

PHOTOGRAPHIC SENSIBILITIES IN TWO EARLY NOVELS BY THOMAS HARDY

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The present paper deals with two early novels by Thomas Hardy – *Desperate Remedies* and, only peripherally, with *A Pair of Blue Eyes* – and brings into focus his inclination to create verbal descriptions that display a distinctive photographic sensibility. His artistic technique was inspired by his architectural education and pronounced interest in art. Scholars (Wolfgang Iser, Tsotcho Boyadzhiev, Roland Barthes, Hans-Georg Gadamer, etc.) have advanced reasonable explanations of how his method is used in literature.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, photography, frame, ekphrasis, perception

One is inevitably bound to notice that Thomas Hardy's novels share a particularly curious characteristic in terms of narrative technique. Various scenes and events are presented in a way reminiscent of a description of a realistic painting or a photograph. In some cases there is even a direct mention of a particular painting. Scholars have long ago remarked that Hardy had an interest in art and attended various exhibitions (Smart/Смайт 1961). It is also known that he was occupied with architecture before achieving literary fame (Millgate/Милгейт 2004). There have also been discussions on the acuteness of photographic detail in the writer's novels although he possessed no camera and there is no known evidence that he ever used a device of this kind (Jackson/Джаксън 1984). All these pieces of information speak of his interest in visual arts and knowledge of the science behind drawing but none of them actually answers the question of *why* he builds his narrative in this fashion. Surely it must be something more than a particular stylistic decision – the aesthetic beauty of it must go together with another significant function.

The present paper narrows the focus to a commentary on what seems to my mind a particularly photographic approach to Hardy's portrayal of characters and scenes as seen in important events. This technique could be read as a manifestation of ekphrasis in its more general definition of a "virtuosic description of physical reality (objects, scenes, persons) in order

to evoke an image in the mind's eye as intense as if the described object were actually before the reader"¹. On the one hand, a reader faces a work of fiction, but on the other, this fictive account has been crafted so as to have a high degree of plausibility. I suggest that Hardy's descriptions have a distinct photographic sensibility because his narrators act as biographers, chroniclers and reporters who provide painstaking renditions of reality. In other words, these narrators behave like professionals who strive for objective and convincing delineation of events by means of using facts. Such people would resort to the use of photographs and not realistic paintings namely because, as Roland Barthes points out, photographs can prove that what they show has actually been there, has existed (Barthes/Барт 1981). Also, the photographic process involves the use of a machine, which provides an accurate and persuasive representation of reality. Additionally and more importantly, I believe that the employment of such imagery in this novel can be viewed through the lenses of phenomenology and hermeneutics so as to interpret what Hardy thought important as regards a human perception of the world.

The next pages contain an analysis of two of Thomas Hardy's early novels – *Desperate Remedies* (1871), which reads like a *record* presumably kept by a *reporter* (TH-2/TX-2 2010: 138, 331), and *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1872–73) whose narrator labels himself a *biographer* (TH-1/TX-1 2009: 356). The focus of this paper rests chiefly on the former. I have decided to look at them through the critical lenses of scholars such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wolfgang Iser, Tzvetan Todorov, and Roland Barthes.

Before dealing with the main point, it would seem necessary to clarify the relationship between photography and someone who was not closely associated with it, at least insofar as we can judge from what has been recorded. On the one hand, Thomas Hardy was trained in architecture and had an accurate eye for graphic detail. In fact, he once said that the works of Victor Hugo “are the cathedrals of literary architecture“ which would suggest that he himself tried to be a “literary architect“ (Hardy/Харди 1962: 311). This professional background could have also predisposed his mind to work with and understand smaller building blocks for the purpose of composing a meaningful and sound whole. If the term “photographic sensibility“ can be accepted at least in this early stage of research, then one could say that the descriptions with photographic detail

¹ As defined in J. A. Cuddon's *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1999). p. 252.

are strongly reminiscent of photographs in an album that has been specifically put together to tell a convincing visual story. In one of his literary notebooks there seems to be evidence for this – Hardy presents an approach to his writing, he says “give an impression picture of the scene – then an allusion to some event (connected or mingling with scene?)“ (TH-3/TX-3: 42). On the other hand, photography was perceived as an interesting blend of science and art that was gaining momentum in his time (Gilmour in Frawley/Фроули 2008). In the preface to *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, Tim Dolin says that “Hardy’s aim was to unite the best aspects of his two ideals: the ideal of the mid-Victorian literary man (the poet...) and the late-Victorian professional literary man“ (Dolin in TH-1/TX-1: xviii). It seems that the interplay between art and science in photography results in a similar unity. This is why one may make an educated guess that Thomas Hardy was familiar or even infatuated with these peculiarities.

