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AT THE BOTTOM LINE: HOW HARDY TRIES CONCLUSIONS

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1

People have trouble deciding just where, in the end, Hardy stands. Some of them – Victorian readers of his last-published novels, say, or Edwardian readers of his first-published poems – cannot forgive Hardy his failure either to step up to the mark and affirm the rightness of the human condition, or else to join that other, complementary choir invisible which makes sweet moan over the sadness of the human condition. That poker-faced irony of Hardy's pretends to the generality of a satire of circumstance, but isn't it in truth deadpanning everybody across the board? So such readers suspect. But other readers reckon that Hardy is being as forthright as he can about the darkness that he too sees and the bewilderment that he too feels, perceiving them both so acutely that he finds no refuge in the therapies of either evolutionary triumphalism or its codependent twin a melancholy Decadence.

For these others – in The Thomas Hardy Journal I may as well say for us others – Hardy's last stand shapes up as the disclaiming of a definitive stance, a trying of conclusions with conclusiveness itself. If in the final analysis no analysis is final, then the candid poet's job is to say so, and to say so in poetry's workmanlike way: lapidary, clean-chiseled, well-joined, plumb. Put it in arithmetical terms that a practicing architect might have approved: Let your minuend be the ideal you bring to life, and life will see to it that your subtrahend is the loss experience exacts. The difference that remains constitutes Hardy's bottom line; a delicate balance; a brilliant

deduction, and with the showiness of brilliance deducted into the bargain; a summing-up not agonistic, just agnostic.

I propose to look for this remaindered Hardy, this metaphysical scavenger and literary connoisseur of leftovers, literally at the bottom line of his art. I'll suppose that where he comes down on the question a given poem engages may appear most clearly at the point he comes down to on the page, the finish line where the poem reaches a preconcerted goal to which, if it's a real poem, it nevertheless seems to have made its way by surprise, tact, and luck. Good luck, or bad? That all depends; for the formal concludedness that typifies Hardy's craft, as faithfully as it does his immediate model the poetry of Swinburne, meets its defining match in the inconclusiveness that typically provides his forms with their content.

2

Take first [that early Shelleyan avatar of nineteenth-century belatedness "A Sign-Seeker," from Wessex Poems (1898), where Hardy's earnest Victorian speaker lathers up a conviction that from him alone has been withheld the comforting assurance of Romantic transcendence, only to pull out his stropped razor at the final hemistich:

> There are who, rapt to heights of trancelike trust,
> These tokens claim to feel and see,
> Read radiant hints of times to be –
> Of heart to heart returning after dust to dust.
>
> Such scope is granted not to lives like mine. . .
> I have lain in dead men's beds, have walked
> The tombs of those with whom I had talked,

Called many a gone and goodly one to shape a sign,

And panted for response. But none replies;
No warnings loom, nor whisperings
To open out my limitings,
And Nescience mutely muses: When a man falls he lies.[1]

Mortality is, as we say, a terminal condition; corpses lie down and stay put. At the same time, that flat truth when thus baldly stated is more than mankind can bear. Consequently, when a man falls in with the truth of mortality the first thing he does is deny it – becoming in effect a poet, albeit a minor one, for the rest of his lying life. The fall and the lie being coeval, so are the two senses conveyed, sotto voce, by Hardy's last six words: when a man falls he lies.

Lexical doubleness of this Empsonian sort is pretty rare in Hardy; he loved to equivocate, but he preferred to do it with prosodic form. An instructive example bridging both modes of ambiguity concludes a poem better known, "The Convergence of the Twain." Here as so often in the 1914 collection Satires of Circumstance, Hardy is bent on discerning, by courtesy of an ironic hindsight, more than the eye could see in the nick of time about a certain ocean liner and a certain iceberg:

Alien they seemed to be:
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history,

[1]"A Sign-Seeker," lines 37-48, in The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy, ed. James Gibson (New York: Macmillan, 1976), p. 50. Subsequent citations to this edition occur parenthetically in my text.

