THE RELATION BETWEEN THE COUNTRY-HOUSE poem and pastoral is complex. Pastoral poems in Virgil and Theocritus sometimes contain houses or farms as places of retirement. But the country-house poem takes as its special origin the contrast between country and city in Horace. In English literary history, the central tradition for the country-house ideal is Jonson, Marvell, Pope—all poets who had an interest in pastoral as well. The Romantic poets on the whole did not pursue the country-house ideal. Nor do the major Victorians write country-house poems in a strict sense. But what makes Hardy especially important is his renewal of earlier genres abandoned by Romanticism and its inheritors, and at the same time his experimentation with these forms.

Hardy’s experimentation with these forms involves what one might call “subliminal allusion.” Hardy writes poems that allude to the country-house tradition, but in ways that disrupt the country-house ideal. These disruptions involve issues of poetics and the structure of representation in the poems. Hardy’s house poems ignore or overturn boundaries of genre, so that his poems are also pastoral and georgic simultaneously. If Hardian pastoral is about the exile from poetic community, Hardy’s house poems reveal,
from within the locus of community values, the breakdown of those values. The breakdown of generic structure both imitates and reflects the breakdown of the reciprocity between man and the community, which had characterized the country-house ideal.

To see the way Hardy's house poems derive in part from the country-house tradition, and to see the way he uses this tradition in conjunction with pastoral and georgic motifs, we may turn to one of Hardy's earliest poetic efforts, "Domicilium." Florence Emily Hardy placed the poem at the front of *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy.* Even apart from this prominent position in the *Early Life,* "Domicilium" is important. The poem shows in a somewhat rough form some of the pastoral themes Hardy explores by way of the idea of houses and the ideal of the country-house tradition. The Latin title suggests a high value placed on traditions of origin and language; those traditions are a central concern of the poem. But Hardy also disrupts traditional concepts in "Domicilium." We see one type of disruption in the opening stanza, with its foregrounding or exaggeration of pathetic fallacy:

Wild honeysucks
Climb on the walls, and seem to sprout a wish
(If we may fancy wish of trees and plants)
To overtop the apple-trees hard by.

Here the poet describes the exterior of the house where he was born. The wild honeysucks struggle against the walls and against the apple trees behind the house; Hardy begins this poem and essentially his poetic career with an image of struggle in nature. The struggle defines a pastoral that is not simply about domicile, but about the figure of the poet in exile from poetic community emblazoned by the house. The speaker, in describing this pastoral struggle among the vines, the apple trees, and the wall, uses a figurative language that calls attention to its own artifice: "seem to sprout," "if we may fancy wish." This figurative exaggeration is a technique and a way of thinking that Hardy uses often. He uses pathetic fallacy, but openly acknowledges the figurative nature of his description, thus disrupting the fiction of the poetic scene. The figural disruption parallels the disruption of the pastoral scene through violent struggle in nature as signalled by the word "overtop."
The major country-house poems, such as Jonson’s “Penshurst,” Marvell’s “Upon Appleton House,” and Pope’s Horatian Epistles, emphasize order, an economy of householding, and peaceful retirement. What is interesting about Hardy’s “Domicilium” is the tense balance between such peaceful economies and the pastoral energies that threaten to overwhelm, to “overtop,” them. We see that balance in the second stanza, where, despite the flowers that flourish untrained, there is an orderly distribution of spatial flowers and fields. After the flowers, there are “herbs” and “esculents.” And the poet follows these with phrases beginning with “and” or “then”: “and farther still a field,” “then cottages with trees,” “and last / The distant hills and sky.” Here we have an orderly project from near to far, from domestic flowers to the distant sky. It is also an orderly balance between the domesticated economy of the home on the one hand, and, on the other, the important labor found in the fields and the implied laborers in the surrounding cottages. This is the country-house ideal, with its abundance of natural growth signalling the prudent and comfortable life of the house’s inhabitants.

