything with his living spirit, like an immanent deity, so that houses, furniture, clothes, the landscape – all declare the glory of his presence in the world."[152]

Thanks to the idealised image of the late Avice I and of her local traits, the Isle of Slingers is no longer the place of familiarity which had triggered Jocelyn's existential ennui, for its space has gained a new structure and meaning, becoming the place of his idealistic fancy. The abovementioned sequence, with its distinctively poetic analogies and imagery, puts the person and the space on the same level, by focusing on the only element they have in common, i.e. distance: Avice I is unattainable because of her death, whereas the Isle's distance resides in its mythical past, in which Jocelyn could retrace a union with his beloved. Pierston's efforts to turn separation into closeness, thus renders the Isle of Slingers as haunting a presence as Avice's, so that the image of its landscape penetrates physical space, even when the protagonist is absent from it, as the dead woman's essence enters the bodies of her descendants. This can be observed not only in the same passage, already discussed, but also when Jocelyn travels to Rome in search of artistic inspiration:

> "The unconscious habit, common to so many people, of tracing likes in unlikes had often led him to discern, or to fancy to discern, in the Roman atmosphere, in its lights and shades, and particularly in its reflected or

[151] Cf *ibidem*, Part 2, Chapter III, p.229
[152] Miller, J.H., *Thomas Hardy. Distance and Desire*, cit., p. 132

> secondary lights, something resembling the atmosphere of his native promontory. Perhaps it was that in each case the eye was mostly resting on stone – that the quarriers of ruins in the Eternal City reminded him of the quarries of maiden rock at home."[153]

These passages demonstrate that, as is typical in Hardy's literary production, the spatial setting is not merely a geographical background, but it might be enlisted among the phenomena which are experienced by the character's subjectivity. Pierston becomes more and more receptive of the consequences of his relationship with himself, with other people and, as is relevant for this chapter, with his origins.

However, there is someone, namely the narrator, who already knows that there is a deep connection between the character and space, and therefore "a certain narrative design […] exists (also) on the level of the physical scene in which the story is for the most part enacted"[154]. This consciousness on the part of the narrating figure is overtly expressed in the statement concerning the Isle of Slingers in the *Preface* to the novel, which depicts the natural propensity of the landscape to trigger acts of imagination, not only in natives but also in outsiders, who unfortunately neglect it:

> "To those who know the rocky coign of England here depicted […] it is matter of surprise that the place has not been more frequently chosen as the retreat of artists and poets in search of inspiration – for at least a month or two in the year, the tempestuous rather than the fine seasons by preference."[155]

Moreover, the influence of such a setting onto the narrative is interspersed throughout the novel in a more subtle way, by means of references to traditions of the community in terms of social relations and material culture, which are alive in the conscience of the characters and determine the occurrence of certain circumstances. For instance, the presence on the peninsula of a limited number of family groups due to intermarriage[156], which is reflected in the repetition of names and surnames among characters, enhances the notion of insularity as containment and gives a particular meaning to the portrayal of interpersonal relationships. Indeed, it reinforces the idea of a primal sense of unity, the same unity Jocelyn was searching for, which connected all inhabitants in a sort of

[153] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 3, Chapter I, p. 284
[154] Miller, J.H., *The Well-Beloved. The Compulsion to Stop Repeating*, cit., p. 158
[155] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., 1912 Preface, p. 173
[156] Hardy mentions this question in the novel when he writes: "He remembered who had used to live there – and probably lived there now – the Caro family; the 'roan-mare' Caros, as they were called to distinguish them from other branches of the same pedigree, *there being but half-a-dozen Christians and surnames in the whole island.*" (*ibidem*, Part 1, Chapter I, p. 180, my emphasis)

incestuous extended family with a shared cultural background. To Pierston's derailed imagination, especially after the death of Avice I, the Isle of Slingers thus becomes the most congenial environment where he could find his female double:

> "Avice, the departed one, though she had come short of inspiring a passion, had yet possessed a ground-quality absent from her rivals, without which it seemed that a fixed and full-rounded constancy to a woman could not flourish in him. Like his own, her family had been islanders for centuries – from Norman, Anglian, Roman, Balearic-British times. Hence in her nature, as in his, was some mysterious ingredient sucked from the isle; otherwise a racial instinct necessary to the absolute unison of a pair. Thus, though he might never love a woman of the island race, for a lack in her of the desired refinement, he could not love a Kimberlin – a woman other than of the island race, for her lack of this groundwork of character."[157]

In this framework of enclosure, Pierston's relationship with the three Avices contributes to a further contraction, for the family tie between them progressively becomes closer and closer. While the bond with Avice I is dated back to a remote past, Avice II is discovered to be married to Jocelyn's cousin, thus entailing that Avice III does no longer bear the surname 'Caro', but is actually called Avice Pierston. Therefore, a veritable rupture of this sense of unity, which triggers and accompanies Pierston's disillusion, is provided at the end of the novel, when both he and Avice III marry a 'kimberlin', i.e. Marcia Bencomb and Henri Leverre.

Alongside this inherently incestuous tradition, there are other aspects of the Isle of Slingers which are relevant to characterisation. For instance, the emphasis which Hardy puts on the geological characteristics of the Isle[158] is a sign of how geography is functional to the expression of the narrative's potential, by being woven in Pierston's creative life and identity. As a matter of fact, the limestone which constitutes the Isle's soil is the result of a process of accumulation and stratification of fossilised organisms, thus mirroring the dualism of unity and fragmentation which is attached to Jocelyn's ideal Well-Beloved. In addition to this, during a conversation with Avice III, the protagonist is compared to a "strange fossilized relic in human form"[159], thus strengthening the analogy between him and the rock. The Isle of Slingers is thus the result of a process of creation carried out by nature, which translates it into the

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[157] *ibidem*, Part 2, Chapter III, p. 232
[158] More on Hardy's interest in geology can be found in Ingham, P., *Hardy and the Wonders of Geology*, "The Review of English Studies", New Series, Vol. 31, No. 121, February 1980, pp. 59-64
[159] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 3, Chapter IV, p. 306

nonhuman equivalent for the artist and its works of art. The oolite of the peninsula is intimately related to Jocelyn's art, for it does not only host the women who are the embodiments of the Well-Beloved and the sources of his inspiration, but also because it is the raw material in which he carves his sculptures. As a consequence, although his career as an artist unfolds primarily in London, he is constantly in contact with his birthplace and his family, since the blocks of rock are sent to the city by Pierston's father:

> "In these professionals beauty-chases he sometimes cast his eye across the Thames to the wharves on the south side, and to that particular one whereat his father's tons of freestone were daily landed from the ketches of the south coast. He could occasionally discern the white blocks lying there, vast cubes so persistently nibbled by his parent from his island rock in the English Channel, that it seemed as if in time it would nibbled all away."[160]

Another important connection between Jocelyn's idealising fantasy and the local culture of the Isle of Slingers is finally provided through an architectural metaphor, namely the presence of a church which had been presumedly built over the ruins of a Pagan temple devoted to Aphrodite/Venus[161]. The juxtaposition of different buildings through history stands for the cultural hybridity of the community, by recording the successive modifications of the social structures on the territory. Of course, the image of the temple charges the setting with a supernatural and ghostly aura which allows the persistence of pagan divinities, and, interestingly enough, the goddess that ancient civilisations worshipped there is exactly the same that Jocelyn compulsively endeavours to represent in his statues, and who governs his erotic desire. However, the superimposition of a Christian element over the Greek pagan tradition echoes the Christianisation of Platonism and the ideological war between conflicting tendencies within Pierston. As Fowles explains:

> "If the Pagan there stands for permitted incest, pre-marital relations, the unchecked Id, it also stands for consummation; and if the Christian stands for current social convention (as in the first Avice's 'modern feelings' about staying chaste), the Super-Ego and 'mainland' reality in general, it also forbids consummation."

[160] *ibidem*, Part 1, Chapter IX, p. 211

[161] Hardy writes: "Tradition urged that a temple to Venus once stood at the top of the Roman road leading up to the isle; and possibly one to the love-goddess of the Slingers antedated this." (*ibidem*, Part 2, Chapter III, p. 232)

To sum up, not only is the Isle of Slingers a necessary precondition to understand the character's personality and attitude, but it is itself humanised and characterised, hence creating a unity among the different elements it is composed of. Jocelyn loves this sense of a unifying principle, for it responds to his pursuit of an essential harmony. However, Hardy's sceptical view constantly reminds the reader that such unity is not possible and, if perceived, it is only illusory. Using a term coined by Giorgio Agamben, Bizotto defines the Isle of Slingers a 'zone of indistinction', namely "a zone prior to the distinction between sacred and profane, religious and juridical"[162], where different domains and temporal dimensions can coexist. By portraying both the coexistence and the conflict between its constituents, space can thus become an integral part of the character's individuality. As a consequence, as long as Pierston retains his idealism, the island can remain the space of his fancy, but when he rejects his pursuit at the end of the novel, the utilitarian turn in his personality leads him to erase the cultural and material heritage of the past without any nostalgia.

[162] Agamben, G., *Homo Sacer* quoted in Bizotto, E., *op.cit.*, p. 56

CHAPTER FOUR

History, the Time of the Conscience and Narrative Sequence

4.1 A Dual Conception of Chronology

After the analysis of the elements of romance and geography provided in the previous chapters, it should be evident that the investigation upon idealism which Hardy concealed behind this narrative is not confined to a merely aesthetic sphere. Pierston's fantasy also entails a peculiar interpretation of time, based on the same tensions which govern the totality of Hardy's *œuvre* and his representation of the temporal dimension, both in terms of history and of narrative sequence. The mockery of Platonic ideals as a profoundly ahistorical mindset is therefore accompanied by a resistance to the typical rectilinear conception of history and experience, so that Hardy's narrative is transformed into an attempt to simultaneously combine the two approaches and challenge them:

> "His own anti-aesthetic position committed him to a search for the timeless qualities of life and destiny, (and) to a sense of history that shares little of the critical scrutiny of time and experience that was soon to become a major prepossession of the modern artist."[163]

As a result, in this novel, the question of time is another aspect which is connected to the dictatorial ideal which controls Jocelyn's understanding of reality. To be specific, it mainly relates to the protagonist's relationship with the history of his place of origin, which he often uses as a justification for his fantasy alongside the metaphysical explanation, and to Pierston's perceived agelessness. In both cases, it will be demonstrated that his exclusive concern with eternity is the result of a disarming process of self-delusion operated by his psyche.

According to the tradition in fiction, a conception of time and experience as a linear progress should be applicable to novels: this is particularly evident in the genre of the Bildungsroman, which is structured around a process of learning from experience. In Jocelyn's case, however, experience seems not to play any cognitive role, for his sensibility changes suddenly and drastically only at the end of the novel without having him perceive a veritable gradual change. This simple yet significant example accounts for the internal tension which underlies Hardy's own conception of time, whose oppositions are inscribed in the self-contradictory character of all topics

[163] Zabel, M.D., *op.cit.,* p.30

which have been analysed so far. In *Distance and Desire*, J.H. Miller identifies a first form of tension in the contrast between presence and absence, which influences this novel in all its aspects. As far as the temporal structure is concerned, he refers to the distance between the narrator's perspective based on retrospection, and the time in which the events of the novel take place and are filtered by the character's imagination – i.e. the historical and psychological time of the narrative. Hardy's main endeavour as a narrator, is thus to reduce this distance "to bring the perspective of narrator and character together, to reconcile then and now […], or to possess all time in a single moment."[164]. Unfortunately, he does not manage to fully reach this identity between the character and the narrator's vantage points, not even in this highly abstract and almost poetic novel. However, the attempt to reach this goal can be retrieved in the creation of a temporal structure where the narrator allows distant temporal phases to merge and become present at once: memory is obviously one of the primary instruments for the creation of such a structure, since in Hardy it mediates between presence and absence, by expanding the notion of what is real and present to the individual's mind. This preoccupation with the discrepancy between what is physically and what is mentally real thus influences the way in which external time is conceived in *The Well-Beloved*, for it "moves both rapidly and nowhere at once"[165]. In fact, an all-encompassing tension between forces of motion and forces which lead to immobility and repetition has been identified by Villari[166] as one of the main principles which regulate Hardy's fiction.

