

## Visual Techniques in Hardy's *Desperate Remedies*

NORMAN PAGE

MOST of Hardy's critics pass rapidly over his earliest surviving novel, conscious of the more rewarding territories which lie ahead and generally content to dismiss *Desperate Remedies* (1871) as crude apprentice work — a blind alley of a book which represents a false start, and necessitated a return to the fictional high road before he could find his true direction. An important dissenter from this view is Professor Guerard, who regards it as "a better novel than is commonly assumed"; but more characteristic is the recent comment that "Nothing of importance in the book . . . anticipates the later novels."<sup>1</sup> Without denying its limitations and weaknesses in plotting, characterization and style, it seems worth pointing out that several devices which are utilized extensively in the later novels are to be found in an already well-developed state in this early attempt. Evidently Hardy was quick to grasp the usefulness of certain indirect ways of drawing attention to significant moments in the action of a story. Since he had a strong natural tendency to conceive episodes and situations in visual terms, these devices to some extent fulfil a descriptive purpose; it is equally reasonable, however, to regard them as *narrative* motifs since their primary function appears to be related to the need to give special emphasis to crucial phases in the action. Some examples will make their nature and effect clearer.

In the opening chapter, the heroine, Cytherea Graye, sits in Hocbridge Town Hall, looking through a window which provides a view of "the upper part of a neighbour-

ing church spire": high up on the scaffolding can be seen her father, who is an architect, and four workmen. Soon Mr. Graye is to fall to his death, leaving his daughter conveniently and conventionally orphaned; but before the novelist moves on to narrate this dramatic happening, he invites the reader to pause in contemplation of the scene:

The picture thus presented to a spectator in the Town Hall was curious and striking. It was an illuminated miniature, framed in by the dark margin of the window, the keen-edged shadiness of which emphasized by contrast the softness of the objects enclosed.<sup>2</sup>

Such passages reflect those daily and systematic visits to the National Gallery to which reference is made in the *Life*, and their vocabulary (*picture, miniature, framed*) is typical of dozens of passages to be found throughout Hardy's novels. The reader is encouraged to share the character's role as spectator: the window, like a picture-frame, isolates a portion of the scene outside for scrutiny, to some extent depriving it of its normal mundane reality — or, more accurately, exchanging this for the different kind of reality possessed by a work of art — at the same time as giving it an unusually emphatic claim upon the viewer's attention. Hardy's novels are full of scenes glimpsed through windows, either (as here) by an insider viewing the outside world, or (more often) by an outsider looking in. Later in the novel, Cytherea is seen by her lover as she pulls down the blind in an upper room and then, silhouetted as a "charming outline," crosses and recrosses behind it (p. 33); the villain Manston sees his returning wife through one of the illuminated windows of a passing train (p. 166);<sup>3</sup> and, as the melodrama reaches its involved climax, he is suddenly recognized by the terrified heroine, as he presses his face against the glass of the window in which she sits reading (p. 424). Similar moments in later novels are legion. In *Far from the Mad-ding Crowd*, for instance, Boldwood, standing in the darkness, looks at Bathsheba in a lighted room; subsequently Bathsheba, in the opposite role, keeps vigil and observes

Gabriel in *his* home reading and then praying in what he believes to be solitude. In *The Return of the Native* Mrs. Yeobright sees "a woman's face at a window"—Eustacia's—before she leaves the cottage, rejected and heartbroken, to tell the boy she meets that she has seen something worse than a ghost, "a woman's face looking at me through a window-pane."

What Professor Hillis Miller has called the "recurrent motif of spying"<sup>4</sup> in Hardy's work, then, often involves the sustained contemplation of a scene framed by a window. Or, almost equally often, a door; for one of Hardy's favourite devices is to catch a character in the act of passing through a doorway and to hold him there for a moment; or to have a character "discovered" in the doorway as a door is opened; or to allow a scene to be perceived through an open doorway. We need go no further than the fourth chapter of *Desperate Remedies* for a striking example, on Cytherea's first meeting with the intimidating Miss Aldclyffe: as the girl is about to open the door, the knob turns apparently of its own accord and the door opens from the other side:

The direct blaze of the afternoon sun, partly refracted through the crimson curtains of the window, and heightened by reflections from the crimson-flock paper which covered the walls, and a carpet on the floor of the same tint, shone with a burning glow round the form of a lady standing close to Cytherea's front with the door in her hand (p. 58).