But domestic economy gives way in an abrupt transition at the opening of the third stanza: “Behind, the scene is wilder.” This stanza turns back from the prospect and, in part, undoes the ordered economy of the house in the first two stanzas. In stanza three, the speaker turns from pastoral order, the type of order we associate with Jonson or Pope, to a pastoral that emphasizes the wildness of nature. This “wildness,” which in terms of poetics draws on Hardy’s Romantic heritage, is signalled by such phrases as “uneven ground” and “stunted thorn.” The scene pictures a house put in nature and put in a poetic history that is not a traditional economy but an energetic growth exceeding the bounds of convention. The poet represents this energy in the image of the oak emerging from the pit:

    and from a pit
    An oak uprises, springing from a seed
    Dropped by some bird a hundred years ago.

These lines develop the idea of “a wilder scene” set forth in the opening line of the stanza. Here the speaker explicitly joins together the idea of nature’s wildness with an expansiveness of time.
that constitutes a sense of the poet and even of tradition. It is curious also that the poet echoes the figurative image of the sprouting wish here with the "springing from a seed." In the first stanza, the emphasis on falling created a disruptive sense of uncertainty about the natural imagery, while also calling into question the idea of poetic community through the exaggerated nature of the literary figure; this is one way that Hardy creates a feeling of poetic exile from the house of tradition in this poem and in many others also. In stanza three, the scene creates a similar disruption of the pastoral's reality through the sense of time itself: the vast expanse of time emphasizes the transience of the scene. In this stanza, Hardy hints at the way time itself disrupts the ordered pastoral economy of the country house.

Time's effect on the country house becomes the central theme in the fourth stanza. The speaker emphasizes the sense of time through such phrases as "days bygone," "long gone," and "at such a time." Hardy "undoes" the peaceful order and domesticity of this country house through his extreme insistence on the power of time itself. Just as the uprising oak images the passage of years, time becomes a way of demystifying the order and the superficial domestication of nature. As the speaker in "Domicilium" walks with his grandmother, she describes the pastoral scene in its primitive state fifty years earlier:

"Fifty years
Have passed since then, my child, and change has marked
The face of all things. Yonder garden-plots
And orchards were uncultivated slopes
O'ergrown with bramble bushes, furze and thorn:
That road a narrow path shut in by ferns,
Which, almost trees, obscured the passer-by."

If the vines on the walls of the house impinge on the order of the house in stanza one, here in stanza four, the past itself more severely disturbs that order. In the present, changes over time mark the objects of nature; in the past, the wildness of the scene blocks out the perception of human presence: the ferns "obscured the passer-by." It should be observed also that the second half of the poem mirrors, in terms of structure, the first half. In stanza
two, the order of the country house unfolds through a progressive series of spaces: garden, flowers, field, cottages, hills, and sky. In stanza four, the layers of time—from "days bygone," "now," and "Fifty years have passed"—which recede into the past, parallel the layers of landscape receding into the past in stanza two. While stanza four mirrors stanza two in terms of receding landscape parallel to receding time, stanza four also undoes the order of the country house. The speaker's grandmother tells him that "Yonder garden-plots / And orchards were uncultivated slopes." The speaker replaces the reciprocity between home and surroundings, the peaceful economy of the pastoral retreat in temporal retrospect, with a house isolated in an uncultivated wilderness:

"Our house stood quite alone, and those tall firs
   And beeches were not planted. Snakes and efts
   Swarmed in the summer days, and nightly bats
   Would fly about our bedrooms. Heathcroppers
   Lived on the hills, and were our only friends;
   So wild it was when first we settled here."

Hardy's houses are houses of poetic tradition, and when the poet reveals the tenuous hold on cultivated land and cultural life that his early home possessed, he is acknowledging also his own sense of exile from the pastoral poetry of retirement.