And before embarking on the journey of deeper interpretation, it is important to have a look at an example. It is in the opening pages of *Desperate Remedies* that the reader finds an accumulation of ekphrastic descriptions delineating not only the portrait of Cytherea, a major character, in talking about her complexion, clothes, face, lip, hair, fingers, motion, etc (TH-2/TX-2: 9), but also a scene of utmost significance in which the maiden witnesses her father’s death as she is looking through a window:

The Town Hall, in which Cytherea sat, was a building of brown stone, and through one of the windows could be seen from the interior of the room the housetops and chimneys of the adjacent street, and also the upper part of a neighbouring church spire, now in course of completion under the superintendence of Miss Graye's father, the architect to the work.

That the top of this spire should be visible from her position in the room was a fact which Cytherea's idling eyes had discovered with some interest, and she was now engaged in watching the scene that was being enacted about its airy summit.

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.

The height of the spire was about one hundred and twenty feet, and the five men engaged thereon seemed entirely removed from the sphere and experiences of ordinary human beings.

Then one of them turned; it was Mr. Graye. Again he stood motionless, with attention to the operations of the others. He appeared to be lost in reflection, and had directed his face towards a new stone they were lifting.

Why does he stand like that?'... 'I wish he would come down,' she whispered, still gazing at the skybacked picture...

When she had done murmuring the words her father indecisively laid hold of one of the scaffold-poles, as if to test its strength, then let it go and stepped back. In stepping, his foot slipped. An instant of doubling forward and sideways, and he reeled off into the air, immediately disappearing downwards (TH-2/TX-2, emphasis added).

The quotation above reminds the reader of what Arlene Jackson discussed in relation to Hardy's use of photography as style and metaphor. The scholar has noticed the novelist's technique of "framing human figures in doorways and windows" as well as his use of "the double viewer or voyeur effect (we watch an observer who watches the playing out of a particular scene)" which is a kind of "a mediator (camera) between ourselves and the scene" (Jackson/Джаксън 1984: 95). I must add that Hardy's technique is not restricted to the framing of characters – it extends to important scenes such as the one described in the above fragment. In other words, Cytherea herself is framed by standing beside and looking through a window but the tragedy surrounding her father's death is also framed within the borders of this window and verbally presented as a series of images. Matters can be taken a bit further using the double viewer idea. Cytherea is a mediator and hence a camera. Her mind is the film or sensor one finds in a camera, and the window serves as a viewfinder for the composition of a photograph she wants to take or one that she stumbles upon and captures not entirely according to her will. It is namely the second type of framing in this episode that is more important for the present investigation. Cytherea is aestheticized, but she is also a witness to the scene that unfolds and contributes to the account's reliability which results in a delicate and authentic balance between factography and fictionality. Actually, the idea about framing can be viewed through the eyes of Iser who, in discussing various acts of fictionalizing, deems that the act of "self-disclosure of fictionality [aka the 'as-if'] puts the world represented in brackets, thereby indicating the presence of a purpose that proves the observability of the world represented" (Iser/Изер 1993: 16). So, framing seems synonymous to representation in brackets – either way there is a cutting out of a smaller bit from something bigger. This restriction attracts one's attention to the particular world within it. In other words, framing limits one's view but also highlights the importance of what has been included in the composition. Iser goes on to say that "observability requires a stance, the necessity of which causes attitudes to be adopted by the recipient, who is made to react to what he or she is given

to observe“ (Ibid). To me, it means that a reader would not only stop and politely consider a frame. No, one may very well be provoked into a deep analysis of the message conveyed or the significant relationship one episode has with another, the entire book or even life.

So far, I have been consistent in looking at what has been narrated as a photograph. Accepting this, one might draw the following conclusions.