Again we are offered a picture, completed with frame, which helps to determine our impressions of the character thus introduced; the heroine is, quite literally, on the threshold of a new phase of her life, and Hardy marks this important stage of his narrative with this suggestive romantic portrait.<sup>5</sup> To mention only one of the later novels, *The Return of the Native* provides several examples of the same device. Mrs. Yeobright looks at the sleeping Thomsin through the open door of the reddleman's cart, "the light of the lantern" falling on the girl's face; or the watcher can be inside, as when Susan Nunsuch sees Eusta-

cia in the beams of light coming through an open door as she passes by ("As Eustacia crossed the firebeams she appeared for an instant as distinct as a figure in a phantasmagoria — a creature of light surrounded by an area of darkness").

Windows and doors are the commonest but not the only means of setting a portrait or scene within a frame. In one passage of *Desperate Remedies* the reader is invited to look in imagination up a wide old-fashioned chimney and to see a portion of the sky, with "one or two bright stars," framed in "the square opening in the midst" (p. 331); and in a famous episode, when Manston looks at the innumerable tiny organisms living out their lives in the stagnant water of a rainwater-butt, he grips its edges as he might hold a picture by its frame for closer inspection (p. 245). Another circular picture occurs in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, where dramatic use is made of a scene viewed through a telescope; and this in turn recalls the vivid account, early in the *Life*, of how Hardy as a youth, and with benefit of telescope, witnessed a hanging outside Dorchester jail from a distance of nearly three miles. Especially favoured is the device of mirror-reflections to focus attention on a revealing instant, or to afford a character a startling glimpse of something that might not otherwise have been seen. In this way, Cytherea sees the tell-tale locket round Miss Aldclyffe's neck, "though hidden from the direct line of [her] vision" (p. 79), and Manston, about to flee, sees "the reflected image of his own face in the glass — pale and spectre-like in its indistinctness. The sight seemed to be the feather which turned the balance of indecision . . ." (p. 408). The latter example reappears in a more developed form in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, where Henchard sees what he takes to be his own corpse in the river. Another memorable scene in the earlier novel recounts a meeting of Edward and Cytherea by night: standing by the river, she becomes "aware of an object reflected in the water" (p. 280); then, as she perceives

that it is the inverted image of her lover, it strikes her that he must be able to see and identify her in the same way. If we wonder why Hardy should have resorted to this elaborate means of bringing the two together, and enabling them to recognize each other in the darkness, the answer must be twofold: that the unusual visual quality of the scene thus evoked made a strong appeal to his sense of the pictorial, and that, by drawing attention to the sudden act of mutual recognition, it sharpened the intensity of a moment charged with deep emotion for those involved.

Yet another mannerism widely employed is the viewing of a scene by one of the characters through a peep-hole. This is a variant of the "watcher" motif already noted: since a full view usually cannot be obtained in this way, it enables the novelist to impose a precise angle of vision upon the viewer, and to single out particular visual items for emphasis. There is a good example of this when Anne Seaway, lurking in the garden, spies on Manston and Miss Aldclyffe through a hole in the window-shutter "three-quarters of an inch in diameter"; though she cannot see the whole of the interior scene, what she does see is highly suggestive, especially when Manston whispers into the other's ear: "Whilst he spoke he held her head to his mouth with both his hands. Strange expressions came over her face; the workings of her mouth were painful to observe. Still he held her and whispered on" (p. 403). Such a scene vividly recalls the placing of the figures in characteristic narrative paintings of the same period such as Frith's "The Courtship" and Hughes' "The Long Engagement," in which the spectator is left to deduce a dramatic situation from the stylized attitude of the characters. Similarly elsewhere, Gabriel Oak observes Bathsheba through a hole in the cowshed wall, and Eustacia Vye is an unseen watcher of the mummers' rehearsal.