In Hardy's house poems, the ideal of retirement to the country retreat shifts toward retirement into the past. The country house becomes not an emblem of a reciprocal economy between people and the land, but a sign of the placelessness, the sense of exile, when the people who lived in the house have died. The country house becomes a memento mori. We see the elegiac quality in "Night in the Old Home." The "old home" brings back the past to the solitary man who still remains there.

When the wasting embers redden the chimney-breast,
   And Life's bare pathway looms like a desert track to me,
   And from hall and parlour the living have gone to their rest,
   My perished people who housed them here come back to me.

One cannot claim that this is in a strict sense a country-house poem. But the house as an ideal draws upon that tradition. The speaker explores and also overturns the ideal in part through the
intense subjectivity of his voice. The country-house poem usually involves a civic, public tone, but here the speaker, as usual in Hardy, is deeply personal; nevertheless, this speaker does draw upon the country-house ideal through types of negative allusion. Instead of the welcoming hearth, the fireplace contains “wasting embers.” The speaker also plays on the idea of the host/guest relation typical of the country-house ideal. But this relation interacts with the idea of death and absence. The crucial line is the third in stanza one: “And from hall and parlour the living have gone to their rest.” The speaker may be describing guests who, at the end of the evening, retire to their rooms, but the line also suggests those who were living but are now dead. The poet heightens the sense of absence through the images in the preceding line: “Life’s bare pathway” and the “desert track.”

The speaker pursues the idea of host/guest in the country house in the second stanza. The speaker becomes the host, and the guests are the spirits of the past; thus, he transforms the celebration of abundance and peace in the country retreat into a mournful elegy on the house’s past and the past of its inhabitants:

They come and seat them around in their mouldy places,
Now and then bending towards me a glance of wistfulness,
   A strange upbraiding smile upon all their faces,
   And in the bearing of each a passive tristfulness.

The speaker transforms and envisions the country house as a ghost house.

In “Night in the Old Home” the speaker not only alludes to the country-house ideal of festive social relations between host and guest, he changes the host/guest relation into a commentary on the poet’s attitude toward life. Implicit within that commentary one observes Hardy’s concern about his relation to poetic tradition as well. A ghostly past inhabits the house, and the sole living being, the speaker, discovers himself to be a kind of ghost. The irony of the poem lies in that the ghosts of the house are stronger than the poet/speaker. Witness the speaker’s address to the ghosts in stanza three:

   “Do you uphold me, lingering and languishing here,
   A pale late plant of your once strong stock?” I say to them;
"A thinker of crooked thoughts upon Life in the sere,
And on That which consigns men to nights after showing the day to them?"

While the ghosts have a "passive tristfulness," it is the speaker who is the weak figure in the poem. Although he is alive, he portrays himself as spiritually and emotionally dead. He is "lingering" and "languishing." He uses a telling metaphor here: "A pale late plant of your once strong stock." The idea of being too late occurs frequently in Hardy's poems. It usually refers to the poet's relation to tradition, and refers, as well, to the melancholy separation that the living feel for loved ones who are dead. The speaker in stanza three describes the futility of his own "crooked thoughts." His imaginative activity becomes associated with death, as if to think about death were to summon it prematurely. As the poem progresses, the sense of the house as a place of retirement recedes. Yet the relation between the speaker and the ghostly visitors continues the allusion to the ideal of host and guest in the country-house tradition. The reversal of values between the two, however, makes "Night in the Old Home" an ironic turn on this ideal. It is the dead who are the true celebrants of life. It is the poet/speaker, as the ghosts indicate, who cultivates a kind of imaginative death, alone in the house:

'O let be the Wherefore! We fevered our years not thus:
Take of Life what it grants, without question!' they answer me seemingly.
'Enjoy, suffer, wait: spread the table here freely like us
And, satisfied, placid, unfretting, watch Time away beamingly!'