On the one hand, as it has already been mentioned, Hardy's interest in those "timeless qualities of life and destiny"[167] had the potential for jeopardising the objectivity of his historical accounts, which were conversely expected to record the mutations due to a progressive notion of time. In *The Well-Beloved*, this timeless immobility is hence to be mainly found in the connection between the characters and their origins. As inhabitants of the Isle of Slingers, they are the representatives of a surviving tradition in charge of making "old ideas survive under the new education"[168]:

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[164] Miller, J.H., *Distance and Desire,* cit., p. xiii
[165] Carr, H.C., *Composite Ghosts: A 'Doubleeyed' Reading of Thomas Hardy's 'The Well-Beloved'*, "The Cambridge Quarterly," Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 19
[166] In *Il Vizio Moderno dell'Irrequietezza*, she precisely mentions "una più generale tensione tra le forze che tendono al movimento e quelle che tendono alla ripetizione, al vagheggiamento di una regressiva immobilità, quasi della condizione dell'inanimato." (cit., p. 50)
[167] See note 163
[168] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 1, Chapter IV, p. 190

for example, one might mention the previously analysed tradition of intermarriage, which also contributes to a further contraction by entailing a genealogical repetition, seemingly suspending the course of time. Moreover, this perceived suspension does not only happen diachronically as the constant re-enactment of the same event, but it is also the outcome of the analogical mechanisms regulating Jocelyn's mental faculties, which tend to synchronise different generations. As a matter of fact, genealogy was interpreted by the protagonist as part of that unifying principle he was searching for, for he did not conceive it as the successive transmission of physical and temperamental traits from generation to generation, but rather as the precondition for establishing identity among different individuals in spite of their differences. This is particularly clear in a passage where Pierston talks to Avice II about her daughter, by affirming a presumed knowledge of her personality based on his past experiences with her predecessors:

> "Now, Avice, I'll to the point at once. Virtually I have known your daughter any number of years. When I talk to her I can anticipate every turn of her thought, every sentiment, every act, so long did I study those things in your mother and in you. Therefore I do not require to learn her; she was learnt by me in her previous existences."[169]

This peculiar perspective on the topic of genealogy accounts for Hardy's materialistic view on history, which he did not interpret it as an ameliorative progress in which the new erases the old, but as an accumulation of different cycles: "To-day has length, breadth, thickness, colour, smell, voice. As soon as it becomes yesterday it is a thin layer among many layers, without substance, colour, or articulate sound."[170] This stratification of chronological cycles entails that the past is never annihilated completely, thus denying the possibility of a veritable progress and emphasising the repetitive character of history. Indeed, this notions does not only take shape in the lineage of the Caro women which is dated back to the mythical past of the Isle of Slingers, but also on the nonhuman element of the Isle itself, which is presented as a 'stratified' space:

> "In the same way, heredity is deconstructed in the isle's successive stratification of the different and discrete geological cycles of time which produce a whole – the historical island – which nevertheless, as Hardy

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[169] *ibidem*, Part 3, Chapter III, p. 296

[170] Hardy, T., *Notebook Entry* of January 27th, 1897, quoted in Hardy, T.¸ *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy,* cit., p. 302

> makes clear, does not involve the teleological, 'arrow of time' evolutionary pattern of continuous progress towards perfection, typical of the Spencerian reading of Darwinism and its implied Whig interpretation of history; rather, the isle is the concretionary produce of successive yet discrete, final, and non-synchronizable, cycles."[171]

The cyclical interpretation of the geological and historical dimension, which reinforces the notion of repetition and of a static tendency in Hardy's fiction, is frequently reiterated throughout the novel through references to the layers of rocks and buildings of this "peninsula carved out by Time"[172]. The accumulation of fossils brought by the sea, era after era, and of buildings made by the successive civilisations which had inhabited the Isle of Slingers records the juxtaposition of different historical phases both visually and materially:

> "More than ever the spot seemed what it was said once to have been, the ancient Vindilia Island, and the Home of the Slingers. The towering rock, the houses above houses, one man's doorstep rising behind his neighbour's chimney, the garden hung up by one edge to the sky, the vegetables growing on apparently almost vertical planes, the unity of the whole island as a solid and single block of limestone four miles long, were no longer familiar and commonplace ideas: All now stood dazzingly unique and white against the tinted sea, and the sun flashed on infinitely stratified walls of oolite."[173]

As indicated in this quotation, the most relevant consequence of this stratification lies in the sense of unity it conveys – i.e. "a single block of limestone" -, which is congenial to Pierston's pursuit of an ideal harmony, and which contributes to the transformation of the isle into the place where this ideal could be found. Everything in the history of the peninsula seems to suggest a deep interconnectedness among its human and nonhuman constituents: the rock, from which the temperament of the islanders seems to spring, is used as the material to build houses, which become in turn one among many geological layers. However, it should not be forgotten that this unity can only be observed on the surface, for each cycle in Hardy maintains its own discreteness – as Bezrucka points out in the previously quoted passage from her article[174]. It can thus be concluded that the material element of the Isle of Slingers seems to resist the temporal

[171] Bezrucka, Y., *op.cit.,* p. 232
[172] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., 1912 Preface, p. 173
[173] *ibidem*, Part 1, Chapter I, p.179
[174] See note 171

unification which Pierston accords to it, just as the Caro women did by retaining their individuality.

Returning to the point made by Villari about the coexistence of immobility and movement in Hardy's fiction, it should be also remembered that the attention to repetition and to a claimed timelessness is accompanied and counteracted by the author's fascination with history, which is not only evident in clearly historical writings such as *The Trumpet-Major* (1880) or *The Dynasts* (1904), but also in the rest of his production. Expectedly, Hardy's approach to the passage of time could not be exempt from the complexities which characterise his works, for it responds to his aesthetic mode of representing reality as experienced by a person's subjectivity, if not his own:

> "The fact is that Hardy wrote of the world he knew, the world he had lived in […], he was putting on record a history which he had lived on his pulses, and, for that very reason, it was history more real than anything he could turn out in a 'historical novel' properly so called."[175]

Therefore, the historical cycles Hardy describes, despite their repetitiveness, cannot fully escape a movement forward, which is mirrored by the physical movement of his main characters from one place to the other, such as Pierston's moving to London in order to join modern intellectual circles. Moreover, the advent of new manners is also reflected upon in terms of the new type of education which younger generations were imparted, and which would thus threaten the persistence of old customs. In the novel, this is not only easily detectable in the personage of Jocelyn, but also in the local, yet modern, Avice I, who willingly decides to interrupt the tradition of trial premarital sexual intercourse in accordance to her own feelings, in her written refusal to meet Pierston:

> "My Dearest, - I shall be sorry if I grieve you at all in what I am going to say about our arrangement to meet to-night in the Sandsfoot ruin. But I have fancied that my seeing you again and again lately is inclining your father to insist, and you as his heir to feel, *that we ought to carry out Island Customs in our courting* – your people being such old inhabitants in an unbroken line. Truth to say, mother supposes that your father, for natural reasons, may have hinted to you that we ought. Now, the thing is contrary to my feelings […] I am sure that this decision will not disturb you much;

[175] White, R.J., *Thomas Hardy and History*, New York, Barnes & Noble, 1974, p. 5

> that you will understand *my modern feelings*, and think no worse of me for them."[176]

This quotation quintessentially embodies the abovementioned subjective perspective on history, which is typical in Hardy's writings: the transforming society of Wessex is not portrayed as an objective fact, but as a question of feelings with an impact on people and consequently caused by them. This is exactly the reason why the historical changes which were covertly occurring on the isle, become suddenly more visible, radical, and annihilating as soon as Jocelyn himself is involved in them, after his idealistic mindset is overturned:

> "His business was, among kindred undertakings which followed the extinction of the Well-Beloved and other ideals, to advance a scheme for the closing of the old natural fountains in the Street of Wells, because of their possible contamination, and supplying the townlet with water from their pipes, a scheme that was carried out at his expense, as is well known. He was also engaged in acquiring some old moss-grown, mullioned Elizabethan cottages, for the purpose of pulling them down because they were damp; which he afterwards did, and built new ones with hollow walls, and full of ventilators."[177]

Furthermore, the idea of movement is reinforced, similarly to that of immobility, by the nonhuman component of the narrative. If the vertical walls of rock of the island stand for the simultaneous persistence of stratified historical cycles, they are contrasted by the horizontal surface of the sea, which is equally relevant to the narrative, and which is traditionally associated with the notion of constant change. Therefore, Jocelyn's suicidal attempt at sea, at the end of the 1892 version of the novel, could be interpreted as his wish to retrieve his freedom from the perpetual ideal and from his obsessive pursuit, by being incorporated in the flux of water, namely the flux of time[178].

Nevertheless, it is necessary to specify that the internal tension between these conflicting forces which either cause motion or immobility, is not translatable in moral terms, for its significance lies precisely in their opposition and not in any positive or negative connotations attached to them. Both principles are accepted and included in the narrative with their advantages and disadvantages, without asserting the pre-eminence of one over the other. For instance, the abovementioned notion of a stratified

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[176] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 1, Chapter IV, p. 189, my emphasis
[177] *ibidem*, Part 3, Chapter VIII, p. 336
[178] Cf Bullen, J.B., *op.cit.*, p. 227

time accounts for the relevance of history in the geographical construction of Wessex and of the Isle of Slingers, in the case of *The Well-Beloved,* as a space where an old and peculiar lifestyle could be preserved. Yet, the singular coexistence of different historical cycles is also responsible for Jocelyn's derailing vision of reality. As a matter of fact, not only is the narrative triggered by Pierston's return to his original birthplace, but the past continues to be revived as he repeatedly perceives that the late Avice I is resurrected in her successors together with all her local knowledge as an islander, thus fuelling his sense of guilt for abandoning her. It is only at the end of the novel that he is finally inscribed in a new temporal perspective: his illness and the consequent loss of his artistic sensibility stand for his shift from the world of timeless ideas to the actuality of historical progress. On the one hand, he is freed from the yoke of his paralysing and obsessive fancy, but on the other hand, this renewed sense of chronological linearity entails the deletion of the isle's past heritage in the name of a destructive modernity. This tension between different interpretations of time, however, is not exclusively relegated to the relationship between the characters, especially Pierston, and external reality, but it also affects the protagonist's own perception of himself. It has been clarified that his idealistic temperament sets Jocelyn in a state of temporal suspension, which is extended from the crucial moments in which the ideal Well-Beloved is apparently manifested, to the totality of his life. The question of the hero's perceived agelessness, which acquires particular significance in the 1897 version, is indeed strongly related to his Platonic aspirations to a transcendent principle. The fact that, despite his age, he always remains "A Young Man"[179] accounts for his detachment from and unawareness of the flux of time, but this does not imply that he is not undergoing change. His conscience and his body are equally subject to the conflicting interplay of static and dynamic forces, which cause a rupture within his identity between a part of him which ages and registers the course of time, and another which, contrarily, refuses to age in order to continue his pursuit of Beauty - thus allowing the reader to compare Pierston to another great literary aesthete, i.e. Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray. Therefore, it might be deduced that not only does the abandonment of his pursuit cause his sudden growth, but also vice versa, his acquired experience is finally turned into a reversal of his mindset:

[179] Significantly, the three parts which constitute the novel are respectively entitled "A Young Man of Twenty", "A Young Man of Forty", and "A Young Man Turned Sixty".

