THOMAS HARDY: THE POETRY OF PERCEPTION

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The Poetry of Perception

TOM PAULIN

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Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chace our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appear'd in that narrow compass. This is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produc'd.

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

Under that despotism of the eye (the emancipation from which Pythagoras by his numeral, and Plato by his musical, symbols, and both by geometric discipline, aimed at, as the first *propaideuma* of the mind) – under this strong sensuous influence, we are restless because invisible things are not the objects of vision; and metaphysical systems, for the most part, become popular, not for their truth, but in proportion as they attribute to causes a susceptibility of being seen, if only our visual organs were sufficiently powerful.

S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*

Preface

It's sometimes said that the reason why there are so few books about Hardy's poetry is that the poems are so various that no one has found a consistent way of approaching them – a lever to shift them with. My approach is through his stress on sight and the numerous issues which are implicit in it, but I have by no means confined my discussion of the poems to his positivism. This is mainly because I wanted to give as full and flexible an account of his poetry as possible, and also because I wanted to redeem and develop the postgraduate thesis which is at the basis of this book. Here, I must stress that I haven't simply resprayed six chapters and a thousand rusty footnotes – I have revised, expanded, ruthlessly cut and totally rewritten my original discussion, and I have added a great deal of new material.

The discussions of Hardy's poetry which I found most valuable are Donald Davie's *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (though I've often disagreed with it) and also his great essay, 'Hardy's Virgilian Purples', in the special Hardy issue of *Agenda* he edited. Samuel Hynes's *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry* is the only good full-length discussion of the poems I've read, though again I often disagree with it, and two reference works – F. B. Pinion's *A Hardy Companion* and J. O. Bailey's *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary* – are invaluable.

I owe great debts of gratitude for their help and encouragement to Dennis Burden, Dorothy Bednarowska, R. N. R. Peers and the staff of the Dorset County Museum, Merryn Williams, Samuel Hynes, T. M. Farmiloe, David Williams and James Gibson for his help over the Eweleaze illustration. And I'm particularly indebted to Peter Messent for checking the manuscript and making many necessary corrections and valuable suggestions.

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The notes at the back of the book, which are not essential to an understanding of the text, include the sources of the less accessible quotations. These notes are keyed by the page number and the opening words of the quotation or phrase to which they refer.

January 1975

T.P.