Or sign that they were bent

By paths coincident

On being anon twin halves of one august event,

Till the Spinner of the Years

Said "Now!" And each one hears,

And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres. (25-33)

Readers routinely fault this as an unfeeling poem, jeeringly eloquent in all that it doesn't say about the victims of the "Titanic" disaster but that common decency knows it really ought to. I disagree. There's plenty of <u>feeling</u> here, all right, only it's feeling reduced, or refined, to the purity of traumatic overload: an elaborate repetition of the shock that, one night to remember, the antic hand of chance dealt at a stroke to the global system, the nervous system, and the moral system. It's something of a feat for Hardy to pull this shock off, after making sure since the mid-poem balance point of stanza six that the reader's attention is riveted on the slow, sure buildup of what lurks in the offing. Making the shock tell aesthetically, which is to say physically, is the metrist's task: each terzain of which the poem is composed claps a couple of trimeters together with rhyme, then welds two more of them lengthwise to make the third, alexandrine line. This recurrent stanzaic structure constitutes in itself a little calisthenic rehearsal of the preconcerted convergence or abutment of balanced counterparts that was the "Titanic" disaster, which comes to thematic and formal consummation, of course and as expected, at the bottom line. But with the rhythmic jar of the last hemistich our metrical substructure is violated – and if I say it's <u>penetrated</u>, you'll be ready to hear how Hardy's spondee in "two hemispheres" thrusts into mind the double-hulled, concentrically hemispheroid construction, now pierced and crumpled and swamped, of the reputedly unsinkable

boat, to which you also have my permission to liken the visual shape of the stanza, two trimeters afloat upon the hexameter beneath. Clearly, more than metrical structure gets exposed here in its thinly veiled precariousness. This isn't an unfeeling poem at all; it just aims to feel something non-standard, and actually rather deep.

We might call the target affect here fearful symmetry. But this Blakean formula pertains to "The Convergence of the Twain" only if we bracket out that portion of fear which commonly seeks refuge in its comfortable twin a pitying sympathy. Hardy shows no tolerance for the bromide dosage of automatic compassion in which we ordinarily indulge when responding to a high-profile, safely distant disaster. He resists such indulgence because it clouds the drier, crisper (finally more Blakean) feeling of symmetry itself. And it is to that sense of equilibrium that Hardy turns in order to rescue an awareness of agency from the onslaughts of blame that, on the showing of Jill Matus in a recent book on shock in Victorian fiction, tended for people of his generation to drench and blur the longer and clearer view. [2]

This same feeling for delicate balance has the last word in a lesser poem of convergent life lines, "The Flower's Tragedy" from Human Shows (1925). A woman has walked out on her life, leaving behind a cut flower that needed watering. The speaker who discovers it parched dead two weeks later exclaims, "I wished I had not found the flower!" but then backs off from this plangency into something more Hardyesque in a concluding anapestic couplet:

> Yet it was not much. And she never had known
> Of the flower's fate; nor it of her own. (15-6)

[2] Jill Matus, *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge, 2009): "Victorian investigations of the effects of shock are less concerned with *victimhood* than they are with *accountability*" (186-7) "questions about agency and passivity, volition and responsibility" (188).

The chiastic parquetry of these four two-stress units is on one hand indifferent, on the other keenly interested in constructing an equilibrium of indifferences. Hardy's characteristic ascent from stock response to long, cool fatalism both honors the disregarded flower's ecological niche and tersely suggests how a corresponding pattern of neglect may have informed what the poem never gets any closer than this to narrating: the enigmatic tragedy of the absconded woman.

The apparently exceptional case of the tragic flower illustrates a higher and wider rule that, hitherto unsuspected, gets disclosed by prosodic framing. Prosody after all is made out of rules and exceptions, and in such cases as I shall consider next it is the regular fulfillment of metrical pattern that carries the burden of enlarged awareness. Observe how the last stanza of "A Cathedral Façade at Midnight" (also 1925) moves in one virtuoso sentence from pathos into resignation, as moonlight slowly rakes down over the effigies sculptured on the building's west wall:

A frail moan from the martyred saints there set
        Mid others of the erection
Against the breeze, seemed sighings of regret
        At the ancient faith's rejection
Under the sure, unhasting, steady stress
Of Reason's movement, making meaningless
The coded creeds of old-time godliness. (15-21)

While the first half of this stanza takes part, by means of rhythmic variance, in the "frail moan" of lamentation imputed to saints of a faith martyred all over again by secularizing history, once we get to the triple c rhymes of the close Hardy's meter conforms exactly to the new dispensation of Reason's movement; it indeed performs

that movement with a "sure unhasting, steady stress" that you could set an architectural moondial by.