Some of the examples already cited incorporate an element which calls for special mention — the use of special lighting effects, such as the chiaroscuro created by candle-

light amid surrounding darkness, to impress the scene upon the reader's imagination. At such moments a face may be seen in an unfamiliar aspect which reveals an unsuspected likeness; thus Cytherea's resemblance to her father (the long-lost lover of Miss Aldclyffe) is just detected as the girl's face is illuminated from beneath by the candles on a table near which she stands (p. 83). One has the sense of Hardy somewhat self-consciously arranging his figures to the best advantage, as an artist might arrange a model or a lay-figure. Or a suggestion of the macabre may be conveyed, as when Edward Springrove's ghost-like presence in a dark corner of the church during Cytherea's wedding ceremony is revealed by "rays of candle-light" which "showed him forth in startling relief" (p. 275). Hardy also makes effective use of the power of a silhouette to convey an imprecise but disturbing suggestion: towards the end of the novel, as Manston seeks to dispose of his victim's corpse, he is watched by a mysterious stranger who is, in turn, dimly perceived by Anne Seaway: ". . . the square opening of the doorway showed the outline of this other watcher passing through it likewise. The form was that of a broad-shouldered man enveloped in a long coat" (p. 413).

Devices of this kind will usually be found to occur at important points of the narrative — depicting a decisive step in the action, revealing an unsuspected truth, or heightening and prolonging a moment of dramatic suspense. Part of the novelist's strategy is to detain the reader's progress through his story, briefly but perceptibly, compelling him to bestow upon such moments a closer attention than usual and demanding from him a more definite imaginative reconstruction of the scene as originally visualized. Hardy has, of course, no monopoly of visual devices in fiction: many Victorian novelists make frequent appeals to the reader's powers of visualization, just as a vocabulary borrowed from the graphic arts was a stock resource of nineteenth-century reviewers. If many

Victorian paintings seem to aspire to the condition of literature, it is no less true that Victorian novels often seem to aspire to the condition of painting or drawing or (more rarely) sculpture. What may be claimed, however, is that in Hardy's work such habitual modes of vision are more prominent and more important in relation to the central purpose of the fiction than in that of his contemporaries — not excluding Wilkie Collins, to whom his debt in *Desperate Remedies* is considerable, and whose qualifications for introducing a strong pictorial element into his fiction were if anything even stronger than Hardy's. It seems remarkable that his first published novel, for all its feebleness in some respects, should show Hardy to have been so fully aware of the uses to which these devices could be put: devices which, used with more restraint, were to become a permanent and prominent feature of his technique.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>A. J. Guerard, *Thomas Hardy: the Novels and Stories* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P.) 1949, p. 50. L. Lerner & J. Holmstrom, *Thomas Hardy and his Readers* (London: Bodley Head) 1968, p. 14.
- <sup>2</sup>This and all subsequent page-references are to the "Greenwood" edition of the novel (London: Macmillan) 1966. C. J. P. Beatty quotes this passage, and comments briefly on viewpoints in *Desperate Remedies*, in "Desperate Remedies 1871," *The Thomas Hardy Yearbook 1971* (Guernsey: The Toucan Press) 1971, pp. 32-3.
- <sup>3</sup>Compare a similar image a quarter of a century later in the poem "Wessex Heights," *Collected Poems*, (London: Macmillan) 1930, p. 301: "There is one [ghost] in the railway train whenever I do not want it near / I see its profile against the pane . . ."
- <sup>4</sup>J. H. Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P.) 1970, p. 7.
- <sup>5</sup>The passage quoted bears an interesting relation to a childhood memory recorded much later in the *Life*, in which the reflection of the sunlight on a rich red wallpaper was a source of an intense experience. Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928* (London: Macmillan) 1962, p. 15.