2 Beginnings and Endings in Hardy's Major Fiction

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What we call the beginning is often the end.
T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', Four Quartets

Because of the length of a novel, our memory of it is disproportionately related to its opening and ending. In the opening chapters, the narrator creates for his readers the physical world in which the novel takes place and the first episodes of the story which begin to reveal the personalities of the characters. But more significantly, beginnings introduce the novel's cosmology and the standards and values by which actions will be judged. (Of course, since the reading of a novel is an ongoing process, as the reader experiences subsequent episodes, the moral terms on which the reader makes his or her judgement will be modified.) Each novel has its own Genesis and Apocalypse; when we open a novel, our world is closed off and the genesis of a new ontology begins. The opening chapters of the novel, that form which more than any other seeks to have the inclusiveness and specificity of the real world, mimes the process of Creation as the author's language imposes shape and form upon silence and emptiness. Imperceptibly, as we read the first sentences, our sense of time gives way to the internal imagined time of the novel. The ending is an apocalypse which reorders the significance of all that precedes; it is the moment when the imagined world is abruptly sealed off from us and we return to our diurnal activities. ¹

If, as I believe is true, on the first reading of a Hardy novel one has a sense that he has anticipated and almost experienced actions that occur for the first time, it is because Hardy has created a world where actions

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seem inevitable. Hardy's prophetic (and proleptic) openings in which every detail seems to foreshadow major themes, in conjunction with conclusions that confirm these openings, are responsible for this sense of inevitability. The openings take the reader into a world where man's aspirations are blunted, as external circumstances connive with man's hidden flaws, and where the well-meaning characters rapidly discover that they live in a world in which things are quite likely to turn out badly. By 'fulfilling' the promise of the beginnings, the endings imply that the world in which men live is closed and invulnerable to essential change. The title of Tess's last phase, 'Fulfilment', implies, I think, something about Hardy's world-view and aesthetic. By fulfilment, he means the inevitable bringing to fruition of the pattern that derives from the interaction of the central character's psyche with the world in which he (or she) is placed. After *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the endings fulfil the prophecies of the opening chapters. The ingredients of the destruction of central characters are implicit in the novels' beginnings. That the language, plot, and narrative comment of the opening are frequently echoed throughout, especially at the ending, enchances this sense of inevitability. When the reader reaches the ending of a Hardy novel, it is as if a prophecy were fulfilled. Hardy's endings perpetuate conditions that have prevailed before his specific narrative has begun and will prevail as given conditions of the imagined world in which these events take place. Turning away from a traditional benevolent resolution, Hardy's endings confirm rather than transfigure what precedes and reject the notion that experience brings wisdom and maturity.

After *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 'fulfilment' of the novel becomes 'fulfilment' of the pattern of a character's demise; this fulfilment is ironically juxtaposed to the narrative that the protagonist tells himself in the form of hopes and aspirations for the future. As Hardy's career progresses, the central character's perspective replicates the narrator's at an earlier and earlier stage in the novels. Hence the ironic distance between the narrator and character disappears and the narrator becomes an empathetic spokesman, an apologist, and an advocate for those central characters whom he envisions to be victims. The gradual movement from innocence to experience that is so characteristic of English fiction before Hardy (except, perhaps, *Wuthering Heights* and *Tristram Shandy*) is, in Hardy, far less noticeable than the intensification of the central character's plight and the narrator's conclusion that the cosmos is