> "As with the child, this experience is heavy with loss – of all the discarded illusions and counter-myths as well as of the desires and sensibilities that inexorable adulthood (or artistic good form) has no time for. The cost of it is a constant grumbling ground-bass in the Hardy novel I wish to consider, *The Well-Beloved*. Pierston feels cursed by his 'inability to ossify', to mature like other men. He feels himself arrested in eternal youth; yet also knows (the empty maturity of his contemporaries, such as Somers gets savagely short shrift elsewhere) that the artist who does not keep a profound part of himself not just open to his past, but *of* his past, is like an electrical system without a current. When Pierston finally elects to be 'mature', he is dead as an artist."[180]

It is however true that for the majority of the time span covered by the narrative, there is a clear predominance of the ageless side of Jocelyn's conscience over the aging one, which is undoubtedly related to his subjection to the imagined goddess of ideal Beauty, who forces him to draw a connection between timelessness and death. As Fussell observes[181], the deemed persistence of an essential quality, which is repetitively reincarnated, necessarily requires the death of the people who embody it, which might be both physical, as in the case of Avice I, but also metaphorical, such as when the Well-Beloved flies from the real woman, leaving her a corpse to Pierston's imagination. This preoccupation with death hence implies an increased inability in the protagonist to understand that veritable female beauty was not to be found in a permanent quality, but rather in those uniquely valuable details which are exposed to the action of time, and are a manifestation of the vital power which gives life to all beings. Since the earlier stages of the novel, Jocelyn seems to know that in his Well-Beloved "only one quality remained unalterable: her instability of tenure"[182] and that "nothing was permanent in her but change"[183], but he always remains incapable of applying this notion to his pursuit, which consequently results in a nightmarish, compulsive, and incoherent chase after an abstract and undefinable entity, whose automatic nature becomes only gradually visible, until Pierston decides to interrupt it at once by discarding a part of his own identity.

4.2 Challenging the Traditional Form of Fiction

[180] Fowles, J., *op.cit.*, p. 29
[181] Cf Fussell, D.H., *op.cit.*, p. 217
[182] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 1, Chapter IX, p.212
[183] ivi

In the first chapter of this thesis, where we discusses the question of the exact location of *The Well-Beloved* in the wider panorama of Hardy's production, the author and his work were defined as key elements in the transition from the traditional Victorian novel to a more modern perspective on fiction. As generally acknowledged, realism was based on the creation of an artificial reality with its own material concreteness and timeline, so that the imagined world of the novel could be easily interpreted as a regular series of events inscribed in the straight line of conventional history. In terms of structure, the novelist would shape casual circumstances into a story, following a model constructed around the causal interrelation of three main blocks of narrative, generally referred to as beginning, middle and conclusion, which would progressively unfold in both the process of writing and of reading. However, if Hardy's unique perspective on history is considered, the concept of cyclical time, in which nothing is ever destroyed or forgotten, implies that the element of plot would somehow be affected by it. In addition to this, the already emphasised exceptionality of *The Well-Beloved* among Hardy's novels reinforces its function as a disrupting product, capable of liberating the genre from conventions not only in terms of contents, but also in its structure, thus expanding the narrative options available to novelists. As a matter of fact, this novel presents a plot "which is not just transparent, but also aggressively systematic and obvious"[184], owing to the deliberate use of thematic, temporal and spatial recurrences, which threaten the typical dynamics of mimetic realism by unveiling the artificial nature of the literary product:

> "In other words, the pressure of the design is such that the reader is made continually aware that it is a story that he is being told, it has its own authenticity, its own fabrication: it is 'once upon a time…'."[185]

Therefore, the problematic nature of the plot of *The Well-Beloved* is immediately evident from the beginning, which anticipates the content of the novel before the reader is given the opportunity to know the protagonist and his world. Traditionally, a novel would start with a sort of "genesis" of the fictional world, in which the narratorial voice would provide the reader with a description of the different elements which constitute the narrative – i.e. the characters and the setting in time and place -, in order to convey an idea of balance, which is to be disrupted by a specific occurrence, thus

[184] Ryan, M., *One Name of Many Shapes: 'The Well-Beloved'*, in Kramer, D. (ed.), *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy*, London, Macmillan, 1979, p. 174
[185] Gregor, I., *op.cit.*, p.27

triggering the narrative. In this case, however, when Jocelyn is first introduced, he is not described as developing his Platonic aspirations, for he is already an artist and an idealist who has courted many women before Avice I, in whom he thought he had found the ideal Well-Beloved. Although this is not specifically affirmed in the 1897 volume, the brief first chapter of the serialised version, entitled "Relics", records Pearston's attempt at burning the letters written by all the women he had previously courted:

> "The sculptor was not engaged in his art on one particular midnight in the summer season, when, having packed up such luggage as he might require for a sojourn in the country, he sat down in his temporary rooms in a London square to destroy a mass of papers that he did not wish to carry with him and objected to leave behind. Among them were several packets of love-letters, in sundry hands. […] Suddenly there arose a little fizzle in the dull flicker: something other than paper was burning. It was hair – *her* hair. […] 'How can I be such a brute? I am burning *her* – part of her form – many of whose curves as remembered by me I have worked into statuettes and tried to sell. I cannot do it – at any rate, to-night.'"[186]

The omission of this first chapter in the second version, however, does not prevent the reader from perceiving that Jocelyn's pursuit had started way before the beginning of the novel, for the protagonist himself describes it as an innate tendency and, to push this interpretation even further, inscribes it the mythical past of the Isle of Slingers, from which he has drawn his sensibility. This anticipation of the main thematic core of the novel, therefore, emphasises the inevitability of the following events and already sets the hero on the path towards his disillusion/awakening.

The fact that Pierston is not able to escape from his enslavement to ideal Beauty is then strengthened throughout the novel, whose structure is clearly based on a system of repetitions, which both mirrors the protagonist's obsessive search and Hardy's cyclical interpretation of time. Chronology is thus reproduced through a series of parallelisms and symmetries, which, in this novel, starts with the artist's return to his place of origin. As already analysed in the previous chapter of this thesis, the topic of homecoming constitutes a staple in Hardy's fiction, and similarly to other novels by the author, it is a singular experience which causes the hero to perceive the clash between his newly-adopted taste and manners and those of his fellow islanders. Moreover, in *The Well-Beloved*, this theme is presented with the same attention to

[186] Hardy, T., *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, cit., Chapter I, pp. 9-10

compulsion which features all aspects of the narrative, so that Pierston's return to the Isle of Slingers is just as repetitive as his endeavours at possessing the ideal of female beauty. As a matter of fact, the law of repetition and reproduction which regulates Pierston's loving forces him to be continuously fascinated with different embodiments of the same entity, by identifying in what is present and real, i.e. the female body, a perennial essence or phenomenon which will never cease to exist in the world of ideas. Moreover, this notion is complicated by the genealogical design which underlies the relationship of Jocelyn to the three Caro women. This question has been thoroughly discussed in a brilliant study by Tess O'Toole on the problematic relation between genealogy and plot construction in *The Well-Beloved*[187], in which the two concepts are described as compatible and yet irreconcilable. As a matter of fact, the two abovementioned systems equally depend on a strong temporal character and on the recognition of both similarities and differences: genetics allows to identify the traits which are transmitted from generation to generation, without however denying the individuality of each member of a certain family; likewise, a narrative is based on the coexistence of analogies, which are functional to the creation of coherence, and differences, which allow the story not to be monotonous. Naturally, this affinity is what has permitted the composition of family sagas and of novels concerning the lives of successive generations of the same lineage, but these works always belonged to the realist tradition of 19th-century fiction. On the contrary, since *The Well-Beloved* clearly does not respond to the paradigm of linearity, as one single man is confronted with three different generations of women, the problems of juxtaposing the narrative structure and a genealogical sequence are brought to light, for such a process would "represent at once excess and paucity". On the one hand, the repetitions entailed by genealogy have the potential for creating an interminable chain, which would imply a difficulty in bringing the novel to closure; on the other hand, the constant reiteration of the same event would determine an exaggeration of minimalism and thus a lack of entertainment for the reader. The dynastic character acquired by Jocelyn's pursuit after the death of Avice I thus leads to a veritable thematization of the repetitive structure, which gains significance as it stands for Pierston's personal obsession with the Well-Beloved, which entraps him and ironically forces him to re-enact and re-experience the same pattern of desire over and over. However, what the protagonist sees as the

[187] O'Toole, T., *op.cit.*

impact on his life of an unattainable, invisible, divine force, is in reality, as the reader can observe, the outcome of a power which is inscribed in the inner logic of the text itself. Indeed, in *The Well-Beloved*, repetition seems to go beyond the narrated events, which are characterised by "such surprising recurrence of similar situations as to tax the credulity of the most confirmed readers of Hardy"[188]: symmetry becomes a quintessential quality of this novel, for it represents the binding force which holds the novel together, and which gives way to a narrative form which is shaped according to a creative project carried out independently of the contents which are being manipulated. As Ian Gregor explains, in his critical study on the form of Hardy's fiction:

> "In Hardy, we find a notion of form, which resides in the structuring power itself, rather than in that which is structured, a sense of form seen not as a result, a shape, more as a process, a direction, a verb rather than a noun. […] Moreover, the web makes us think simultaneously of the spider and its weaving, of the creator and the act of creation […]."[189]

As a consequence, the narrative pattern of this novel deserves a specific analysis in terms of how it gives a meaning to events which depends on "the way it (an event) doubles in essential outlines other examples of the same pattern of experience"[190]. Repetition is what motivates the narrative, by triggering the action while simultaneously illustrating the thematic linchpins of the plot. In such a context of pre-eminence of the formal aspect of the novel, the introduction of the genealogical element obviously contributes to the establishment of a more noticeable process of reiteration, which not only nurtures the narrative but also contracts it, thus stressing the automatism which underlies the novel's symmetry and Jocelyn's desire. Furthermore, the narrative implications of the transmission of genetic traits are not exclusively related to the mechanical character of Jocelyn's fascination, for the repeated haunting presence of Avice I in her descendants, as interpreted by the hero's idealistic imagination, implies a suspension of time based on reproduction, which is aligned with his temperament. As a matter of fact, just as Platonism saw in the material and contingent thing the copy of the eternal idea, the present embodiment of the dead Avice is associated with the unchanging memory of her. As a result, genealogy is no longer read as a record of the linearity of time, but it is rather transformed into a force