As went cultural law, in this gifted expositor-inquisitor of the nineteenth-century contexts that had formed him, so went natural law. Listen to the magnificently understated collocation of Romantic topoi with modern science in that jewel in the crown of Winter Words (1928), "Proud Songsters," which I quote in full:

> The thrushes sing as the sun is going,
> And the finches whistle in ones and pairs,
> And as it gets dark loud nightingales
> In bushes
> Pipe, as they can when April wears,
> As if all Time were theirs.
>
> These are brand-new birds of twelve-months' growing,
> Which a year ago, or less than twain,
> No finches were, nor nightingales,
> Nor thrushes,
> But only particles of grain,
> And earth, and air, and rain.

Once again the final lines go metronomically neutral, as if to lay bare beneath the pride of life, down under our organic sympathy for what vernally burgeons into swelling spondees and frisky anapests, the organic chemistry on which the whole show is based. The iambic tick of resistless time across a weathering cathedral façade was one thing, true enough but pretty familiar. What's extraordinary in "Proud Songsters" is the equanimity with which Hardy presses home a mirroring

counter-truth: not only does dilapidation occur by law, but origination does too; birth and death march to the same "unhasting, steady stress."

3

Hardy's would not be properly human shows did meter's continuo always have the last word. The poet whom we have just seen enlisting metrical regularity to correct stock emotional astigmatism was as likely to stage a quiet rhythmical protest movement when the acknowledged order of things warranted some disturbance in the name of poetic justice. The 1922 nocturne "Haunting Fingers," subtitled "A Phantasy in a Museum of Musical Instruments," imagines those instruments' imagining how musicians are playing them once more, in a ghost sonata that ends at daybreak with a reluctance the last line makes lyrically palpable:

Thus they, till each past player
  Stroked thinner and more thin,
And the morning sky grew grayer,
    And day crawled in. (57-60)

And a like prosodic figure of syllabic retardation underscores like imagery at the close of "Lying Awake," another gem quotable in entirety from Winter Words:

You, Morningtide-Star, now are steady-eyed, over the east,
    I know it as if I saw you;
You, Beeches, engrave on the sky your thin twigs, even the least;
    Had I paper and pencil I'd draw you.

You, Meadow, are white with your counterpane cover of dew,

I see it as if I were there;
You, Churchyard, are lightening faint from the shade of the yew,
The names creeping out everywhere.

The day crawls in, the names creep out. A transition from the first stanza's visual arts of engraving and drawing to alphabetic inscription in the second – from image to text – affiliates Hardy's always powerful elegiac strain with a matching epitaphic clarity. When a man falls to sleep he lies; but when this man lies down to sleep, he can't: he keeps running into the truth, and the way it creeps him out puts a kink in his prosody. If not the facts of life and death, then the rote proprieties whereby those scandalous facts get socially managed, wrong something fundamentally human, in whose behalf Hardy's fisted versification exercises tribunal vigilance.

Prosody minds time; and its chronometric contrivances are equally apt in Hardy to enforce time's linear onwardness and to denounce it. Both his assent and his resistance to clockwork closure assume fullest allegorical form in the Phantom Intelligences of *The Dynasts*, where the Spirit of the Years confirms the reality principle as steadfastly as the Pities in chorus question it, and the wisecracking Spirits Ironic and Sinister take their pot-shot asides. It would be too much to say that each Intelligence has its own prosodic leitmotif; but, in general, Years measures his dooms in iambic pentameter only lightly seasoned, while the others execute their themes with more melodic variation, and a more marked tendency to rhythmic counterpoint. The final lines from Part One of *The Dynasts* will illustrate what I mean: note how Years' metered aplomb lays down the law, establishing a field of force which governs the response of the Chorus, yet from which by the last two lines the Chorus has struggled incrementally, changefully free:

SPIRIT OF THE YEARS

It suits us ill to cavil each with each.

I might retort. I only say to thee

ITS slaves we are; ITS slaves must ever be!