Firstly, Thomas Hardy uses photograph-like scenes to tell a story so as to incite a further thought process on behalf of the reader for the purpose of rationalization of a certain message that could have pertinence to something bigger than the available verbal and/or visual fragment. This goes together with Tsocho Boyadzhiev’s view that “a photograph is namely a *pars pro toto*, it expresses wholeness in a certain way, and certainly with some remainder of meaning allowing for an endless process of thinking further about what remains“ (my transl. of Boyadzhiev/Бояджиев 2020: 72²). At this initial stage of the book, the reader’s attention can be both narrowed down to the framed event and also provoked into thinking about its ramifications. A question could arise – *Is this simply a narrative technique, or has the narrator placed particular emphasis on the episode because of its importance to the overall plot?* If one is to answer positively to the first part of the question, then one could simply savour the beauty of this technique evaluating the craftsmanship of the writer. On the other hand, if the second suggestion is right, then the additional thought process could look for a relationship between this and future episodes. I believe both are valid and because the former seems to be part of the appreciation of the latter, and the latter is what I intend to focus on now. The episode in question determines to a great extent the future of Cytheria and her brother as the two will be left without parents and will have to face the burden of growing up in this condition. It appears that the scene of Cytheria beholding the tragic event could be read as what Gadamer says happens when one is facing a work of art. In his words, “the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it“ (Gadamer/Гадамер 2004: 103). In this way, unwillingly, the heroine undergoes a transformation in which aesthetic and ethical are fused as could be expected in the logic of the chronicler-artist.

Also noteworthy in this respect are two other episodes from *Desperate Remedies*. The first being Cytheria’s discovery of her father’s miniature in Miss Aldcliffe’s locket. In it an image triggers the untying of the mystery

² „Снимката е именно *pars pro toto*, тя изразява в някакъв смисъл целостта, ала непременно с остатък, позволяващ безкрайно „домисляне“ на отсъстващото.“

about her father's sweetheart (TH-2/TX-2: 62). This experience changes the young girl in her perception of the past as well as in her position in the future as she wins the good disposition of her mistress. And while here Hardy does not specify if this miniature is a photograph, later in the novel a photograph is the key that drives an important investigation of a conspiracy covering up a murder (TH-2/TX-2: 256, 265, 267). It is namely this – the outcome of these proceedings – that allows for a somewhat positive ending in the book. Secondly, Gadamer's *Truth and Method* discusses a pertinent connection between pictures and texts. He says: "Only if we "recognize" what is represented are we able to "read" a picture; in fact, that is what ultimately makes it a picture. Seeing means articulating... The same is true of the literary work. Only when we understand a text – that is, are at least in command of its language – can it be a work of literary art for us" (Gadamer/Гадамер 2004: 79). This may be a reason why Hardy describes scenes and events with meticulous photographic detail which allows one to *picture* them clearly, and this facilitates recognition and understanding. Gadamer also believes that "what we experience in a work of art and what invites our attention is how true it is – i.e., to what extent one knows and recognizes something and oneself" (Gadamer/Гадамер 2004: 113). It appears from this that a reader (who is also a beholder of an art work) is attracted by truthfulness and a photograph can be truthful more often than not. I agree that truthfulness can be one of the qualities that are attractive about photographs and believe that Hardy's narrators, presented as chroniclers and biographers, increase the plausibility and appeal of their accounts by using the discussed technique. This, of course, leads to more sophisticated and successful narration.

It is necessary to mention Roland Barthes' classification of photographs as it relates to the above discussion on Iser. He uses two distinctive properties called *studium* and *punctum*. The former involves "a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity" whereas the latter "is the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (Barthes/Барт 1981: 26). He continues with "occasionally a "detail" attracts me. I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value. This "detail" is the *punctum*... a partial object. Hence, to give examples of *punctum* is... to give myself up" (Barthes/Барт 1981: 42 – 43). And lastly and quite importantly, Barthes deems that the *punctum* has a "power of expansion" which "is often metonymic" (Barthes/Барт 1981: 45). These views relate to Hardy's photographic style in that in his descriptions of scenes and people there is

always something more to be learned, understood or recognized. This something could play a crucial role in the development of the novel as is the case with the portrayed tragedy in the above fragment as well as the ones with the locket and photograph – what the characters witness both pierces them and relates somewhat synecdochically to the grander scale of events; or it could be a kind of a message that the book is meant to convey. The latter case applies when one considers not only the separate scenes but the book as a whole which is a synecdoche of a kind – it carries a particular moral that can be related to a larger ideological system in real life. Maybe this is why people need synecdoches – to fragment existence by means of frames so as to get the whole picture that life is in smaller steps.