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[188] Beach, J.W., *op.cit.,* p. 128
[189] Gregor, I., *op.cit.*, pp. 40-1
[190] Miller, J.H., *Distance and Desire*, cit., p. xi

capable of defying the inexorable process of evolution and decay and the regular unfolding of the narrative sequence. Indeed, such a perspective on genetic heritage was formulated by Hardy years after the publication of *The Well-Beloved*, in a short but dense poem entitled *Heredity* (1917), which could be perfectly applied to Pierston's romantic enterprise as a description of the essence of Avice I, which is passed on from descendant to descendant, without ever fading:

> "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."[191]

However, the previously discussed question of the coexistence of immobility and movement in Hardy's fiction, alongside the critique of Platonic aesthetic idealism advanced in this novel, should be sufficient to imply that the notion of transcendence and indestructibility associated with the Well-Beloved and genealogy is only a chimera created by Pierston's imagination. As a matter of fact, in spite of its repetitive pattern and the assumed suspension of the temporal dimension, the narrative and those who inhabit it cannot fully escape the constraints of rectilinear chronology, and of a literary genre which is traditionally based on the account of a progressive development. Consequently, Jocelyn finds himself trapped inside his own unsatisfiable fantasy of immutability, whose vanity is also determined by the fact that the perennial ideal can remain such only as long as it is not possessed: any attempt at obtaining it in the physical world of contingencies would, in fact, imply its inscription in the process of decay which is shared by all sentient beings. In narrative terms, this means that the design of repetition and symmetry, which is so ostentatiously manifested, is accompanied by a more subtle, and yet equally urgent, pattern of gradual change in Pierston's physical and emotional life, which unfolds throughout the novel in an

[191] Hardy, T., *Heredity*, in *Collected Poems by Thomas Hardy*, cit., pp. 407-8

increasingly visible way. Jocelyn's awareness of his own growth becomes especially relevant in the third part of the novel, where the narrator registers the development of some sort of morality, which would counteract the romantic inconstancy inherent in his pursuit – a change which has already been introduced in the second chapter of this study of the novel:

> "He was fully aware that since his earlier manhood *a change had come over* his regard of womankind. […] now his heart showed its bent to be a growing fidelity to the specimen, with all her pathetic flaws of detail […] This *mature feeling*, if finer and higher, was less convenient than the old. Ardours of passion could be felt as in youth without the recuperative intervals which had accompanied evanescence."[192]

However, the greatest expression of the passage of time in the novel is undoubtedly inscribed in those moments when Pierston's conviction of his own agelessness is contrasted by pieces of evidence, which hint at his physical decay and progressively make him aware of his own mortality. The first of these moments is to be found in Avice II's confession of her own inconstant fascination with different men. Beside suggesting a fundamental reversal of roles between the subject and the object of desire, this revelation also metaphorically foreshadows Pierston's death, for he is turned into "*one of the corpses* from which the ideal inhabitant had departed"[193] and "this was what he had become now, in the mockery of new Days"[194]. Although this premonition does not entail an immediate acknowledgement and acceptance of his own decay, for Jocelyn is still enveloped in that self-delusion which he calls his idealism, it is certainly enough for an external observer to understand that the agelessness of the protagonist is only a mere illusion, thus reinforcing the ironical character of this episode. As a matter of fact, after this crucial reversal, the reader who has already observed the young man Jocelyn turning from twenty to forty is assured that the protagonist is vulnerable to a change much more profound than the incoherent movement of the ideal Well-Beloved, for it is inscribed in the hero's conscience. Unfortunately, it will take twenty more years for Jocelyn to reach the same level of awareness, until he eventually starts recognising the changes in his appearance:

> "He was not exactly old he said to himself the next morning as he beheld his face in the glass. And he looked considerably younger than he was. But

[192] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 3, Chapter I, p.286, my emphasis
[193] *ibidem*, Part 2, Chapter VIII, p. 254, my emphasis
[194] ivi

> there was history in his face – distinct chapters of it; his brow was not that blank page it once had been. He knew the origin of that line in his forehead; it had been traced in the course of a month or two by past troubles. He remembered the coming of this pale wiry hair; it had been brought by the illness in Rome, when he had wished each night that he might never wake again. This wrinkled corner, that drawn bit of skin, they had resulted from those months of despondency when all seemed going against his art, his strength, his happiness. 'You cannot live your life and keep it, Jocelyn,' he said. Time was against him and love, and time would probably win."[195]

However, this recognition of the action of time on himself does not automatically imply that he is ready to embrace it, for he still felt himself "out of proportion with the time"[196]. Indeed, in a sequence from Part Three of the novel, Pierston is shown as he sees his face reflected in a mirror, failing to reconcile the external image to his own internal conception of himself:

> "His position was facing the window, and he found that by chance the looking-glass had swung itself vertical, so that what he saw was his own shape. The recognition startled him. The person he appeared was too grievously far, chronologically, in advance of the person he felt himself to be. […] Whether he had overwalked himself lately, or what he had done, he knew not; but never had he seemed so aged by a score of years as he was represented in the glass in that cold grey morning light. While his soul was what it was, why should he have been encumbered with that withering carcase, without the ability to shift it off for another, as his ideal Beloved had so frequently done?"[197]

Furthermore, the burden of physical decay and old age is increased if one considers that, in the same section of the novel, the sixty-year-old protagonist is confronted with the young Avice III, thus rendering the age gap between the two an urgent question to Pierston's consciousness, for it might be the primary reason for the girl to reject his affection. As a consequence, their encounters are characterised by a lack of bright lighting, so that the signs of Pierston's deterioration could be concealed and thus not perceived by Avice:

> "Whatever Pierston's years might have made him look by day, in the dusk of evening he was fairly presentable as a pleasing man of no marked antiquity, his outline differing but little from what it had been when he was

[195] *ibidem*, Part 3, Chapter III, p. 300
[196] *ibidem*, Part 3, Chapter I, p. 287
[197] *ibidem*, Part 3, Chapter IV, p. 305

> half his years. […] in brief, he might have been of any age as he appeared to her at this moment."[198]

The idea of masking the marks of old age to provide an illusion of youthfulness is then reprised in the final chapters, when Marcia appears unchanged only thanks to her resort to cosmetics, which would however reveal her vulnerability to time and decay once removed:

> "'To fall in this vanity I tried to look it (younger). We were often in Paris, and I became as skilled in beautifying artifices as any *passée wife* of the Faubourg St. Germain. […] At this moment I am frightfully made up. But I can cure that. I'll come in to-morrow morning, if it is bright, just as I really am; you'll find that Time has not disappointed you. Remember I am as old as yourself; and I look it.' The morrow came, and with it Marcia, quite early, as she promised. […] She stood the image and superscription of Age – an old woman, pale and shrivelled, her forehead ploughed, her cheek hollow, her hair white as snow. To this face he once kissed had been brought by the raspings, chisellings, scourgings, bakings, freezings of forty invidious years – by the thinkings of more than half a lifetime."[199]

This increased awareness of the action of time within and without both himself and Marcia, which is represented as "an act of self-exposure which has all the grimness of a 'Memento mori'"[200], has a fundamental value in terms of the form of the novel, for it is what finally leads Pierston's pursuit and, consequently, the narrative to an end.

Nevertheless, the ending of *The Well-Beloved* is far from being exempt from the complexities with which the structural aspect of Hardy's fiction is imbibed. In fact, it could be even asserted, as rightfully done by J.H. Miller, that "the problem of ending is thematized in the story"[201]. This is especially true if the existence of two alternative conclusions – or rather of two alternative texts – is considered, in the light of the metafictional concern which would bloom later in 20th-century fiction. According to the Victorian tradition of fiction, the conclusion of a novel had the function of a final statement capable of summarising the meaning of the entire story, in order to re-establish the previously disrupted balance. If the beginning of a novel has been previously defined as the 'genesis' of the narrative, the ending should be defined as "an apocalypse which reorders the significance of all that precedes; it is the moment when the imagined world is abruptly sealed from us and we return to our diurnal

[198] *ibidem*, Part 3, Chapter II, p. 293
[199] *ibidem*, Part 3, Chapter VIII, pp. 331-2
[200] Grundy, J., *op.cit.*, pp. 43-4
[201] Miller, J.H., *The Well-Beloved. The Compulsion to Stop Repeating*, cit., p. 156

activities"[202]. Predictably, the response of *The Well-Beloved* to the constraints of novel form in terms of ending is as atypical as the totality of this work. As a matter of fact, this novel seems to have a potential for open-endedness, which is related to the abovementioned pattern of repetition capable of generating the interminable reiteration of the same events. Moreover, this resistance to closure is inscribed in the narrated events as well, for the unattainability of the Well-Beloved is exactly what prevents Pierston from ever reaching his aim, thus causing him to never stop searching it. The ending of *The Well-Beloved* is therefore surrounded by a profound ambiguity, because any answer is debatable on which of the two existing conclusions is more satisfactory, as each option provide its own interpretation of the novel's thematic core. On the one hand, in the 1892 version, the reader follows a frustrated Pearston at sea in the Race, where he unsuccessfully attempts to escape from its enslavement to the Well-Beloved through suicide. Obviously, such a conclusion could be defined as a release aligned with the protagonist's romantic artistic temperament, unlike its 1897 counterpart, in which there is an evident loss of the most peculiar trait of his personality. Nevertheless, the serialised version does not contain an explicit recognition on the part of the now hysterical Jocelyn of the illusory character of that principle of unity he was pursuing, which would be the only way to veritably interrupt the chain of repetition in which he was imprisoned. This interruption occurs only in the volume version of the novel, which deserves an accurate observation in terms of how it is included in the novel's structural design. Hardy's attention to symmetries reaches its highest point at the end of *The Well-Beloved*, for the events are brought full circle in an extraordinary coincidence of beginning and end: Pierston's flight to London with Marcia, which triggered the protagonist's sense of guilt towards Avice I, is paralleled and reversed by Avice III's attempted elopement with Marcia's stepson Henri Leverre; similarly, if Avice I's death is what initiates the most unique of Jocelyn's romantic enterprises, it is after the funeral of Avice II that he eventually falls into that illness which, paradoxically, cures him from his fancy. The realism of the novel's ending and the shift to a linear conception of time, which seem to clash with this system of recurrences, is in reality the outcome of the eventual predominance of the course of time over Pierston's unnatural psychological condition of transcendence, which is initiated as soon as the possibilities for narrative symmetry are exhausted. The most

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[202] Schwarz, D.R., *Beginnings and Endings in Hardy's Major Fiction* in Kramer, D. (ed.), *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy*, cit., p.17

abrupt turn at the end of the narrative, therefore, is not really that which occurs within Jocelyn's conscience, but rather that which involves the narrative itself as a structure, and which has the configuration of a sudden disintegration of the stratified accumulation of temporal cycles due to a rapid acceleration of time – i.e. Jocelyn's immediate shift to old age and the modernisation of the traditional face of the Isle of Slingers. Pierston's new concern with utilitarianism, which accounts for his loss of artistic and erotic vitality, is thus the final consequence of a linear process of development which had constantly been underlying the narrative, but which he failed to perceive because it was concealed by a more evident and pressing symmetrical structure of parallelisms. This structure, combined with Jocelyn's distorted perception of reality owing to his Platonic idealism, was the element which prevented him from fully entering the flow of time and accepting his mortality. However, when he eventually realises that his condition as a human being precludes him from ever attaining an Ideal which is merely an illusion, he is not only freed from his obsession but also from the narrative system which that obsession implied, eventually allowing him and his story to move forward.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Artistic Enterprise of Jocelyn Pierston