CHORUS (aerial music)

Yea, from the Void we fetch, like these,

And tarry till That please

To null us by Whose stress we emanate. –

Our incorporeal sense,

Our overseeings, our supernal state,

Our readings Why and Whence,

Are but the flower of Man's intelligence;

And that but an unreckoned incident

Of the all-urging Will, raptly magnipotent.[3]

The Lucretian power of the "unreckoned," as I argue at greater length elsewhere, affords Hardy a margin of hope that from the pathologic mutation that has effected consciousness there may evolve a capacity within the Immanent Will to will something better than obtains in the world we know.[4] It's a characteristically nice touch that in prosodic context the very phrase "but an unreckoned" slips a pyrrhic-spondaic swerve into the iambic meter of the Chorus, as if to match – and gently nudge into question – the same pattern when it occurs in the final line: "Of the all-urging."

[3] The Dynasts: An Epic-Drama of the War with Napoleon, in Three Parts, Nineteen Acts, and One Hundred and Thirty Scenes, The Time Covered by the Action Being About Ten Years (1909; rev. ed. London: Macmillan, 1923), p. 137.

[4] Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 598-601.

4

To atone for human impercipience by envisioning the unseen is a constant effort of Hardy's imagination. As far along as 1922 in Late Lyrics he was working the trick with meters, daring us to hear, and feel, meter's ghostly presence, and the ripple effect of its refraction by else-unexpressed feelings of which he leaves it to rhythm alone to take note. Look, by listening, to that fine lyric "The Fallow Deer at the Lonely House," in its second and last stanza:

> We do not discern those eyes
> Watching in the snow;
> Lit by lamps of rosy dyes
> We do not discern those eyes
> Wondering, aglow,
> Fourfooted, tiptoe. (7-12)

Five lines of utter rhythmic constancy to the meter set us up for the wonders of the last. There, beholding eyes that have feet and even hoof-tipped toes – as if the aged Matisse had sketched us a deer in four strokes of the crayon – we believe the more avidly what we don't see because we are still hearing the meter we don't voice. "**Four**footed," or do I mean "Four**foot**ed" – and inducing that hesitation is of course surefooted Hardy's secret – magically levitates across the metrical threshold, while "tiptoe" – like "hemispheres" in "The Convergence of the Twain," only better – recovers balance and touches down like a dancer thanks to the play of rhyme stress (on " -toe") against pronunciational stress (on "tip-"). Meanwhile, the fricative and dental consonants make the line hard and soft at once, like the snowdrift scene the

poem so deftly evokes; and the comma-extended pause in which the voiced d of the first word becomes the unvoiced t of the second makes for more understated suspense than words can say. "Fourfoote**d**, **t**iptoe."

"I must trust," Hardy declared in the exasperated "Apology" he prefixed to Late Lyrics, "for right note-catching to those finely-touched spirits who can divine without half a whisper" (p. 559) the different shadings of tone to which successive poems give voice. Such delicatesse, obviously pertinent to the stunned innocence of "The Fallow Deer," is also solicited by Hardy's folksier modes, say the comedy of humours, even slapstick, that we find in "Ice on the Highway" (1925). The title portends an accident waiting to happen; for once in Hardy none does happen, although our awaiting one can sharpen attention to how, at the ends of lines, things keep almost coming to grief as the syllables in "tip-toed" or "upright" lean uncertainly against one another:

Seven buxom women abreast, and arm-in-arm,
Trudge down the hill, tip-toed,
And breathing warm;
They must perforce trudge thus, to keep upright
On the glassy ice-bound road,
And they must get to market whether or no,
Provisions running low
With the nearing Saturday night,
While the lumbering van wherein they mostly ride
Can nowise go:
Yet loud their laughter as they stagger and slide!

Every step of this irregularly staggered singleton strophe seems improvised, as the footing of these nonce ice-capaders manifestly has to be. All the same, each long line is a more or less bumpy pentameter, a fact that bears hard on the last of them. Read alliteratively, à la Hopkins, the line seems a tetrameter of old English growth, something out of Piers Plowman: loud-laughter, stagger-slide. Yet when meter claims its due, a less flashy assonance on short a glows out of nowhere to confer stress on the tiny middle word as, which emerges thereby as the keystone or linchpin of its slickly rollicking hendecasyllabic line.

