

# Balance and Self-Destruction : The Two Vying Forces inside *A Pair of Blue Eyes*

by Yasunori Sugimura

## I

*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, a minor work done early in Thomas Hardy's career, throws light on fundamental problems inherent in history as well as in plot-making. Considering the narrative structure of this novel, I'd like to point out the following features:

- ( i ) Two contradictory impulses thread through the novel —one always seeking a change and advancement, the other repeating a former situation over and over again.
- ( ii ) These two major impulses keep a splendid balance, and various elements of the novel vie with each other to weave a thick and intricate design.
- ( iii ) On the other hand, the contradictory forces sometimes make a self-destroying union and their balance is lost in an instant.

Among these features, the third point most clearly represents the peculiarities in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. The harder Elfride tries to be modern and assert her originality, the more strongly the uncanny repetition of the past tugs her, which leads to the ironical result that the very development of the plot is trapped in a repetitive and regressive historical pattern.

In this novel, the advancing force and the repetitive impulse create a latent tension which the author uses to develop the plot. But this tension is gradually lost, until we perceive in the story a hollow and

dreary ambience. As for this problem, Richard Carpenter observes that "the plot is awkward and diffuse," and that "once the comic current has been set moving, it can be turned awry only to our dissatisfaction."<sup>1</sup> I, however, would like to consider not only the plot-making anomaly, but also the historical dilemma that is very well expressed in this novel.

## II

The story concerns a love triangle between Elfride Swancourt, the daughter of a country vicar, and two men who are in love with her. Elfride becomes engaged to Stephen Smith, an architect's assistant who has visited Cornwall to make plans for restoring the church. While he is gone to India on business, Elfride is drawn to Henry Knight, Stephen's intimate friend and a man of letters. It happens that Henry Knight falls from the edge of "the Cliff without a Name" in Elfride's presence. She rescues him just in time. This incident makes them deeply attached to each other. But she doesn't have the heart to tell Knight about her earlier love, and always misses the chance for confession. However, he discovers her secret by the inopportune appearance of both her lost earring and young Jethway's tombstone, as well as by Mrs Jethway's dirty tricks. Left forever by Henry Knight, Elfride half desperately accepts Lord Luxellian's proposal "so as to turn her useless life to some practical account;"<sup>2</sup> that is, to restore the social status of her family. But she dies too quickly from a miscarriage. The van containing her coffin is attached to a train in which Knight and Stephen both happen to ride. They have a passionate quarrel about their claims to Elfride, with neither one knowing what has happened to her.

Even this brief outline of the story gives us a vague feeling of curious irony. A closer examination of the plot structure will reveal that there are many descriptions of uncanny repetition throughout the novel. Falling from a height, Jethway's tombstone, Elfride's earring,

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1 Richard Carpenter, *Thomas Hardy* (Boston: Twayne, 1964), pp. 53-54.

2 Thomas Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (London: Macmillan, Paper Back Edition, 1975), p.400. All the subsequent page references to this novel are from this edition.

as well as other scenes and situations are coincidentally repeated. This gratuitous repetition is best exemplified in Elfride's *déjà vu* which makes the incident at the cliff overlap with her former emergency on the parapet:

"You are familiar of course, as everybody is, with those strange sensations we sometimes have, that the moment has been in duplicate, or will be." "That we have lived through that moment before?" "Or shall again. Well, I felt on the tower that something similar to that scene is again to be common to us both." (p. 193)

*Déjà vu* is a sensation in which "the environment and the events a person is experiencing strike him as familiar against the fact that they are new,"<sup>3</sup> and Hardy sometimes deals with these "strange sensations" in his other works. In *Desperate Remedies*, for example, Cytherea Graye, hearing "a very soft gurgle or rattle,"<sup>4</sup> had a feeling that she had heard the sound before at some past time in her life. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the carriage borrowed on Tess's wedding day is strangely overlapped with the ominous d'Urberville Coach in her *déjà vu* sensations.<sup>5</sup>

### III

The impulse of repetition such as in the *déjà vu* experience is, according to Freud, a "repetition compulsion" (*Wiederholungszwang*) which is "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things—inanimate things that existed before living ones."<sup>6</sup> Thus the repetition compulsion is the death instinct, or the drive leading to death. This instinct is most clearly expressed in the mental landscape crossing the mind of Henry Knight as he clings to the cliff. He is

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3 Peter Hartocollis, *Time and Timelessness: The Varieties of Temporal Experience* (New York: International Univ. Pr., 1983), p. 86.

4 Hardy, *Desperate Remedies* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 120–121.

5 Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 280.