5.1 The Artist's Trajectory: from the Pursuit of the Ideal to Disillusion

> "As with many great writers, a central theme of Hardy's writing is literature itself, its nature and powers. More or less hidden in the earlier novels, this theme surfaces in the last one, *The Well-Beloved*. It surfaces *in the form of an interrogation of the relation between erotic fascination, creativity and Platonic metaphysics* which makes *The Well-Beloved* one of a group of important nineteenth-century novels about art."[203]

These are the words that J.H. Miller uses to summarise the primary thematic concern of *The Well-Beloved*, in the chapter of his essay *Fiction and Repetition* dedicated to this novel. From Miller's formulation, it might be easily deduced that art is the centre around which the entire narrative is constructed. As a matter of fact, it is the theoretical thread connecting all topics which have been analysed so far and giving significance to the totality of Hardy's fiction as a system. Above all things, this novel is "A Sketch of a Temperament", which would generally be defined as 'artistic', but which is not purely exhibited in art, as one would expect, but also in love and in the metaphysical interpretation of external reality, composed of its spatial and temporal dimensions. The aesthetic question which Hardy seems willing to answer through this novel is whether art – and, more precisely, what kind of art – is possible in a world so clearly dominated by the strong internal tensions hitherto highlighted. To find a solution to this aesthetic dilemma, he thus creates a novel which could be inscribed in a genre destined to an increasing popularity in the 20th century tradition of fiction, namely a *roman d'artiste* or *Künstlerroman*. By using an artist as the protagonist, Hardy did not endeavour to offer his own literary equivalent in order to establish an identity between the author and this personage: his treatment of Jocelyn's inner life is marked by heavy irony, so that this figure, with his set of obsessions and fixations, could be read as the caricature of the typical 19th-century aesthete, such as Wilde's Dorian Gray (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1890), and of his philosophy, as described in Walter Pater's *Marius The Epicurean* (1885). However, Hardy's aesthetic investigation should not be superficially read as a mere mockery of Platonism and aestheticism, for his main

[203] Miller, J.H., *The Well-Beloved. The Compulsion to Stop Repeating*, cit., p.148, my emphasis

preoccupation was to define the relationship between art and life by questioning the contemporary aesthetic philosophy, as A. Federico explains:

> "*The Well-Beloved* […] is a parable about the misapprehension (or misapplication) of aesthetic values, since (Jocelyn) seems unable to see art and beauty as belonging to 'the sphere of social sympathy and reconciliation'. Hardy wrote to Swinburne that *The Well-Beloved* was a 'fanciful exhibition of the artistic nature', but he certainly knew that the artistic nature requires more than an appreciative eye, sensitivity to forms, or a commitment to beauty in the abstract. *The Well-Beloved* engages aestheticism's argument that beauty is a feature of life connected to the world; art has to do with individual persons as much as with paint, plaster, or abstract forms."[204]

Undeniably, Pierston's fascination with the abstract is by far the most characteristic trait of his artistic pursuit. He is a visionary sculptor, whose creativity is committed to a potentially endless exploration, aiming at the revelation of an unknown ideal form of Beauty. His artistic experiments, namely his attempts at representing Aphrodite in statue form, are thus the application of a quasi-religious engagement with art based on his profoundly essentialist Platonism. Despite the lack of a clear reference to Walter Pater's theories, Jocelyn's quest can be perfectly inscribed in the search for the One, which this spokesman of the aesthetic movement describes in *Plato and Platonism: A Series of Lectures*:

> "It (the European mind) has been put on a quest (vain quest it may prove to be) after a kind of knowledge perhaps not properly attainable. Hereafter, in every age, some will be found to start afresh quixotically, through what wastes of words! in search of that true Substance, the One, the Absolute, which to the majority of acute people is after all but zero, and a mere algebraic symbol for nothingness. […] must nevertheless be admitted to have had all along something of disease about it; as indeed to Plato himself the philosophic instinct as such is a form of "mania". An infectious mania, it might seem, - that strange passion for nonentity, to which the Greek was so oddly liable, to which the human mind generally might be thought to have been constitutionally predisposed […]"[205]

This tension towards absolutes is naturally the same which dictates his erotic enterprise: ideal Beauty is worshipped by both Jocelyn the artist and the lover, thus making the two experiences of love and creativity inextricably interrelated. The connection between the desired woman and his creations can be retrieved in the

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[204] Federico, A., *Thomas Hardy's 'The Well-Beloved': Love's Descent*, "English Literature in Transition", Vol. 50, No. 3, 2007, p. 272

[205] Pater, W., *Plato and Platonism. A Series of Lectures*, London, Macmillan, 1910, p. 40

following passage, in which Jocelyn observes Avice II in his studio while she is walking among the statues:

> "It was tantalizing conduct in the face of his instinct to cherish her; especially when he regarded the charm of her bending profile; the well-characterized though softly lined nose, the round chin with, as it were, a second leap in its curve to the throat, and the sweep of the eyelashes over the rosy cheek during the sedulously lowered glance. How futilely he had laboured to express the character of that face in clay, and while catching it in substance, had yet lost something that was essential!"[206]

Therefore, art might be deduced to be the aesthetic dimension in which Jocelyn can displace his romantic desire, and similarly to it, a projection outwards of that "ever-bubbling spring of emotion which, without some conduit into space, will surge upwards and ruin all but the greatest men"[207]. As a result, the statues are at once the products of Pierston's artistic creativity, but also the symbolic images of his object of erotic desire, thus offering the opportunity to critics to advance hypothesis about the character's presumed Pygmalionism or agalmatophilia[208]. However, beside any possible reading of Jocelyn's sexual engagement with his sculptures, it should be acknowledged that both experiences of art and love derive from the same generating source of feeling. This inspiration can then be either expressed through an idealising erotic passion, capable of moulding real women according to Pierston's fancies, or through a creative outlet such as sculpture, which materially allows the protagonist to try to give shape to his Ideal – "For all these dreams he translated into plaster"[209]. Indeed, his statues only have one subject, namely Aphrodite or, as Pierston would define it, the essence of female Beauty which the goddess represents. A similar situation is described by poet Christina Rossetti, namely the sister of Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Rossetti, in a text titled *In an Artist's Studio*:

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[206] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 2, Chapter XI, p. 268

[207] *ibidem*, Part 1, Chapter IX, p. 211

[208] In *From Pygmalion to Persephone: Love, Art and Myth in Thomas Hardy's 'The Well-Beloved'*, P. Pulham quotes A. Scobie and J.W. Taylor's discussion about these two terms and their difference in meaning: "Agalmatophilia is the pathological condition in which some people establish exclusive sexual relationships with statues. The condition is neither to be confused with pygmalionism nor with fetishism, although confusion sometimes arises about these three different manifestations of immature sexuality. […] The myth of Pygmalion can apply only to those who actually bring statues to life, and not to those who use statues for their own sexual purposes without bringing them to life. […] An agalmatophiliac […] establishes a personal relationship with a complete statue as a statue. He does not bring the statue alive in his fantasy as would a pygmalionist." (*op.cit.*, p. 226)

[209] Hardy, T. *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved and The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 1, Chapter IX, p. 212

> "One face looks out from all his canvases,
> One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
> We found her hidden just behind those screens,
> That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
> A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
> A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
> A saint, an angel – every canvas means
> The same one meaning, neither more nor less."[210]

Pierston's art, therefore, is always founded on that same metaphysical mindset, based on a mutual interdependence of beauty and truth, which leaves him a powerless dreamer at the mercy of his own fantasy. Rejecting any form of commitment to public life and commerce, Jocelyn thus devotes himself completely to his all-encompassing impossible quest in order to freeze into perennial form those unfamiliar details of physical reality, which manage to impinge upon his senses, so as to translate them into the eternal language of ideas:

> "The study of beauty was his only joy for years onward. In the streets he would observe a face, or a fraction of a face, which seemed to express to a hair's-breadth in mutable flesh what he was at the moment wishing to express in durable shape. He would dodge and follow the owner like a detective; in omnibus, in cab, in steam-boat, through crowds, into shops, churches, theatres, public-houses and slums – mostly, when at close quarters, to be disappointed for his pains."[211]

Despite being constantly disappointed, the hero is unable to understand that his eccentric dream for the true substance of Beauty is destined to fail, for his aim stands beyond human possibilities. Therefore, his creativity can persist only as long as his desire remains unfulfilled, a notion which has a fundamental consequence in terms of how he perceives his search, as it implies that the most relevant aspect of his pursuit is not its final objective, but rather the road which leads to it, and whose length and obstacles determine the artist's suffering. The metaphor of the path, Donguk notices, is even materialised in the novel, when Pierston finds himself at a bifurcation between two equally steep roads, with the necessity to choose between an old, winding, but picturesque climb – representing the difficulties of his pursuit of truth -, and a straight and modern, yet potentially boring, path – which, however, would not take him to the Ideal:

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[210] Rossetti, C., *In an Artist's Studio* (1896), in Burnstone, D. (ed.), *Illustrated Poets. Christina Rossetti*, London, Parragon, 1995, p. 67, ll. 1-8
[211] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 1, Chapter IX, p. 211

> "As you approach the upper end of the street all progress seems about to be checked by the almost vertical face of the escarpment. Into it your track apparently runs point-blank: a confronting mass which, if it were to slip down, would overwhelm the whole town. But in a moment you find that the road, the old Roman highway into the peninsula, turns at a sharp angle when it reaches the base of the scarp, and ascends in the stiffest of inclines to the right. To the left, there is also another ascending road, almost as steep as the first, and perfectly straight. This is the road to the forts. […] Before turning to the right, his proper and picturesque course, he looked up the uninteresting left road to the fortifications."[212]

Pierston's wandering in both love and art, therefore, depends on the same derailed logic: he is repeatedly suggested that, as all women he courts cannot hold that substance defined as the Well-Beloved, his artistic creations are not a satisfactory representation of his goddess/Muse, since the need for a transcendent quality is inherently incompatible with their materiality. The artist is forced by his aesthetic sensibility to move constantly, and to see his fantasy of the Ideal as a point of reference and as an epistemological centre to return to, after being fascinated by a multitude of diverse material and physical details.