Watch your step, says versification like this: look out. It's not over till it's over; and it may not be over when you think it is. Very often the position that Hardy's poetic closures secure is one of open-minded observancy. The stanza closures at the beginning of the narrative vignette "A Hurried Meeting" (1925), for example, show how grippingly effective this device can be for purposes of story-telling under lyric pressure:

It is August moonlight in the tall plantation,
Whose elms, by aged squirrels' footsteps worn,
  Outscreen the noon, and eve, and morn.
On the facing slope a faint irradiation
  From a mansion's marble front is borne,
    Mute in its woodland wreathing.
  Up here the night-jar whirrs forlorn,
And the trees seem to withhold their softest breathing. (1-8)

In scene-painting like this the chief pigment is anticipation, a stilling of motion and sound that whets expectancy. Spondees in the last two lines ("night-jar whirrs," "trees seem") rein the meter in to a pregnant pause that couldn't be more fitting,

since the figure about to enter in stanza two is pregnant indeed, and is awaiting her low-born lover's arrival to dismiss him and explain that she and her mother have a plan for concealing her shame. We don't learn that yet in stanza two, which instead pauses, brilliantly, to render the woman's restiveness under the entanglements of circumstance:

> To the moonshade slips a woman in muslin vesture:
> Her naked neck the gossamer-web besmears,
> And she sweeps it away with a hasty gesture.
> Again it touches her forehead, her neck, her ears,
> Her fingers, the backs of her hands.
> She sweeps it away again
> Impatiently, and then
> She takes no notice; and listens, and sighs, and stands. (9-16)

If only a cobweb were all the matter. If only he would keep faith and turn up. While this stanza tells us nothing for plot purposes, the way its accordion lines collapse and expand, long to short to long, gives us in affective terms just about the whole story. In the end, there is so little one can do; she may not know this yet, but the scansion does: "and listens, and sighs, and stands."

5

Bottom lines can't break much open all by themselves. They need the pressure exerted on them by their herald lines above, and the excerpted passages I've placed before you thus far owe their full force to a lot of advance work that my quick cut to the chase more often than not elides. Let's treat ourselves once, then, to a whole poem slowly pondered, to see how Hardy's prosody can orchestrate,

block, and stage an entire show. I nominate "The Oxen" from Moments of Vision (1917):

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
"Now they are all on their knees,"
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
"Come; see the oxen kneel

"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

Fathoming the affect that attaches to this bottom line begins by understanding prosodically why, in line 1, Hardy wrote, not "twelve o'clock" but "twelve of the clock." He wanted the slightly archaic locution, to be sure; but he also wanted to jiggle his 4/3/4/3 ballad stanza out of iambic kilter. I say this with confidence

because he did something like it with anapestic substitution in every single line in the first half of the poem. That this effect couples with that of lexical archaism will surprise no student of Dennis Taylor's superb books on Hardy's verse and diction.[5] The linkage between these two poetic dimensions becomes clear, in the instance before us, when the second half of the poem pivots from past to present – from back "then" (8) to "these years" now (10) – with three lines of ironclad iambics: a meter that Hardy conscripts here to police, rhythmically, the great nineteenth-century power shift that replaced habitual customs by uniform rules standardizing time and space, and so to enforce, as Blake had put it, "number weight & measure in a year of dearth."[6]

Grasping this nonce assignment of cultural values to metrical signs – which, by the way, is as much as can ever be claimed in relating stress to history, all such relations being nonce relations – we are poised to appreciate the finesse with which the poem paces towards its inconclusive concludedness. Line 12 keeps syllabic tally with the iambic norm of the third stanza, but a trochaic substitution in the first foot claims a legal variance that recalls the effect, and with it the rejuvenating affect, that we learned to associate with all those anapestic substitutions during lines 1-8. "**Come**; see the **ox**en **kneel**" is a line that makes believe: it feigns to hear the childhood music of yore, and this prosodic feint then brings on the thing itself, in the rhythmically and also lexically old-fashioned line 13, "In the **lone**ly **bar**ton by **yon**der **coomb**" – only to snap back out of it with a recognition of adult realities in the strictly iambic line that comes next, "Our **child**hood **used** to **know**." How, then, will Hardy end a poem thus divided against itself, iamb against anapest, duple against triple foot, adult versus childlike consciousness? By keeping faith with that