In a strange way, the ghosts' advice involves the country-house ethos: "Take of Life what it grants," "spread the table here freely like us." The ghosts, former inhabitants of the house, celebrate the house's and life's festive abundance unquestioningly. Indeed the ghosts' sadness stems from their perception that the poet/speaker's brooding is a kind of imaginative death, one more destructive than death itself. The poem shares with the country-house ethos the concern with how life should be lived; it departs from that ethos in its emphasis on the power of time and death to bring life to an end. In terms of the latter, Hardy draws upon the elegiac strain
within the pastoral tradition. But Hardy disrupts both traditions by having the dead be the happy ones who try to cheer up the mournful poet. In Hardy’s ironic transformation of the country-house poem, the dead celebrate the festive life in the country retreat, while the living, caught in the memories of the past, are emotionally dead.

Hardy’s house poems usually contain spectral presences of the past. The house constitutes an emblem of the past: it contains signs of the people now dead who once lived there. In “The Ghost of the Past,” the poet combines georgic and country-house elements to create the speaker’s meditations on the fading power of memory. Behind this meditation lies a secondary one on the poet’s relation to tradition, with the house standing for the latter. The poet’s house constitutes a house of tradition in several senses of the term:

We two kept house, the Past and I,
The Past and I;
Through all my tasks it hovered nigh,
Leaving me never alone.
It was a spectral housekeeping
Where fell no jarring tone,
As strange, as still a housekeeping
As ever has been known.

The speaker describes the past of tradition as a “spectral housekeeping.” It is as if the ghosts of the dead, familial and literary, provide the order that festive celebration provides in the traditional country-house poem. The past becomes a double, both a loved one and a poetic alter ego, and this doubling is also the characteristic structure of the poem: the poem explores the alterity of its own poetic structure. This temporal double hangs above the speaker: “it hovered nigh.” And the double from the past bears qualities that comment on poetic sound. This “was a spectral housekeeping / Where fell no jarring tone.”

The economy of this house of tradition is “strange” and “still,” suggesting both the speaker’s alienation from tradition and the tradition’s silence for him now. The silence of tradition suggests the difficulty with which the speaker can respond to the poetic past,
as well as the difficulty he has “hearing” the poetic past in the
present. Again the imagery evokes the alterity, the radical other­
ness, of tradition for the poet/speaker. And yet this alterity implies
gain as well as loss.

In stanza two, the speaker states that he “did not mind the By­
gone there – / The Present once to me.” Here we note the autobio­
graphical element, as this passage becomes yet another chapter in
Hardy’s exploration of his marriage following Emma’s death. But
the stanza tells us something else about the poet as well: it shows
us much of the positive sense of reconciliation, not only with the
woman from whom he became estranged, but within his estrange­
ment from a poetic tradition that defines so much that is valuable
in Hardy’s poetics. His companionship with the absent beloved
bears in it “Something of ecstasy.” Again there is an implicit con­
trast with the country-house ethos. In the country-house poem,
friendship is of central importance: friends gather to share in the
fruitful abundance that the country-house economy produces. But
in Hardy’s reversal of country-house ideals, the friends are absent;
the festivity is one of emptiness, absence, and silence. Out of this
deprivation and solitude, however, arises a kind of creative im­
pulse: the speaker cannot discuss this “Something of ecstasy.” It
is the pleasure of a poetics concerned with alterity itself, with the
radical otherness of creation.

But Hardy’s poetics demands such an ironic reading that even
the “ecstasy” does not remain. This too constitutes an aspect of his
poetic practice:

And then its form began to fade,
Began to fade,
Its gentle echoes faintlier played
At eves upon my ear
Than when the autumn’s look embrowned
The lonely chambers here,
When autumn’s settling shades embrowned
Nooks that it haunted near.

By “form,” the speaker means the past and the woman who is now
dead. But the speaker also means poetic form, and the sounds of
poetry. We observe the poet’s emphasis on sound: “Its gentle echoes
faintlier played / At eves upon my ear.” For Hardy, the love of the past and past loves intertwine with poetry as the form or body of traditional utterance. We have seen that Hardy often represents his relation to the poetic past and his estrangement from it through spectral figures in autumnal scenes. Stanza four of “The Ghost of the Past,” with “chambers” and “woods” “embrowned” by autumn, rehearses once again this scene. The country house begins to decay, and the scenes of the poetic past begin to fade. As elsewhere, Hardy here invokes Keats’s “To Autumn” as touchstone for the problematic of the poet’s relation to tradition.