Nevertheless, what Jocelyn fails to comprehend is that his Ideal is the real cause of his decentring, and a veritable pathology of his subjectivity, which imposes the neurotic repetition of the same journey over and over, thus preventing him from ever interrupting the chain. As a consequence, the sculptor and his work are equally doomed to frustration as the lover and his chase of a beloved. Not even his success as an artist with the general public seems to convince him of the beauty of his art, for fame was never the result he was aiming at:

> "He prospered without effort. He was A.R.A. But recognitions of this sort, social distinctions, which he had once coveted so keenly, seemed to have no utility for him now. […] He would have gone on working with his chisel with just as much zest if his creations had been doomed to meet no mortal eye but his own. […] The study of beauty was his only joy for years onward."[213]

The only reason which lies behind his art is that pursuit of a female counterimage, of that epipsychic mirror image of himself, whom he searches both in real women and in his statues, thus making his trajectory as a sculptor a further "rewriting of self-interest

[212] *Ibidem,* Part 2, Chapter IX, pp. 255-6
[213] *Ibidem,* Part 1, Chapter IX, p. 211

(and) self-deception"[214]. Attempting to translate the Well-Beloved in statue form reinforces in Pierston the idea that the real problem with his quest for the Absolute is to be retrieved in its embodiments: as the women resisted an idealised unification under the same definition of femininity, his portrayals in stone of the various phases and moods of the goddess "are rarely in harmony, but follow each other like harsh, unpleasing vibrations of different instruments, at intervals which can only jar"[215]. Notwithstanding this, the narrator, and consequently the reader, know what the protagonist is incapable of understanding: all his attempts are essentially futile, for they respond to an absurd and inhuman principle, manipulating Jocelyn's psyche in an increasingly frustrating search for an illusory unity, which entails in reality an unreasonable and ceaseless reduction of all elements into sameness. It is therefore impossible for the protagonist to capture the essence of Beauty in his creations, for it would imply a loss of that vitality which is the index of individuality, and which is what initially triggers his curiosity during his "professional beauty-chases"[216]. Pierston's Venuses are failures to him because his Ideal fundamentally denies the element of life which is shown through "line, curve and colour"[217], and this denial is profoundly related to that association of the Ideal with lifelessness and death, which has already been analysed in the previous chapters of this thesis – i.e. in the death of Avice I and in the notion of the body as the corpse previously inhabited by the Well-Beloved.

Predictably, an essential turn in Jocelyn's perception of his search for a Muse occurs after Avice I's death. The new unattainability of the woman makes him realise that she possessed that "ground-quality"[218], which could be the element to mould in order to possess the Ideal, if not the essence itself of beauty. This material was present in Avice and, by and large, in the Isle of Slingers, thus determining the repetition of his homecoming with a renewed hope that he had finally discovered what he really needed. This hope is then reinforced by his first encounter with Avice II, which provides him with the certainty that the substance of femininity, which he thought was lost forever, could be reincarnated. However, this change of perspective in Pierston only contributes to the exacerbation of the irony which surrounds the treatment of his

[214] Ingham, P., *Introduction*, cit., p. xxvi
[215] Donguk, K., *op.cit.*, p.99
[216] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 1, Chapter IX, p. 211
[217] Grundy, J., *op.cit.*, p. 42
[218] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 2, Chapter III, p. 232

artistic and erotic desire, for his knowledge of what he needed does not allow him to attain it and, paradoxically, causes a deep rupture within the protagonist's self. As a matter of fact, Pierston finds himself split between the affection for two different aspects of Avice II: on the one hand, he loves in her the identity his mind has created, based on the analogies with her late mother; on the other hand, he responds to a more modern interest in non-conventional beauty and in those unrefined qualities, which are the characteristic traits of her personality as an individual. This disjunction between the classical pursuit of a unifying principle and a desire directed towards materiality and idiosyncratic beauty can be witnessed in the following contradictory passages selected from the novel. Firstly, Pierston's psyche is represented as it merges the image of the two Avices:

> "He could not read her individual character, owing to the confusing effect of her likeness to a woman whom he had valued too late. He could not help seeing in her all that he knew of another and veiling in her all that did not harmonize with his sense of metempsychosis."[219]

However, at the end of the same chapter, it is said that:

> "However, the Well-Beloved was alive again; had been lost and was found. He was amazed at the change in front of himself. She had worn the guise of strange women; […] but all his embodiments had been endowed with a certain smartness, either of the flesh or spirit: some with wit, a few with talent, and even genius. But the new impersonation had apparently nothing beyond sex and prettiness. […] Odd as it seemed to him, her limitations were largely what he loved her for."[220]

Obviously, this inner division within Pierston holds particular significance not only in his romantic life, but also in his art, since the reason why he is not able to be fully joined with the Avices is the same which determines his failure at representing ideal Beauty in his statues. Indeed, in both cases he recognises the elements which stand for the uniqueness of the specimen, but he is constantly driven by his fantasy to see them as flaws or "limitations"[221], if not to entirely neglect them.

Furthermore, the discrepancy between Pierston's idealism and the materiality of both his creations and his objects of desire is emphasised on a narrative level by the distance between the character's perspective influenced by his Platonism and the

[219] *ibidem*, Part 2, Chapter VI, p. 244
[220] *ibidem*, Part 2, Chapter VI, p. 246
[221] See note 220

lucidity of the narrator, who sees the narrated circumstances for what they really are. As a matter of fact, despite Jocelyn's delusional metaphysics, it appears clear that his idealism is not as intellectual as he thinks, for it is certainly an expression of his perceptions, which are always dependent on the material: the Well-Beloved and the notion of beauty connected to it are not principles or governing rules, but rather phenomena which he experiences in the physical world and which he records and remodels through his artistic imagination. In this perspective, Jocelyn's love life and his work as a sculptor both depend on impressions, namely sensual experiences filtered by the mind, which however maintain a strong bond to material reality because of their impact upon the senses. Owing to this relation with the corporeal dimension, impressions are also the main expression of contingency and mutability: they are unstable and ephemeral, so they do not succumb to any attempt by the artist to range them into some unequivocal and timeless form of logical or aesthetic order. As it has already been observed, Pierston is aware of the transient character of his own Ideal, which would be enough to unveil the paradoxical nature of his pursuit: to assert the existence of a mutable Idea would be a contradiction in terms, for Ideas are by definition eternal and perfect. Nevertheless, he seems unable to stop trying to fulfil his expectations, however inadequate they might appear, for he fails to accept that he is not chasing any spiritual truth but simply another material reality. This compulsion to change, accompanied by the introduction of new emotions and feelings due to his experience as a human being, make it thus impossible for him to fix Beauty in a form which would not be subject to the action of time. Not until the end of the novel does he manage to resist his temptation to impose his Ideal onto materiality, for he never develops a genuine interest in those details, which give life to objects, by simultaneously *accepting their being objects*. To use Hardy's own words, Pierston fails as an artist because he is unable to make "the defects [of nature] 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"[222].

The only knowledge that Jocelyn shares with the narratorial voice is that of an existing and unfillable gap between the domain of the ideal and reality, which initiates his progressive recognition of the truth behind his pursuit, thus determining the eventual predominance of the material over the spiritual. After his illness, he is

[222] Hardy, T. quoted in *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, cit., p. 118

awakened from his dream of ideal Beauty, and this does not only relate to his search for an Ideal woman to love, but also to his approach to art. The failure of his sculptures had already anticipated the more general failure of his idealistic temperament, which is physically equalled by the loss of the capacity to see, also interpretable as the privation of the faculty to seek beauty and obtain pleasure through vision – "and your sight is weak at present"[223]. Therefore, the "strange death of Jocelyn's sensuous nature"[224] and the evaporation of his artistic creativity cause him to shrink from what had formerly represented the source of his own inspiration. When he eventually visits his studio as an old disillusioned man, he is disgusted by his statues, and not even the most exquisite works of the great artists exhibited at the National Gallery manage to stir any emotion in him:

> "He looked round upon the familiar objects – some complete and matured, the main of them seedlings, grafts, and scions of beauty, waiting for a mind to grow to perfection in. 'No – I don't like them!' he said, turning away. 'They are as ugliness to me! I don't feel a single touch of kin with or interest in any of them whatever.' […] On another afternoon they went to the National Gallery, to test his taste in paintings, which had formerly been good. As she had expected, it was just the same with him there. He saw no more to move him, he declared, in the time-defying presentations of Perugino, Titian, Sebastiano, and other statuesque creators than in the work of the pavement artist they had passed on their way."[225]

This newly acquired freedom from idealism can thus be read as a refusal of the quasi-religious connotation attached to beauty, for he understands that ideas as conceived in Platonic terms cannot be reproduced and conquered in a work of art. This depends mainly on the fact that the most fundamental value of art is precisely that of falsification: artistic creations could never be infused with truth because they are the representation of something which only *seems* real; their authors recognise their artificiality, but still endeavour to conceal it by creating an illusion of truthfulness. This impossibility of fulfilling the artist's idealistic ambition, and the definitive abandonment of his creative activity, is thus what allows the reader to separate Jocelyn from other aesthetes and artists who had been made the protagonists of contemporary and following literature: his Platonic search disappears, for he eventually rejects his aesthetic obsession by relegating Beauty to a position of utter insignificance.

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[223] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 3, Chapter VIII, p. 331
[224] *ibidem*, Part 3, Chapter VIII, p. 330
[225] *ibidem,* Part 3, Chapter VIII, p. 333

For this reason, at the end of the 1897 version of the novel, he feels himself finally liberated from his curse, and accepts a new mindset based on the conformity to social conventions and on domesticity. His eventual utilitarian and philanthropic turn stands for the return to the moral sphere, after a lifetime spent in a complete indifference towards it. Moreover, if one considers Hardy's own positions towards the novelistic tradition and his conception of time, Pierston's detachment from his own story should be interpreted as the ultimate absorption into "normal life" and in the flux of history which would eventually annihilate him, allowing him to disappear and thus to definitively disrupt his fantasy of transcendence and eternity.

5.2 Hardy's Aesthetics of Subjectivity

Expectedly, many have read the 1897 ending of the novel, featuring Jocelyn's final abandonment of his art, as the literary equivalent of Hardy's own farewell to fiction before his definitive shift to poetry. In the light of this absolutely legitimate interpretation, it could thus be confirmed that *The Well-Beloved*, with its abstract contents and deliberate emphasis on the formal aspect of fiction, should be read as conclusive manifesto of the author's fundamental aesthetic positions. His parody of established models, such as those imposed by Platonic aestheticism or mimetic realism, however, was the expression of the author's own instability and lack of certainties, which would later be a characteristic trait of modern artists. What Hardy really wanted to dismiss was the presumption of the existence of any kind of hierarchical standards of perfection and of dictatorial aesthetic authority. This rejection of the tendency to fix discriminative sets of rules and principles is indeed anticipated by the choice of an epigraph from P.B. Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*, which is precisely a poem concerning a reaction against a tyrannical power. As a consequence, Hardy's fiction has the configuration of an attempt to restore the primacy of everyday life as a subjective fact, and of a reality which was deemed non-artistic over the destructive impact of excessive abstraction or of an exaggerated objectivity.