[5] Hardy's Metres and Victorian Prosody (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Hardy's Literary Language and Victorian Philology (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
[6] The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, plate 7, in The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), p. 35.

very division. He writes a penultimate line that can swing either way, perhaps according to a reader's preference for "go" or for "gloom": four straight iambs (I **should** go **with** him **in** the **gloom**), or else the mirror symmetry of two trochees plus two iambs (**I** should **go** with him **in** the **gloom**). This rich dubiety is then engraved into the bottom line 16, which repeats the trick we noted in the rhythmically equivalent line 12 but gives to that pattern of enunciation a content that fulfills it: the equipoise of hope, which says Amen by saying maybe, or rather might-be, in Hardy's nostalgic re-engineering of what his master Browning had called half a century before "the Grand Perhaps."[7]

Let me turn next to another last good place where at the twelfth hour Hardy hopes against hope, and let me hope you will accept on credit the limbering-up that five dense, terse stanzas of "In Tenebris I" (1901) have done on us before we reach this last one:

> Black is night's cope;
> But death will not appal
> One who, past doubtings all,
> Waits in unhope. (21-4)

To read this stanza aloud is to perform a reluctance that gives the lie to its bravado about a stand taken somewhere beyond dithering dubiety. For this poem brings all its weight to bear on that oddly dubious final word "unhope." Hardy excavated the word from profound medieval obscurity but gave it a modern job to do: namely, daring us to feel the truth of his contemporary Freud's finding that, in the imaginative calculus of the id, negation goes for nothing. Even without knowing that

[7] "Bishop Blougram's Apology," line 190, in Robert Browning, The Poems, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas Collins (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), vol. 1, p. 622.

in the poem's earlier stanzas the last line has been permuted into as many as four different stress patterns, we should be ready after feeling our way thus far through words like "hemisphere" and "tiptoe" to hear "unhope" two different ways at once: as a trochee conforming to "Waits in," and as a formation like "unwell" or "untruth" that waits to stress its second, rhyming syllable. So we are not "past doubtings all," after all, at least not as regards the doubtful pronunciation of a word that, viscerally speaking, ventriloquizes yes and no concurrently: it mutters uh-huh; yet by the same token unh-unh.

Such a guttural prosodic continuo, a virtual algebra of interjection, signs off the very differently keyed "Gallant's Song" that Hardy wrote in 1868 but included in Winter Words:

> When the maiden leaves off teasing,
> Then the man may leave off pleasing:
> Yea, 'tis sign,
> Wet or fine,
> She will love him without ceasing
> With a love there's no appeasing.
> Is it so?
> Ha-ha. Ho!

The final line here, apparently the tra-la-la of a drinking song or catch, has a way of catching in the throat, seizing up with a less-than-gallant doubt as to woman's steadfastness that has to be laughed off, precisely because it's so preoccupying. Ha-ha. Ho! Unh-unh. Uh-huh. The joke is on. . . well, who knows whom? We find ourselves stalled again with the oxen, where hoping-it-might-be-so and unhoping-it-might-not-be-so specify alike that peculiar stance, or open crouch, in which Hardy

trains us to greet the world, and where hope is a both a regrettable liability and a spring that defies capping. R. P. Blackmur glancingly decried in the rhythms of Hardy's verse "a mechanical, relaxed desperation, striking idly on under-water objects".[8] Evidently Blackmur had the "Titanic" on the brain; but I like his comment for the larger correlation it suggests between desperation and hope (the glass half-empty and the glass half-full), also between the subvocalic regions of versification and the contraband that subsists between inarticulate, unconscious, idlingly Tennysonian impulses and poetry's knack for expressing them anyhow.

6

Prosodic structure in Hardy, we find, is a chassis that hangs on the willing suspension of disbelief: a disposition that, like other moral and spiritual dispositions, can be improved with practice, can be practiced by artificial means, and can be reinforced in those means by devices surprisingly arbitrary. If you're like me, you ordinarily go about scanning poetry after taking on its affective cargo: you read the tone off the words, then map that more or less dramatically back onto the intuited meter of the verse and let the feet fall where they may. There are times, though, when the process runs in reverse: when the prompt of meter tells you how to say a line, which in turn governs how you feel in saying it. One such time, clear if not especially subtle, concludes "The Something that Saved Him" from 1917. That this wartime poem is Hardy's rewrite of Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" is evident from the last two stanzas alone. So, I think, is the metrical dictation that the reading voice must follow in sounding the all but melodramatic finale:

[8] "Lord Tennyson's Scissors," Kenyon Review 14:1 (1952) 11.