A Pair of Blue Eyes offers material for similar reflections from the very beginning. In the preface Hardy refers to the story as “an imaginary history of three human hearts [...] found [...] a fitting frame for its presentation“ (TH-1/TX-1: 3). The idea that a story is to be presented within a frame could be a result from his interest in paintings and photographs which are presented within frames, and it could also illustrate the interplay between the fictive and the imaginary that Wolfgang Iser talks about. Hardy’s imagination is where the story is formed and it becomes a fictive account when framed (Iser/Изер 1993: 20). In other words, the limitation of the frame container makes it possible for one’s imaginary ideas to be clad with concreteness and thus give birth to the fictive. In one episode a character says “Ay, life is a strange picter...” (TH-1/TX-1: 241) which corresponds with the *pars pro toto* reflections above. Hardy composes his literary photographs by framing fragments from the bigger picture that relate to it in that they express partially this reality but also leave things out for the spectator to further meditate on. It is also curious to note the comment of a writer who, after meticulously examining Hardy’s poetry, concludes – “He hungered for knowledge and he thus historicized all experiences, claiming their equal importance in building a wholesome image of a world of inter-dependent controversial occurrences and seemingly disembodied abstract ideas“ (Rowland/Роуланд 2014: 240). It appears that what incited him to preserve and present a fictional and somewhat visual record of experiences that had happened or were inspired by what had occurred in his beloved Wessex was present in his poetry too.

Additionally, the narrator often tells us how light makes things visible, changes perception, and sometimes he exhibits a particularly scientific awareness as to the peculiarities of light rays shown. On one page the text reads, “The sun was within ten degrees of the horizon, and its warm light flooded her face and heightened the bright rose colour of her

cheeks to a vermillion red, their moderate pink hue being only seen in its natural tone where the cheek curved round into shadow“ (TH-1/TX-1: 150 – 151). In this quote one can witness the narrator’s awareness of the angle of light and the respective colour temperature that it produces. Additionally, the character whose portrait is being delineated by words emphasises the feeling that she is an image or part of an image. This appears to me a quite eloquent manifestation of the above commented unification of Hardy’s two ideals – that of the professional man and the artist. On another page the narrator describes a scene at sunset with great detail and seems to refer to the sun as “an eloquent speaker“ (TH-1/TX-1: 169) which can be connected with Bernd Stiegler’s comment that many of the early accounts surrounding the discovery of photography point out that the sun has become a painter as “it uses light to portray and depict images more perfect than the work of human hands“ (my transl. Stiegler/Щиглер 2015: 121³). Of course, light-writing is not a property restricted to ambient light but could be performed by artificial light too. This is clearly illustrated in an episode further on in the book when two characters enter a summer-house and the light from within *gives birth, awakens, and reveals* leading to the protagonist’s witnessing “in the summer-house a strongly illuminated picture“ (TH-1/TX-1: 224). From these reflections it becomes even clearer that Hardy’s narrative technique has a photographic sensibility to it and it is in accordance with Stiegler’s view that “reality, nature, and art are a kind of a photographic album that can be interpreted by man as a sign, a mysterious form of light-writing. This light-writing draws images in one’s mind“ (my transl. Stiegler/Щиглер 2015: 123⁴). If Hardy recognized these phenomena, as his writing suggests, it follows that his photographic use of the fictive speaks of his understanding of people’s perception of the world. The world is simply too large to be fathomed at a glimpse – that is why we approach it metonymically – by looking at the separate pictures or photographs our existence offers. And I believe Hardy was truly successful in transposing these relationships into the fictive world of his novels.

In this manner I choose to wrap up the current discussion which reviews some notable instances of photographic sensibilities in Hardy’s two early novels, pointing out the grounds for defining his narrative

³ „то изписва и изрисува със светлина образи, по-съвършени от създадените от човешка ръка.“

⁴ „Действителността, природата и изкуството представляват един вид фотографски албум, който човек може да разгадава като знак, като загадъчен светло-пис. Този светло-пис рисува мисловни изображения.“

technique as having these peculiarities, and interpreting them with regard to human perception through the lenses of phenomenology and hermeneutics. The paths for future investigation are not few but most immediate seem to me the ones that would trace the evolution of this style in later works, or view how, when, and why Hardy resorts to the mention of renowned paintings. A more profound analysis of the use of pictures (scenes) in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is necessary as it was used mainly as a point for comparison here, as well as the addition of movement and sound in the same title and in later novels such as *The Hand of Ethelberta* and *The Return of the Native* which results in cinematic sensibilities.

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