6 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1975), pp. 30–32.

suspended only by his arms, which clutch the tufts of grass. Opposite his eyes there happens to be an imbedded fossil in a low relief from the rock. Knight and this trilobite share the place of death in common. Here is the repetition of what used to be millions of years ago. But we must notice that this uncanny repetition temporarily calms Knight's mind. As the author observes, this is "one of those familiar conjunctions of things wherewith the inanimate world baits the mind of man when he pauses in moments of suspense (p. 240)." It seems quite absurd that the death instinct of "restoring an earlier state of things" appeases the mind of a man who is suspended between life and death. But this death instinct actually prevents a life-death short circuit, and produces a complicated detour in between.<sup>7</sup> Before Knight met the trilobite, he had been wishing for nothing but rescue, struggling desperately to survive the disaster. He had refused the regression, and had only sought the advance. However, these life instincts, unless they are properly checked, may exhaust their energy and instantly connect with death.<sup>8</sup> If Knight had not met with the fossil, he might have fallen from the cliff without being rescued by Elfride. The fossil of the trilobite does, therefore, preserve Henry Knight's mental and physical energy, so that he can hold out until he is saved. This is confirmed by his mental landscape, in which the regressive power works against the evolving and developing power in preventing the premature discharge of life instincts; thus making a detour, for as long as possible, between life and death. This process is clearly shown in the fact that, in face of death, less than half a minute suddenly expands into millions of years. The force of evolution and development is checked by that of regression and repetition, so that each developmental stage of living things appears not in series but in parallel. This is expressed by the words "simultaneously," "juxtaposition" and "overlap."

He (Knight) saw himself at one extremity of the years, face to face with the beginning and all the intermediate centuries *simultaneously*. Fierce men, clothed in the hides of beasts, and carrying, for defence and attack, huge clubs and pointed spears, rose from the

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7 Freud, p. 33.

8 Freud, p. 33.

rock, . . . Behind them stood an earlier band. No man was there. Huge elephantine forms, the mastodon, the hippopotamus, the tapir, antelopes of monstrous size, the megatherium, and the myledon — all, for the moment, in *juxtaposition*. Further back, and *overlapped* by these, were perched huge-billed birds and swinish creatures as large as horses. Still more shadowy were the sinister crocodilian outlines — alligators and other uncouth shapes, culminating in the colossal lizard, the iguanodon. Folded behind were dragon forms and clouds of flying reptiles: still underneath were fishy beings of lower development; and so on, till the lifetime scenes of the fossil confronting him were a present and modern condition of things. These images passed before Knight's inner eye in less than half a minute, . . . (*Italics mine.*) (pp. 240–241)

When life and death are evenly matched, the hierarchy of every intermediate value is levelled, weaving a dense, complicated and dynamic design. This process fits in exactly with the plot-making principle. According to Peter Brooks, what makes the complicated arabesque of plot is the tension created between a drive toward change and the drive toward repetition. The “repetition compulsion,” namely, the death instinct is in itself demoniac and uncanny, but on the other hand serves to prevent the immediate discharge of life instincts, thus binding the energy of the text<sup>9</sup> —just as the death instinct preserves the energy of Henry Knight. Repetition and return, Brooks further observes, interrupt the simple movement forward, diverting the course in various directions in a manner that necessitates the middle as a complicated detour.<sup>10</sup> This detour, which always has two vying forces within it, makes impressive spectacles in many places other than the passage of Knight's mental landscape. J. B. Bullen notices in this novel “an organic connection between the features of a plot and the visual components through which that plot is expressed.”<sup>11</sup> The reader is invited to watch the movement of a scrap of shale thrown by Knight who tries to investigate the direction of atmospheric currents at the cliff. Far

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9 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), pp. 101–102.

10 Brooks, pp. 107–108.

11 J. B. Bullen, *The Expressive Eye: Fiction and Perception in the Work of Thomas Hardy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), p. 54.

from falling, this shale towers into the air and alights on the ground, its own weight vying with the upward current from the sea. This sort of scenery, in which antagonistic elements mingle with each other, is often made up of various colours of lights; for example, white daylight toned to a blueness contrasted with the yellow rays from a candle in a dark vault, chromatic combinations of autumn leaves, and even the nuance of purple lights — bright purple for love vs. dark purple for death. Such an equilibrium maintained by antagonistic forces is found in the nature depiction and in the mental landscape, where characters can keep some distance from the real world. In actuality, however, these antagonistic elements are often self-destructively united, and the whole balance is lost in a moment. A drive toward change and development is swallowed up in a drive of regression and repetition. In the following paragraph, Elfride is deeply disappointed that her literary originality is threatened by some predecessor:

The star dissolved into the day. "That's how I should like to die," said Elfride. . . "As the lines say," Knight replied — "'To set as sets the morning star, which goes Not down behind the darken'd west, nor hides Obscured among the tempests of the sky, But melts away into the light of heaven.'" "O, other people have thought the same thing, have they? That's always the case with my originalities — they are original to nobody but myself." (p. 319)

As for problems of this sort, Paul de Man observes: "When they (writers) assert their own modernity, they are bound to discover their dependence on similar assertions made by their literary predecessors; their claim to being a new beginning turns out to be the repetition of a claim that has always already been made."<sup>12</sup> In *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, the loss of balance between modernity and history causes the gradual relaxation and breakdown of plot. The plot developed by Elfride and Knight is threatened first by her past affair with Stephen, and next by the sudden close-up of the late Felix Jethway half buried in oblivion, until at last the tension of plot is completely relaxed by Knight's leaving Elfride forever, and by her abrupt acceptance of

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<sup>12</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Pr., 1985), p. 161.

Lord Luxellian's proposal which leads to her miscarriage and miserable death. The more Elfride asserts her originality, the stronger becomes the force of past history to pull her back. Conversely, the harder Knight sticks to Elfride's past, the further he gets troubled with her modernity. The place of her engagement with Stephen is, of all places, on the tombstone of the man who once loved Elfride, Felix Jethway. Mrs Jethway, who puts the responsibility of her son's death entirely upon Elfride, always follows her about and curses her love affairs.

Jethway's tombstone appears once again in front of Elfride and Henry Knight when they take a walk. This reappearance makes Knight even more suspicious of the constancy of Elfride, who has already been forced to confess to him her past relationship with Stephen. Finally, she was dealt a fatal blow by a letter Mrs Jethway sent to Knight, which said that Elfride had run away with Stephen to London and had returned again unmarried. We are told that this "runaway" is "handed down in families, like craziness or gout (p. 278)." Lady Elfride (Elfride's grandmother) as well as Mrs Swancourt (Elfride's mother) had eloped with a lover. Furthermore, Elfride and her grandmother are "alike as peas (p. 278)." In this way, her original life is destroyed one step after another by the fetters of the past. At last her acceptance of Lord Luxellian's proposal has completed this process, because her grandmother came of the Luxellians and Elfride wishes to restore the past glory of her family, that is, to regain her grandmother's title. Even her death from a miscarriage after the marriage ironically repeats her grandmother's case. After all, she is cast in the "rough mould" made by her ancestors, her "novelty or delicacy" completely "lost in the coarse triteness of the form (p. 212)," as is predictively but casually observed by Elfride herself during the conversation with Henry Knight.

On the other hand, the paralysed history is, in its turn, destroyed by the progressive power of modernity. Henry Knight, who has been persistently prying secrets out of Elfride's past love affairs, eventually ruins his own romance. For a more symbolical passage, Mrs Jethway, who is vindictively inquisitive about Elfride's past history, perishes simultaneously with the collapse of the old church tower which is soon to be replaced by the tower of the newest style of Gothic art.

## IV

The tragical nature of this novel has often been discussed in terms of Elfride's inborn plasticity and inconstancy,<sup>13</sup> or Knight's psychologically abnormal self-centredness.<sup>14</sup> But I think the problem goes further than such personal matters. Their final self-destruction proves that they are equally affected by the occasional jarring between development and repetition. Concerning an incompatible phase of modernity and history, Paul de Man observes as follows: "If history is not to become sheer regression or paralysis, it depends on modernity for its duration and renewal; but modernity cannot assert itself without being at once swallowed up and reintegrated into a regressive historical process. . . . Modernity and history seem condemned to being linked together in a self-destroying union that threatens the survival of both."<sup>15</sup>

The extremely ironical atmosphere of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is generated from a phenomenon of discord between development and repetition, the two principal forces immanent in historical, as well as plot-making processes.

(This paper forms a sequel to my previous one, "Repetition and Relativity: The Inner Structure of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*," *Shiron*, No.25 (Sendai, 1986), 69-88, which is based on a paper read at the 28th General Meeting of the Thomas Hardy Society of Japan, held on October 12, 1985.)

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13 Joseph Warren Beach, *The Technique of Thomas Hardy* (New York: Russel and Russel, 1962), pp. 42-43.

14 Rosemary Sumner, *Thomas Hardy: Psychological Novelist* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), p. 122.

15 de Man, p. 151.