Last, there loomed
A closing-in blind alley,
Though there boomed
A feeble summons to rally
Where it gloomed.

The clock rang;
The hour brought a hand to deliver;
I upsprang,
And looked back at den, ditch, and river,
And sang. (21-30)

Each odd-numbered line in this odd stanzaic form takes two slabs of stress almost as obviously as each even-numbered line skippingly takes three. So the last line is not the iamb it looks, nor even a spondee, quite. Though I guess I would scan it spondaically, that mere scansion would fail to capture the sudden decelerando or brake-slamming retard that a due respect for Hardy's metrical consistency dictates. The last line should be declaimed with a melodramatic hitch mid-line, before its lyric glee is loosed on a cold world overcome in spite of adverse odds: [drumroll] "And . . . [ladies and gentlemen]. . . sang." And is almost never a word to stress – witness how the penultimate line of this poem has just given it slack twice. If that's why Hopkins labors so to stress it typographically in "The Windhover" – "AND the fire that breaks from thee then" – it's also why Hardy makes a quieter feat out of stressing it here.[9]

[9] "The Windhover: To Christ Our Lord," line 10, in The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie, 4th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 69.

And not only here. And not only with such straight-ahead bravado. In the very late "Snow in the Suburbs" (from Human Shows), although I can't prove it metrically because the strophes are irregularly extempore, I'm as sure as I can be that the last four lines issue in an expression of simple kindness that's made tough by a muted but still audible note of exasperation with the kindness it evinces. The effect hinges on another of Hardy's stressed, suspensive "Ands," not triumphant now but resignedly responsive to the duties of benevolence in hard weather:

> The steps are a blanched slope,
> Up which, with feeble hope,
> A black cat comes, wide-eyed and thin;
> And we take him in. (17-20)

Observe again how a worker "and" in the penultimate line sets the stage for the royal octogenarian "And" that is coming around the corner. That enlarged "And" pretends with a sigh to vacillate – well, Florence, what do you say, shall we or shan't we? – over the foregone conclusion of its own benignancy: freely bestowed and yet habitually mandated, and so to that extent just a little bit marginally resented. The verbal gesture is no more unkind than the domestic one, yet the poetic voice remembers that even authentic kindness may at times feel a shade extorted, on the donor's part, by the mischievous blackmail of circumstances.

Hardy doesn't get better than this – nobody does – but his oeuvre is noteworthy for coming quite close to the best quite often. Two last examples will show in a more materially metrical way how an else insignificant particle of speech can be suddenly gilt-crowned by what prosodists aptly name promoted stress. The first example comes from the best-loved poem of Hardy's best-known sequence, "The Voice." You know the drill: the speaker coquettes for two stanzas with the

belief that he can listen to Emma's loving ghost, then worries whether he hasn't just been hearing things in what is "only the breeze, in its listlessness" (9). And then he steps outside the metrical fairground of holiday dactyls to get a grip and see himself as another might. What he sees is grimly crippled, as the retrenchment signifies from tetrameter to trimeter, and from dactylic triples to trochaic duples; and it's gloriously, compactly complicated:

> Thus I, faltering forward,
> Leaves around me falling,
> Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
> And the woman calling. (13-16)

Not either/or, says the imagination, but both/and. It is this poet's calling to hear in the wind (yes, Wallace Stevens) the sound of a few leaves, which is the sound of the land full of the same wind that is blowing in the same bare place for the listener; and then to say no to such "Snow Man" austerity by at the same time hearing more than merely that.[10] Hardy and Emma may not be able to answer each other, but the fourth line can at least requite the first two by rising to match their trochaic trimeter: "**And** the **wo**man **call**ing." In this metrically entailed process the bottom line affirms, with its inclusive "And," that logical consistency is not so great a thing as imaginative constancy. It's just the wind. And it's my dead wife. One could do worse, and more falsely, than to embrace such a contradiction.[12]

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[10] "The Snow Man," in The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1972), p. 9.

