

'memory and writing' in the poetry of thomas hardy and edward thomas

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



' In my memory / Again and again I see it strangely dark / And vacant of a life but just withdrawn.'

Edward Thomas's *The Chalk Pit* suggests a number of ways of considering the correlation between memory and writing. The line is at once visually stimulating and 'strangely dark.' It communicates an emptiness or absence of physical activity yet, at the same time, Thomas makes it clear that this vacancy is recent and that movement has 'just withdrawn'. The poem is concerned with temporality and the impossible act of revisiting a precise moment in any way other than through the 'dark' reconstruction of memory. This symbiosis between physical experience and what the poet is able to 'see...strangely' through recollection equally dominates the later poetry of Thomas Hardy. Here, Hardy's painful awareness of the progression of time characterises his poems with remorse, shaping a strangeness in his writing whereby the 'shifting shadows' of the imagination are more connected to reality than the points from which they stem.

In the first stanza of Edward Thomas' *Adlestrop* the poet establishes a relationship between recollection and writing that is upheld throughout the poem. His language is precise, anchoring the verse to an isolated moment. He tells us how 'Yes. I remember Adlestrop - / The name, because one afternoon / Of heat the express-train drew up there / Unwontedly. It was late June.' The stanza centers on an awareness of the inevitable advancement of time. In structuring three beats to each line of his four-line stanzas, Thomas creates a consistent regularity, rapidly moving the poem forward. This sense of movement is important, as the first stanza is essentially to do with

progression. The motion of the train, the progression of the language and the poet's recognition of the passing of time all suggest a linear passing of time that has little to do with the experiences of the individual.

However, the poem equally presents an interlude in this progression. The train itself has stopped and Thomas reflects this pause in his own plosive stop to the word ' Adlestrop' and in the halting caesura that follows.

Furthermore, despite the poem's regular form, the imagery that it conjures does not follow a linear sequence but is panoramic. The poem begins with the speculation of a sign, moves to the shape and significance of the word itself and finally to a wider enjoyment of the '...meadow sweet and haycocks dry' beneath '...the high cloudlets in the sky.' Thomas's imagery reflects the wandering gaze of its narrator, but perhaps more striking is its movement from visual perception to sensory experience. The afternoon is characterized by ' heat' and Thomas's fellow passenger is defined by the clearing of ' his throat.' Thus, there is a shift from the mechanical progression of the meter to a deeper more expansive perception of human experience.

The language of the poem weaves a strikingly aural sound-scape and asks to be read aloud. Whilst the alliterative ' And willows, willow-herb and grass' of the third stanza denotes a movement forward, the clarity of the final stanza's ' And for that minute a blackbird sang' is piercing in its cacophony, imitating the precision of its song and causing a moment of pause in Thomas' writing. This transition from a linear to an outward perception is striking as it denotes a movement away from the rigidity of time to a ' minute' in which experiences is not ' darkened' as in *The Chalk Pit*, but attuned to the clarity

of the senses and in which the poet is able to 'see.' Here, we may recall Virginia Woolf's famous allegory for life '...not as a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged' but as a 'luminous halo' which encompasses intersecting threads of experience. The stopping of the train in Thomas's opening line and the pause of its speeding engine suggest a movement away from the concept of such 'gig lamps' as the poet's perception is opened to the complex levels of existence.

However, Thomas makes it clear that this 'minute' is not unfolding as he writes. The opening word 'Yes' is intriguing in that it appears to answer a prior question, indicating discourse. This is at once compellingly inclusive and strangely cryptic. Whilst Thomas' answer suggests a personal conversation, it also distances the reader from the moment described, as it is only accessible through Thomas's writing. The very act of reading denotes an engagement with the past as writing and reading cannot exist simultaneously. This gives a new significance to Thomas' 'minute' of pause, as it demonstrates how memory exists separately from the shared physical world as a wholly personal mental process that is subjective to the individual.

This distinction between physical experience and memory is central to Hardy's *The Shadow on the Stone*. Although it was not completed until 1916, the poem belongs to a series of so-called '1912-13 poems' that Hardy composed following the death of his estranged wife Emma. With this knowledge in mind, it is difficult not to read the poem as an autobiographical account of Hardy's own grief. From this perspective the 'shifting shadows' that fall on the 'Druid stone' in Hardy's garden stimulate his personal

memory of '...the shade that a well-known head and shoulders / Threw there when she was gardening.' However, the poem engages with the wider nature of memory and the process by which it works. Hardy's 'imagining' is fundamental here as it highlights the role of the imagination in remembering, or more precisely, reconstructing past events. The very title of the poem draws on this process. 'The Shadow on the Stone' describes interplay between weight and shadow and in doing so draws a distinction between the physical and the non-physical, or more precisely, between action and memory. Like Thomas' engagement with a wider sphere of human perception, Hardy describes both the physical immediacy of a moment of impression, and the coinciding reality of the mental process stimulated by the moment.