The final stanza of this poem contains the poet’s conscious allusion to the poem’s own underlying structure. The poem hangs on a country-house “skeleton,” just as the speaker’s memories of the beloved become a mnemonic skeleton.

And so with time my vision less,
Yea, less and less
Makes of that Past my housemistress,
It dwindles in my eye;
It looms a far-off skeleton
And not a comrade nigh,
A fitful far-off skeleton
Dimming as days draw by.

Hardy describes here not simply the fading vision of the past or the woman of his past, he describes the poetic economy of the house of tradition as it informs, and gives shape to, the skeletal support for his poetic house in the present? If there is an “ecstasy” in the companionship of the past, there is also sadness as the poet replaces the poetic past by his own poetry of the present, a poetry which he believes to involve a lessening of vision. The speaker emphasizes this poetic diminishment: “with time my vision less / Yea, less and less.” The skeleton constitutes the ghost of the speaker’s full poetic vision.

Hardy often employs the motif of the fading house as a metonymic image for fading memory and fading poetic vision. The fading or moribund house allows the poet to experiment not only with the country-house idea, but with pastoral and georgic ideas. The moribund, both literal and figurative, state of the country-
A Dwelling's Character

house framework subverts generic boundaries. The country-house poem provides a skeletal substructure for many of Hardy’s poems, but it does not prescribe generic or thematic limits. Thus, in “Where They Lived,” Hardy explores the topoi of leaves within a pastoral scene, but combines it with the device of a type of country house. In the first stanza, the poet creates a picture of an autumn scene in which leaves of various hues cover a bank where two lovers once sat, one of them being the speaker of the poem. A special moment between the lovers occurred on this bank. In the second stanza, the speaker says there had been a summerhouse here. But time has changed that:

The summerhouse is gone,
Leaving a weedy space;
The bushes that veiled it once have grown
Gaunt trees that interlace,
Through whose lank limbs I see too clearly
The nakedness of the place.

As in other house poems in Hardy, the poet uses images of growth and decay to describe the creative imagination in its confrontation with the materials the imagination uses to produce art. The stanza explores absence and loss through the house image, and through the interrelation of spacial plenitude and poverty. Paradoxically, with the decay of the house comes the growth of flora to replace it. But this pastoral vegetative growth presents a curious perspective on both the space left vacated by the house and on the psychic space of the imagination that is the underlying concern of this speaker. This pastoral garden involves both growth and decay. With the house gone, all that is left is a “weedy space.” Full green bushes once veiled the house, but they have “grown” into “gaunt trees” with “lank limbs.” In other words, the “growth” that replaces the house increases the sense of desolation and absence. But as so often is the case in Hardy, this poverty stirs the imagination and clarifies vision. The bushes “veiled” the house, but now through the interlacing boughs the speaker sees “too clearly.”

The speaker now realizes the deceptiveness of the summerhouse and of the moments lived out within its space. For Hardy, the country-house ideal of festive celebration and friendship deceives
by attempting to evade time and its power to destroy everything. The speaker in "Where They Lived," and Hardy also, believe that the true vision of life demands looking clearly at the "nakedness of the place." This vision constitutes, in one sense, the exact opposite of the country-house ideal, which celebrates domestic festivity and friendship. But in another sense, what the poet describes is not the opposite of the country-house ideal, but the logical fulfillment of that vision, its temporal completion, in which the plenitude inevitably turns to emptiness, and the celebration of friendship turns to the mourning of its absence.