In spite of the general definition of Hardy as a writer with a pessimistic overview on the human condition, his own aesthetics should thus be rather described as anti-absolutist or anti-essentialist. As a matter of fact he never denied the existence of a notion of Beauty or truth, but he complicated it by recognising that this concept was so deeply influenced by cultural and individual biases, that any indisputable definition of it would necessarily entail some contradictions. Hardy's assumed pessimism was

thus the externalisation of a suffering common to all human beings. Nevertheless, unlike other people, he recognized that truth had to be embraced precisely in its contradictory nature. According to the author, every philosophy or system of values, however pleasant it might appear, had the configuration of a crystallised structure in which there was no room for incongruities, which would hence be neglected in the name of some pre-existing order. However, any effort at arranging reality within an enclosed and organised system was acknowledged by Hardy as the inconsistent and potentially confutable representation of a truth, which was by definition inaccessible to humanity:

> "It must be obvious that there is a higher characteristic of philosophy than pessimism, or than meliorism, or even than the optimism of these critics—which is truth. Existence is either ordered in a certain way, or it is not so ordered, and conjectures which harmonize best with experience are removed above all comparison with other conjectures which do not so harmonize. So that to say one view is worse than other views without proving it erroneous implies the possibility of a false view being better or more expedient than a true view; and no pragmatic proppings can make that *idolum specus* stand on its feet, for it postulates a prescience denied to humanity."[226]

As the author himself precises in the *General Preface* to the 1912 collected edition of his novels and poems, and as it has already been noticed in the first chapter of this thesis, it would hence be a mistake to seek any form of metaphysical coherence in Hardy's production, for it would overlook the intrinsic ideological complexity and aesthetic pluralism, which constitute its most distinctive character. Therefore, the lack of an underlying philosophy in Hardy's writings – both within and among different texts -, is not to be considered as a lack of ideas altogether, but preferably as the expression of the artist's own instability and impermanence. As a matter of fact, his novels are the collection of the multiple points of view of an experiencing conscience capable of reflecting the changes within Hardy's personality: the imaginative and corporeal experiences of individuals thus become the primary concern of the author, who was not afraid of the contradictions which they might entail, even though coming to terms with these contradictions was seen as the main cause of human sufferings. Yet, it was for Hardy a necessary process, based on the assumption that contingencies, as experienced by an empirical and imaginative self, were the only certainties on which

[226] Hardy, T., *General Preface to the Wessex Novels and Poems*, cit.

one could rely, however volatile they might be. As a result, his literature was characterised by a strong sense of individuality and by a marked taste for idiosyncrasies, which were to stand for the particularity of the perspective of one single human being. Alongside this pre-eminence of subjective vantage points, Hardy also recognised and introduced in his narratives the idea of variety and of the existence of an unimaginable diversity among individuals. These two concepts are particularly evident in *The Well-Beloved*: the novel revolves around the distorting effects of Jocelyn's subjectivity onto external reality, which are however demonstrated to be merely the result of his own perception of things, and not the expression of a universal principle, thus implying the possibility for variations.

Hardy's uncertainty towards the existence of any essential meanings was obviously applied to his narratives in terms of content and characterisation, but especially in the way the novels were constructed. Form was thus a further exemplification of the author's approach, for it was based on the selection of specific details of reality, which were then magnified by the character's perception and the narrator's analysis. Choosing a partial and incomplete portrayal of reality was a remarkable reaction against the analytic verisimilitude of traditional novels, which might obviously trigger negative responses in critics and reviewers. However, the rupture with the normative generic criteria of fiction is precisely what determines the uniqueness and the value of Hardy's creations:

> "Although the novelist must give close attention to realistic details, complete accuracy is an unattainable goal. […] The means to this 'something else' that painter or novelist creates lie in selection and emphasis, in what Hardy referred to as a 'disproportioning' of reality so that 'the features that matter' will stand out. Hence in the portraits of the rustics, or of any characters in the novels, we can expect not a summary of the commonplace but rather a heightening, an exaggeration, of those features which afford the author his particular insight and create for him a pattern of comprehension and appreciation within the flux of external reality."[227]

Removing the narrative and its inhabitants from the norm of traditional novel-writing therefore allows Hardy to have access to the inner mechanisms of his characters' psychology, sometimes at the expense of verisimilitude. His approach to fiction,

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[227] Hyde, W.J., *Hardy's View of Realism: A Key to the Rustic Characters*, "Victorian Studies", Vol. 2, No. 1, September 1958, p. 58

should thus not be superficially interpreted as 'anti-realistic', but rather as an enhanced realism which would surpass the typical *tranche de vie*, in order to portray the life of the characters and of their communities without confining it to mere reproduction. Hardy's realism has its own creative power which depends on the author and on his ability to select the right aspects to depict, even though it might sometimes imply the occurrence of highly improbable circumstances, as in the case of Jocelyn's obsessive genealogical fascination for the three Avices: "One practical result is that moments of quirky, fanciful, almost surrealistic self-indulgence can intrude into passages of the fiction that otherwise observe the canon of high realism"[228]. Of course, a selection might also entail a fragmentary representation, but to this potential risk Hardy responded by establishing an internal coherence, which was no longer founded on causal relations, but on that system of symmetries which has been the subject of the previous chapter, and which is what has ignited the interest in the form of Hardy's fiction in more recent times. Alongside recurrences and repetition, another fundamental instrument exploited by Hardy to bring together what would otherwise appear as disrupted is the process of mental associations: through analogies, he thus managed to grasp the similarities among aspects of reality which were typically conceived as separate. Moreover, this was for Hardy a typical trait of the artistic temperament, so it should not be surprising to notice that one of the richest passages from the novel, in terms of presence of poetic analogies, is precisely the one in which Pierston, namely an artist, transfigures the London dining room into the Isle of Slingers and into the face of Avice I.

Nevertheless, Hardy's protagonists – and Jocelyn Pierston, in this case – seem not to be aware of the real dynamics of their own feelings and senses, and this accounts for the notion of distance between narrator and character, which critics generally attach to Hardy's fiction. As a matter of fact, the narrator occupies a position as a detached observer, and invites the reader to adopt the same mode of involvement with the narrated events. However, a separation from the fictional reality does not necessarily imply a lack of sympathy. On the contrary, Hardy's choice not to explicitly describe the characters but to introduce them as they live and interpret their own experience, allows him to depict, and the reader to perceive, their feelings with more precision. As

[228] Page, N. "Art and Aesthetics" in Kramer, D. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, cit., p. 38

Vigar explains: “By seeing, with the author, through the eyes of the characters involved, we can sense their feelings more sharply than we could if we were directly told.”[229] Consequently, literature can become a way for the narrator and the reader to expand their own perspective without the necessary direct participation required by real life, and therefore to protect themselves from the suffering that this participation entails, by creating and witnessing the pains and sorrows of an artificial sentient being detached from them.

Moreover, Hardy’s technique and aesthetics was profoundly influenced by the impact of different artistic forms, which goes beyond the mere choice of a sculptor as the protagonist of his last novel. In particular, Joan Grundy has provided an accurate and brilliant study of the author’s relationship with other expressive modes[230], in particular with visual arts. His attention to non-literary creative outlets was probably initiated in London, where he could enter into contact with different contemporary artistic movements, such as the Pre-Raphaelites, and visit various art galleries, from the most prestigious – i.e. the National Galleries and the Royal Academy -, to the small private ones. His taste in art, of course, underwent the same changes as his ideological positions, but what he never dismissed was the faith in the power of an image’s form to communicate. For this reason, in his literature, Hardy tried to condense the verbal and the visual, and to enhance the formal aspect of his narratives. Furthermore, Grundy draws the reader’s attention to a specific poem by Hardy written in 1887, about his visit to the Vatican Galleries and, in particular, to the Muses’ Hall. A selected passage from this text, in which the speaker imaginatively talks to the Muse, recites as follows:

> “To-day my soul clasps Form; but where is my troth
> Of yesternight with Tune; can one cleave to both?”
> – “Be not perturbed,” said she. “Though apart in fame,
> As I and my sisters are one, those, too, are the same.
>
> – “But my love goes further – to Story, and Dance, and Hymn,
> The lover of all in a sun-sweep is fool to whim –
> Is swayed like a river-weed as the ripples run!”
> – “Nay, wight, thou sway’st not. These are but phases of one;
>
> “And that one is I; and I am projected from thee,
> One that out of thy brain and heart thou causest to be –

[229] Vigar, P., *op.cit.*, p. 66
[230] Grundy, J., *op.cit.*

> Extern to thee nothing. Grieve not, nor thyself becall,
> Woo where thou wilt; and rejoice thou canst love at all!"[231]

From these verses, it would be easy to identify the Muse with ideal Beauty, thus inscribing the speaker in the same idealism which tantalises Jocelyn Pierston in *The Well-Beloved.* However, it should be remarked that the Muses which are mentioned here are not the traditional mythological ones, for they all refer to the formal aspect of the various arts. Therefore, the Muse might be interpreted as the speaker/Hardy's own creation personified, by establishing an identity among different artistic form and thus justifying his attempt to synthetize them in order to provide a more intense expression of life. In this poem, art is metaphorically represented as having a composite nature and this accounts for the same compositeness in Hardy's writings, in which the different elements taken from the wide range of artistic and creative possibilities are merged, but still manage to stand out for their non-literary character.

Among these non-literary elements, a role of predominance is played by the recurrence of pictorial techniques in Hardy's fiction. The author creates with his words images with a strong visual potential, capable of impinging on the senses, which are however filtered and enriched by the character's feelings and imagination, thus creating a inextricable connection between physical reality and the individual's inner life: "Emotions will attach themselves to scenes […] as chemical waters will crystallize in twigs and wires."[232] The notion of reading novels as pictures was not new: the traditional representational practices adopted by Victorian novelists were indeed the attempt at a quasi-photographic reproduction of images of urban life and manners. However, what Hardy does in his fiction is to re-elaborate this conception according to his own peculiar creative positions, for his descriptive sequences are characterised by a strong pictorialism: his novels, therefore, are not filled with photographs of reality, but are exhibitions of veritable paintings. The narrator, who has already been defined as a sympathetic spectator, is in reality both observer and creator, since he exploits the language and the elements of pictorial arts and visual perception in order to convey a non-visual meaning related to the character's own sensations. Hence, Hardy's technique is not only founded on a series of references or allusions to painters and other artists, but on a close attention to the visual impact of his

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[231] Hardy, T., *Rome: The Vatican: Sala delle Muse* in in *Collected Poems by Thomas Hardy,* cit., p. 94-5, ll. 13-24

[232] Hardy, T., *Desperate Remedies* quoted in Vigar, P., *op.cit.*, p. 66

descriptions onto the brain. The characters, therefore, are integrated in the landscape and, vice versa, the scene is absorbed into their sensorial experience. Similarly to painter William Turner, who deeply influenced this aspect of his narratives, Hardy's effort was directed to the representation of "a landscape *plus* a man's soul"[233], for art should not only be limited to a copying of physical reality, but it was also to allow insight into the inner mechanisms of human mind, and how they could transform the external world. For instance, in the following passage from *The Well-Beloved* it is evident how Pierston's focus immediately shifts from a predominant landscape to the minute figure of Avice II, as soon as his idealistic fancy stops him from perceiving the visual and physical power of the great natural entities which surround him, in order to concentrate on the woman:

> "Then he retraced his steps, and in the dim night he walked backwards and forwards on the bare and lofty convex of the isle; the stars above and around him, the lighthouse on duty at a distant point, the lightship winking from the sandbank, the combing of the pebble-beach by the tide beneath, the church away south-westward, where the island fathers lay. […] At length he discerned a dot of a figure, which he knew to be hers rather by its motion than by its shape. How incomparably the immaterial dream dwarfed the grandest of substantial things, when here, between those three sublimities – the sky, the rock and the ocean – the minute personality of this washer-girl filled his consciousness to its extremest boundary, and the stupendous inanimate scene shrank to a corner therein."[234]

In addition, the pictorial connotation of Hardy's description depends on the author's attention to details of form, colour, and especially light, namely to all those elements which are quintessentially pertinent to visual arts. In particular, light is the aspect which most fascinated Hardy and which is thus most interestingly treated in his sceneries. In *The Well-Beloved,* sources of light, such as the distant lighthouse and lightship, acquire a specific richness of meaning due to the association with Pierston's desire for the unattainable Idea, since they always appear when his Well-Beloved is embodied: they especially contribute to evoking the notion of distance, which has already been demonstrated to be of primal significance in the explanation of the hero's pursuit. Examples of the presence of the lighthouse and the lightship are provided when the Caro women are thought to incarnate the Idea: with Avice I "the sky was