In *Memory and Writing*, Philip Davis examines the parallels between the poetry of Hardy and the writings of W. K Clifford whom Hardy had read. In his *Lectures and Essays*, Clifford seeks to reconcile the empiricism of Hume with Kant's idealism and posits that the mental world is composed of the same basic elements as the material world from which it is derived. For Clifford, 'The actions that take place in the brain differ in no way from other material actions, except in their complexity.' This view is striking in that it elevates the importance of the imagination to that of the sensory world. When read alongside the writings of Clifford, Hardy's verse takes on a similar a-temporality to the moment of pause created in Thomas' *Adlestrop*. . Davis emphasises that Hardy was '...deeply attracted by the idea that there is a parallelism between matter and mind.' Yet, in *The Shadow on the Stone*, this

is taken to a new intensity as the 'shadow' assumes more substance than the stone on which it falls. Hardy's frequent half rhymes between the third and seventh line of each stanza and his omission of this rhyme in the second add to a sense of uncertainty, or lack of solidarity. Thus, the poem induces 'shifting' in a multiple sense as the physical movements of the tree provoke an imagined presence that appears more real than the invasive 'fall of a leaf' that threatens to 'fade' Hardy's 'dream.'

This transition between different levels of perception, what Dennis Taylor calls Hardy's 'etching' of 'the presence of what is absent' is intriguing in that it presents reality as subjective to the psychology and perception of the individual. Like the song of the blackbird in Thomas's *Adlestrop*, Hardy's imagined 'dream' in *The Shadow on the Stone* suggests an opening of perception to wider spheres of existence. This reading is deepened by a consideration of Hardy's *Lament*. The poem is concerned with memory yet it depends on the conditional, describing what could have been, rather than what has occurred. Hardy's exclamation that 'How she would have loved/ A party to-day!' is striking in that, in remembering the tastes and enjoyments of his late wife, he is creating an imagined situation in which they would be carried out. Many of Hardy's later poems express a desire for the past, but what gives them their tone of remorse is this interaction between imagination and memory as we are confronted with what could have been and what has been missed.

One of the most intriguing features of memory in the poetry of Thomas and Hardy is the correlation between recollection and sound. In *The Chalk Pit*,

Thomas surveys the abandoned 'Dell' and considers how 'As usual there is no one here / Hardly can I imagine the drop of the axe / And the smack that is like an echo sounding here.' This sense of 'echo' is reflected in Thomas' repetition and is significant in a number of ways. Firstly, it highlights the imperfection of memory; isolated moments are unrepeatable and, like echoes become faint and distant. Yet, it also evokes a sense of the uncanny in a reader's experience. Thomas' poem is dominated by voices, most clear are those of its ambiguous narrators as they engage in dialogue, yet there is a strong presence of imagined voices. The voices of the couple recalled by the narrator and the voices of the workers which must once have filled the 'empty, silent' pit, inspire strangeness in the tone as they create the sense that something is missing. Davis compounds this understanding in *Memory and Writing*, with his assertion that 'imagination is a function of memory and personality in that memory stirs the imagination and verbal skill.' Here, Like the 'well-known head and shoulders' imagined by Hardy in *The Shadow on the Stone*, the absence of empirical form and sound conveys a greater sense of transience as it inspires a construction of memory through the faculties of the imagination.

One of Hardy's most intriguing descriptions of 'hearing' through memory is in within *The Voice*. Here, Hardy induces us to construct our own imagined voice so that we too hear the 'call' of his late wife 'traveling across the wet mead.' Hardy's repetition in the first line is both an echo and an appeal; 'Woman much missed how you call to me, call to me, / Saying that now you are not as you were.' This sense of a binary call and echo or call and

response engages with the twofold way in which the poem can be interpreted. In one sense, it is to do with a personal memory and experience of loss, yet it also raises a strange point about literary texts in general. Both Hardy and Thomas are dead and, in this sense, their poems construct more than one imagined voice from beyond the grave. Taking, for example, Hardy's third stanza; whilst his unusual placing of stress on the rhyming 'listlessness' and 'wistlessness' is evocative of a fading echo, Hardy's own voice remains preserved within the form of his own writing.

The layers of voice constructed in Hardy's poem bring us back to Thomas's *The Chalk Pit*. Here, the fusing of voice shows memory to operate in a broader sphere than individual recollection. Thomas's personification of the 'ash trees' and 'bramble' that 'act their parts' is intriguing in that it denotes an absorption of memory into the landscape. Thus, like the voice of the poet in *The Voice*, memory takes on its own autonomy and life within writing. This highlights the transience of human experience in relation to wider existence yet it also firmly anchors the thought process involved in recollection to physical objects. Thus, we are presented with a view of reality that cannot be defined in a single, empirical sense but depends on the shifting and wholly personal connotations evoked by memory.