Hardy approaches the interrelation of house, lovers who dwell within it, and time which destroys both, from another perspective in the poem "Everything Comes." The poem involves a dialogue between a woman and her lover. In "Where They Lived," the landscape conveyed the desolation of the present in the light of the past; in "Everything Comes," it is the house's newness that is, surprisingly, desolating:

"The house is bleak and cold
Built so new for me!
All the winds upon the wold
Search it through for me;
No screening trees abound,
And the curious eyes around,
Keep on view for me."

Hardy plays on the idea of the badly built country house, one in which the inhabitants do not feel at ease. In many of his house poems, the house is in a state of decay, but here it is the house's newness that creates the sense of desolation. The house is "bleak" and "cold." It does not provide shelter. The winds "search" through it. In the light of Hardy's use of the house as an emblem for the economy of poetic creation and tradition, this poem explores the other side of this dialectic: not the way tradition impinges on creation, but the way creation must necessarily build on tradition. The house lacks "screening trees." In other words, without a type of pastoral garden the house affords neither emotional nor aesthetic shelter from the critical eyes of the neighboring audience. The screening trees become an emerging pastoral space, through which
the poet combines the country-house problem (how one should build one's house) with the pastoral notion of retirement in nature:

“My Love I am planting trees
    As a screen for you
Both from winds, and eyes that tease
    And peer in for you.
Only wait till they have grown,
No such bower will be known
    As I mean for you.”

The speaker demonstrates his love and devotion to the woman by building the bower of trees. The imagery in this stanza relates to the idea of poetic creation: the act of "planting" is like the seeding of a page with words. The proleptic image of the trees after they are grown works along with the speaker's acknowledgement of intention: "as I mean for you." The work of building the bower becomes, analogously, the work of poetic making and meaning: the building through language of country-house and pastoral ideals.

But as so often in Hardy's exploration of the values and conventions of poetic tradition, in "Everything Comes," time destroys what tradition creates. The speaker builds tradition through the grove or bower, but its building requires years: "with years, there grew a grove." Through time the speaker builds up the country house, surrounding it with a pastoral grove. One should understand this movement to be bound up with the processes of poetic creation emerging out of the grounds of tradition. But at the very same time, in typical Hardian irony, all that the speaker works for is being made meaningless. Through time he builds the grove for the house, but through that very same time the woman begins to die. She acknowledges his work, but also its futility. "Yes, I see! / But— I'm dying; and for me / 'Tis too late." We have observed the expression "too late" elsewhere in Hardy's work: in Hardy, this phrase always carries within it implications of the poet's disinheritance. The speaker mourns the death of his lover, but he also mourns his inability through work to stem time's destruction. His poetic work is also "too late."

Hardy's house poems insistently explore memory and love, as well as poetic memory. In "The Strange House," a visitor takes a
tour with a knowledgeable guide of a house whose past keeps re-emerging in the present. Spectral presences besiege him. In the first stanza, the speaker hears a piano “Just as a ghost might play.” The speaker concludes from this episode that this is a “strange house.” In the second stanza he hears sounds: “I catch some undertone here, / From some one out of sight.” This house seems strange to the speaker because a past which he does not entirely understand inhabits it; the house seems strange not only in the sense of odd or unusual but in the sense of foreign. The house’s strangeness mirrors the speaker’s estrangement from it. Here we have the country house as place of exile in which festivity and friendship exist, but only as spectral hauntings from the past. Building the house in “Everything Comes” signifies the poetic task. In “The Strange House,” the poetic task involves uncovering these spectral hauntings to figure out their significance. Indeed, the guide says the principal speaker possesses visionary and poetic power.

—“Ah, maybe you’ve some vision
Of showings beyond our sphere;
Some sight, sense, intuition
Of what once happened here?
The house is old; they’ve hinted
It once held two love-thralls,
And they may have imprinted
Their dreams on its walls.”