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[233] Hardy, T., *Notebook Entry* about an exhibition of Turner's paintings at the Royal Academy (January 1889), quoted in Yeazell, R.B., *The Lighting Design of Hardy's Novels*, "Nineteenth-Century Literature", Vol. 64, No. 1, June 2009, p. 70

[234] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 2, Chapter VIII, pp. 252-3

streaked like a fan with the lighthouse rays"[235]; likewise, in the previously quoted passage about Pierston's encounter with Avice II, Hardy mentions "the lighthouse on duty at a distant point, the lightship winking from the sandbank"[236]. In addition to these sources of light, the moon is also a relevant symbol for Jocelyn's search, for it is associated with the inconstancy of the Well-Beloved and the hero's consequent inability to remain faithful to a single woman. However, Hardy's use of light is not confined to the introduction of elements of the setting which emanate brightness: the author is also extremely precise in depicting light's behaviour and variations in its intensity, thus creating interesting chiaroscuro effects which translate a certain ability of vision. As a matter of fact, it is undeniable that the action of seeing is fundamental in this novel and, in general, in Hardy's fiction, as it accounts for the character's understanding of reality. Light, therefore, becomes more than just an instrument which allows the protagonist to see, as something independent from him and from the rest of the scene. The importance of subjective experience, which has been analysed so far, entails that what a person sees is not separable from the way he is seeing it, and Hardy's treatment of light as capable of shaping reality hence establishes a close relationship between the character's inner life and what surrounds him. This can be deduced from the constant presence of light in the descriptions, which is always strongly characterised, both in the portrayals of the landscape – "the distant riding-lights of the ships now *dim* and *glimmering*; behind them a *faint spark* here and there showed where the island rose"[237] -, and of people – "He could not forget Mrs. Pine-Avon's eyes […] they were round, inquiring, *luminous*. How the chestnut hair of hers *had shone*: it required no tiara to set it off."[238]. Nonetheless, depicting the behaviour of light could also imply a lack of proper lighting in some scenes, which, according to the analysis here provided, would stand for an inability to completely understand or to see things for what they are. This is, for instance, the case of Avice III, who cannot perceive Pierston's age as long as he remains in dim light. As a consequence, light in Hardy "is as apt to deceive as to enlighten"[239], but most of all it allows the author to operate that 'disproportioning' of reality which lies at the basis of his fiction. Indeed, light can be controlled so as to emphasise certain elements and thus to trigger specific effects onto

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[235] *ibidem*, Part 1, Chapter II, p. 185
[236] See note 234
[237] Hardy, T., *The Well-Beloved*, cit., Part 1, Chapter IV, p.191
[238] *ibidem*, Part 2, Chapter II, p. 224
[239] Yeazell, R.B., *op.cit.*, p. 68

the character's and the reader's mind. In such a context, the influence of the paintings of William Turner is especially relevant, as it has already been anticipated, because the writer's appreciation of this particular artist was mainly based on the similarities between their assumptions concerning subjectivity. As Yeazell points out, the late work of Turner was conceived according to a gradual loss of significance of factual reality: the meaning he attached to his images, indeed, was not generated by the thing he represented, nor by the action of seeing it, but rather by the way things were illuminated, which thus determined the way the subject understood them. Another possible influence from visual arts on Hardy's fiction might be retraced in French impressionism. Although criticism rarely associated the writer with this particular movement, due to the fact that its impact in England was perceived much later, it is possible to identify some common elements between them, starting from the notion itself of 'impression'. Like Hardy's novels – and poems as well -, impressionist paintings gained such a definition because they were precisely the result of the artists' endeavours to record the exact moment in which a scene or a landscape is perceived by the eye, by focusing onto the ephemeral effect of light onto objects at that particular instant. As a matter of fact, Impressionism was born as a reaction against the dictates of abstraction and of ideal forms, aiming to reinstate the value of irregularity and appearance in order to imbue art with vitality. Therefore, the challenging of tradition was not apt to deny Beauty, but rather to foster "the discovery of new beauty where, before, it had not been believed that beauty existed."[240]

Likewise, Hardy's fiction should be read as the attempt to express new idiosyncratic forms of beauty, by according a primary relevance to impressions, which are recorded as the accumulation of a series of perceptions, whose cause is only eventually revealed. Furthermore, impressions create a bridge between the physical and the mental, between senses and intellect, thus confirming the notion of subjectivity which was for Hardy more urgent than any philosophical approach. As a matter of fact, to construct his narratives on the immediate sensory contact with reality entails that the author wanted to convey a sense of the limits of translating cognitive experiences into an unequivocal language. Although truth is to be found in those sudden moments which are called impressions, the only thing which is manifested to the subject is the

[240] Venturi, L., *The Aesthetic Idea of Impressionism*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1941, p. 41

material object which affected the senses and not the essence of that object. An application of this principle is particularly evident in *The Well-Beloved*, for Jocelyn's romantic and artistic enterprises are both triggered by physical reality in which he lives and experiences different phenomena, although he fails to comprehend it by constantly referring to his Idea or Muse. What Pierston's lacks, and therefore distinguishes Hardy from his character, creating distance between them, is the author's awareness "of the amount of thinking, feeling, experiencing, that is going on in the world"[241] and his belief in "an art which represents the internal in and through the external, […] (an) approach…which gives the substantiality to Hardy's art"[242]. By simultaneously challenging the existence of an abstract essential truth or Idea, and the mimetic and exact imitation of material reality, Hardy's works result in a combination of the two in which external facts are represented with a sense of verisimilitude, which is not that of realism, but is inscribed in the individual's imaginative powers. Consequently, impressions are the most adequate definition of this synthesis between the abstract and the material, because they allow the artist to create a living reality, contrarily to Pierston's excessive idealism which only leads him to the creation of empty corpses. Moreover, this 'literary impressionism' accounts for the author responsibility towards his creations, because individuality is not only conceived in terms of the character's perception but also as what the artist's subjectivity has created out of it, in order to express his own mental dimension.

Nevertheless, the importance that Hardy accords to subjectivity should not be misinterpreted as an utter triumph of psychological introspection over facts. Indeed, at least on the surface, "Hardy's novels deal far more with externalities, both of action and setting, than do those of most novelists of his calibre"[243]: in the novel which is analysed in this thesis, it has been observed how geography, social traditions and physical appearances play a major role in the plot and in the narrative structure. However, it should be observed that, paradoxically, any form of objectivity or abstraction attached to these realities is profoundly subjective, for it is always formulated by the human mind in order to create order out of the otherwise fragmentary nature of experience. Therefore, Hardy's concern with the physical is always dependent on his attempt to represent an individual's experience of it. As a

[241] Grundy, J., *op.cit.*, p. 7
[242] *ibidem*, p. 8
[243] *ibidem*, p. 13

result, the subjectivity of emotions and imagination becomes the only true unifying principle, which is common to all sentient beings, though with the possibility for innumerable variations. This imagination is conveyed by Hardy in his literature through the interplay of the constitutive elements of different forms of art, which reflects the composite nature of human existence as the totality of different aspects and experiences. Life, as it is represented by Hardy and contrarily to what Jocelyn thinks, thus does not respond to any fixed metaphysical or superhuman paradigm, embodied in various specimens. As a result, art can only be an approximative sketch which is only partially truthful: Hardy's effort as an author was hence to shape this fragmentary representations into his own idea of order, which was based on the response to the need for a certain harmony and coherence within his narratives, without however undermining the value of each impression as a unique manifestation of truth.

CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the analysis of Thomas Hardy's *The Well-Beloved* provided in this thesis, it might be concluded that this work has obviously far more to say than what its label as a 'minor work' would imply. It has indeed been observed how the elements which constitute its thematic foundations, thus affecting the formal aspect of the narrative, are substantially the same which underlie the entirety of Hardy's written production. Therefore, *The Well-Beloved*, despite its cryptic role in the production of the author, can be useful to the understanding of his fictional and poetic *œuvre*: with respect to other novels, it helps to retrospectively sum up his experimental creative projects apt to explore new narrative possibilities. In addition, the taste for the abstract which characterises this novel, as well as the unveiling of the narrative's deep structure as a work of art, can be interpreted as a first glimpse onto his poetry, which was to become his privileged mode of artistic communication, owing to the freedom of expression inherent to the genre. Of course, this discourse on the novel's status account for the centrality of the aesthetic question around which *The Well-Beloved* revolves. Although it is notoriously impossible to define an unequivocal philosophical or aesthetic theory behind Hardy's literature, there is in fact a notion which is shared among his writings, namely the refusal to be faithful to a single ideological stance. As a matter of fact, Hardy rejected Absolutes of any kind, for he considered them a tyrannical denial of those individual experiences which might contradict them.

On the one hand, he exploited the caricature-like personage of Jocelyn Pierston to mock the aesthete's illusory pretension to possess Ideas: in his art, as well as in his love life, the protagonist remains unable to appreciate true Beauty. This essence, indeed, was not to be found in lofty metaphysical principles, but in the details of that physical and corporeal reality he was attracted by, and yet constantly rejected. Moreover, his fantasy exerts a profound influence onto Pierston's perception of space and time: the Isle of Slingers, from whose local traditions he had formerly tried to escape, after the death of Avice I becomes the distant space of the Ideal, which he is constantly attracted to-From the Idea which inhabits it, the Isle also draws the quality of timelessness, which allows the past to live in the present, thus permitting the existence of eternity: this perennial quality is therefore deceivingly absorbed by Jocelyn's conscience forcing him into believing in his own agelessness.

On the other hand, Pierston's pursuit also fosters the author's defiance to the dictates of realist fiction, from which he was willing to detach himself because of the excessive concern with objective facts. Indeed, Hardy's fiction did not neglect the representation of some sort of reality but rephrased it by presenting life as experienced by a living conscience capable of manipulating what is external. This preoccupation with the empirical and imaginative self, therefore, implied the possibility of a lack of verisimilitude in the narrated events, which in this novel is translated into an almost unbelievably compulsive repetition of the same events: in his search for the Ideal, Jocelyn falls in love with three women from the same family by constantly returning to his birthplace, and spends years in frustrating attempts at representing his Well-Beloved as Venus statue after statue. This potentially endless quest is thus at the basis of a narrative in which the linear advancement of time, which was typical of 19th-century novels, is persistently hindered by Jocelyn's individual experience which, conversely, tries to impose immobility and repetition. As a result, the need to create a narrative form capable of mirroring these opposing forces entails a rupture with the traditional structure, based on the concatenation of a beginning, a middle and an end.

In conclusion, *The Well-Beloved*, which combines the mockery of aestheticism and the experimentation with a new narrative system, gains significance for it represents a veritable application of what literature, and art in general, should be according to Hardy. In the author's perspective, a work of art had to be the recording of a series of sensations – or impressions – obtained through a contact with empirical reality, which are then reorganised by the conscience according to its own personal experience. The triumph of idiosyncrasies that such a view entails thus accounts for the impossibility to locate Hardy as an author in any specific artistic or literary movement, for each writing responds to the different and unique perspectives of various characters, and, by and large, to the author's own sensibility in that particular moment. Hardy is neither strictly a Victorian novelist, nor the complete opposite of a Victorian novelist, for he occupies his own singular position in a literature which is itself a living organism in constant change, to whose life each author could contribute by providing his own idea of what truth is.

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