[12] Seamus Perry discusses this line's indeterminacy of accent in the Times Literary Supplement for 5 April 2011. See also my elaboration of the metrical analysis in "Poetic Data and the News in Poems: A *For Better for Verse* Memoir," *Victorian Poetry* 49 (2011) 273-8.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith's still vital book Poetic Closure serves early notice that the end of a poem is always potentially a rehearsal for the end of a life.[13] It makes sense, therefore, that each of our two final examples should come from an elegy – a genre whose full achievement demands that the poet's reflections on death be themselves reflected, at some angle, in the poem's formal finish. Indeed, formal finish is about all the reflection on mortality we get in "The Last Signal," a poem published in 1917 that recalls, from doubly afar, the obsequies two decades before of Hardy's mentor in Dorset poetics, William Barnes. A first stanza sets the scene, in a sui generis metrical pattern, and a buried rhyme scheme, that are maintained throughout the stanzas to come:

Silently I footed by an uphill road
That led from my abode to a spot yew-boughed;
Yellowly the sun sloped low down to westward,
And dark was the east with cloud. (1-4)

Against this darkened backdrop Hardy, who for reasons undisclosed is not taking part in the funeral procession now forming at Barnes's house a mile or so away, sees the spotlighting sun behind him flashed back across the landscape by what he realizes is "the coffin of my friend there" (11), being carried through his garden into the public road. From this optical accident, or convergence of the twain, our nescient sign-seeker weaves the fair fancy that his poet-friend Barnes has come

[13] Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
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To take his last journey forth – he who in his prime
Trudged so many a time from that gate athwart the land!
Thus a farewell to me he signalled on his grave-way
As with a wave of his hand. (13-16)

I wish I could better explain my conviction that the last line must be stressed, not "As **with** a wave of his hand," but "**As** with a wave of his hand." It has something to do with a correspondence Hardy was fond of enlisting between the imagery of waves, be they manual or oceanic, and the rhythmic tide of verses – a correspondence that grows the more urgent the livelier the tug of a rhythm against its anchoring meter. It has a lot to do, I suspect, with the late-Romantic emphasis Hardy's bottom lines tend to throw on the seer rather than the vision; on the conceptual apprehension of percepts into a Gestalt that makes a scene a scene, rather than on the scene as something objectively there in its own right. Barnes, dead as a doornail, dead as Scrooge's Marley, didn't really wave his hand or tip his coffin-lid into the light with semaphoric portentousness. This Hardy knows perfectly well: at the end of the day, when a man falls he lies. And yet something happened that afternoon, a slant of light that made internal difference where the meanings are and the synaptic signals flash. Intricate evasions of *as*, quoth Stevens. "Fancy with fact," Browning insists in The Ring and the Book, "is just one fact the more."[15] If so, then Hardy's "As" is no evasion of truth but its augmentation, pressed firmly home by one who used to notice such things. As with a wave of his hand. And the woman calling. Hoping it might be so.

[15] Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," in Collected Poems, p. 486; Browning, The Ring and the Book, ed. Richard D. Altick and Thomas J. Collins (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2001) I.464, p. 22.

Not meters, so Ralph Waldo Emerson fulminated over a Massachusetts cracker-barrel during Hardy's infant years, not meters but a meter-making argument is what primes and drives poems.[16] Had Emerson been a better poet, he would have known better than to put it that way: he would have known there is such a thing as an argument-making meter. Still, the old New England rhetorician had hold of a big half-truth, which our scanning of Hardy country on this occasion emboldens me to improve by way of remarks from the two modernist poets, one American one Irish, who deserve mention as master craftsmen in the same prosodic tradition with Thomas Hardy. One of them, Robert Frost, claimed to have a lover's quarrel with the world; the other, W. B. Yeats, murmured that we make rhetoric out of our quarrel with others, but out of our quarrel with ourselves, we make poetry.[17] That's where I'd say Hardy's querulous, suspensive, persevering, meter-making arguments come from too.

[16] "The Poet," in Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 225.
[17] Frost, "The Lesson for Today," in Collected Poems of Robert Frost (Garden City: Halcyon, 1942), p. 451; Yeats, "Anima Hominis" (1917), in Mythologies (New York: Collier, 1969), p. 331.