We can see how the house incorporates memory. The creative imagination of the two lovers who formerly lived here inscribes this love on the house. The walls become a type of memento mori: “they may have imprinted / Their dreams on its walls.” In this sense, Hardy’s country house turns into a ruin, over and about which the speaker creates an elegy. But the creative economy exists not only in the house itself as a sign of the lovers who once lived there; it gains force in the speaker’s act of remembering and envisioning these lovers of the past. The speaker reads the writing the lovers once wrote. And he hears the sounds which bespeak their presence in the house now. The strange distance between speaker and former inhabitants constitutes a telling reminder, as well, of the distance between the poet and poetic tradition.
Hardy's house poems represent a psychic economy that is also a poetic economy. Hardy often divides this economic structure into two, and this division may be understood as a telling critique of the poet's relation to tradition. In "The Two Houses," the poet creates a dialogue between age and youth. The new house boasts of its immaculate condition, and at the same time this new house looks scornfully at the dilapidated state of the old house: "Your gear is gray, / Your face wears furrows untold." But the old house provides a response that draws upon the country-house ideal while also calling up themes from pastoral elegy: "'Yours might,' mourned the other, 'if you held, brother, / The Presences from aforetime that I hold.'" The old house becomes an emblem of the poet that bears the full weight of tradition impressed on its structure. As elsewhere, the house functions as a spectral allegory of the poet's relation to tradition. Spectral figures constitute not simply people from the past haunting the present, but an analogous poetic process as well. The new house thus becomes a poetic ephebe who must learn the wisdom that the old house bears within it. The old house says:

"You have not known
Men's lives, deaths, toils, and teens;
You are but a heap of stick and stone:
A new house has no sense of the have-beens."

The old house goes on to provide a catalogue of the various types of inmates who have left their marks of presence on him: babes, corpses, dancers and singers, bridegroom and bride. These presences are mnemonic and poetic; they define the character of a country-house festivity that exists solely by virtue of the past and past inhabitants. They define as well the poetic character:

"Where such inbe,
A dwelling's character
Takes theirs, and a vague semblance
To them in all its limbs, and light, and atmosphere."

The key to the analogue between house and poem lies here in the phrase "vague semblancy," a phrase that defines the poet's task as one involving representation and error or difference from that
being represented. The turn away from pure representation constitutes the peculiarity of language as it defines poetry and the poetic character. The phrase "vague semblancy" also suggests the spectral or ghostly nature of the poet who feels his exile from the very subjects he wishes to represent. These subjects are always in the past, and they always achieve their presence in the poem through a kind of "haunting," what Stevens calls "ghostlier demarcations." When the new house achieves this poetic character, when it is no longer an ephebe, it too will bear the burden of this haunting:

"Such shades will people thee,
Each in his misery, irk, or joy,
And print on thee their presences as on me."

It is no accident that the poet chooses to represent the memories of the past as a type of writing, since the two houses suggest a new or inchoate poet, and a mature poet who has faced tradition and bears marks of the struggle. Here the country-house ideal is very subtly alluded to, but not as an external celebration of the retired life, rather as an internal struggle with the past in the creation of a poetic text.

Hardy's house poems insist on this connection between memory and the building and decay of houses. In "The Man Who Forgot," the speaker's memories about a house and its inhabitants deceive him. The speaker finds himself at a crossroads, recalling the house where a woman he once loved still, he thinks, resides. He asks a passer-by to find the house for him, convinced that it still exists:

"A summer-house fair stands hidden where
You see the moonlight thrown;
Go, tell me if within it there
A lady sits alone."

When the boy returns, the speaker's illusion is "laid bare" both literally and figuratively. The house's presence, so strong in the speaker's mind, clashes with the reality, as conveyed by the boy's words, of its absence.

"I went just where you said, but found
No summer-house was there:
Beyond the slope 'tis all bare ground;
Nothing stands anywhere."
The emptiness of the space overturns the possibility of the speaker’s realizing a country-house ideal of friendship in retirement to the summer-house. In stanza six, the boy describes his encounter with a man who in turn describes the way the house “grew rotten.” This decomposition reminds one very much of the many pastoral poems in Hardy’s work which describe flowers and trees in a state of decay. Hardy modulates from country-house retirement to his recurrent motif of a negative pastoral space in the process of decomposition. This process of decomposition has bearing on his poetics. The speaker does not so much forget, despite the poem’s title, as remember too well. His pictured pastoral scene from the past replaces the actual scene of the present. Thus, as in “The Two Houses,” the poetic material or memories define the speaker’s mind and shape his representation of the present. In fact, it is the past which gives him voice. Faced with present realities the speaker is silent:

   My right mind woke, and I stood dumb;
   Forty years’ frost and flower
   Had fleeted since I’d used to come
   To meet her in that bower.

But Hardy’s exploration of the interplay between country house and pastoral bower sometimes sounds a more positive and less elegiac note. Sometimes pastoral song endures in the present; the country house stands intact and the pastoral bower remains, not merely in memory, but in the day-to-day repetitions of reality. Hardy celebrates the pastoral moment and the poetry of the country domicile in “A Bird-Scene at a Rural Dwelling.” In this poem, the speaker describes birds singing outside of a country house. As the human inhabitants wake up, the birds move further away from the house. But the birds never stop singing; near the house they “whistled sweetly.” Further away:

    they seek the garden,
    And call from the lofty costard, as pleading pardon
    For shouting so near before
    In their joy at being alive.

In Hardy’s poems, bird song allies itself with pastoral song. And the poet here celebrates the power of poetry as a joyful force. Yet
even here, time's power qualifies this joy: “Meanwhile the hammering clock within goes five.” In an uncharacteristically affirmative reversal, Hardy transforms the power of time into a type of poetic repetition that celebrates pastoral song in the rural dwelling:

I know a domicile of brown and green,  
Where for a hundred summers there have been  
Just such enactments, just such daybreaks seen.

Here the house is not haunted by the past but exists in a joyful present created by the repetition of its “enactments” and “daybreaks.” For Hardy, it is an unusually positive vision of the retirement theme and its bearing on pastoral song.

The poem “Silences” is more characteristic of Hardy’s transformation and turn from the country-house ideal and from the ideals of pastoral song. Like “Afterwards,” this is a poem about the end of a tradition as well as the end of life. The economy of landscape and house mirrors the dialectic between pastoral song and silence.

There is the silence of a copse or croft  
When the wind sinks dumb,  
And of a belfry-loft  
When the tenor after tolling stops its hum.

We observe the powerful sense of resonance and echo which the speaker creates through images of the after-sounds of types of song: “the wind sinks dumb,” “after tolling stops its hum.” These after-sounds continue in stanza two, where the speaker describes a “lonely pond.” But it is not simply a pond; it is a place where a man drowned. Here the silence becomes a sign of death, an auditory memento mori; the passage reminds us of how crucial a role the pastoral elegy plays in Hardy’s poetry. But the substructure, the skeletal spectral figure, of the country house lies here also.

But the rapt silence of an empty house  
Where oneself was born,  
Dwelt, held carouse  
With friends, is of all silences most forlorn!

Here Hardy “undoes” the country-house ideal, not through images of decay but through images of emptiness. The absence of
people, of life and festivity, produces silence, but paradoxically that silence constitutes eloquent testimony to the power of Hardy’s poetic language. We see this power in such phrases as “rapt silence”; the word “rapt” connotes careful attention. There is an energy in this silence that, in a sense, emerges from the ruins of the poem’s pastoral and country-house themes. Even the phrase “of all silences most forlorn” is a kind of poetic ruin. One thinks of Keats’s “forlorn” and the demands of reality confronting those of the imagination.

But what is especially interesting in terms of Hardy’s use of the house is the way that, in alluding to the absence of poetic song and country-house festivity, he brings them forward to mind in retrospect. The melancholy of pastoral elegy intertwines with country-house pleasure. In the poetic economy of Hardy’s country house, the ideal of retirement remains, but it always turns to the past. Within this past it turns to themes of absence and loss.