The Fourteenth Line of ‘In Tenebris, II’

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The three poems Hardy titled first ‘De Profundis’ and then ‘In Tenebris’ have suffered a curious critical neglect over the years – in part, it seems, because Hardy himself had occasion to call such emphatic and memorable attention to the meaning of just one line of one of them. I refer to his use in 1922, in the ‘Apology’ to Late Lyrics and Earlier, of a segment of the fourteenth line of ‘In Tenebris, II’ (1895–96) – ‘... if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at/the Worst’ – to illustrate what he thought of as his fundamental optimism, his ‘evolutionary meliorism’ as he called it there in a spirited reply to charges that his poetry was pessimistic. I quote the passage in full:

While I am quite aware that a thinker is not expected, and, indeed is scarcely allowed, now more than heretofore, to state all that crosses his mind concerning existence in this universe, in his attempts to explain the presence of evil and the incongruity of penalizing the irresponsible – it must be obvious to open intelligences that, without denying the beauty and faithful service of certain venerable cults, such disallowance of ‘obstinate questionings’ and ‘blank misgivings’ tends to a paralyzed intellectual stalemate. [The phrases ‘obstinate questionings’ and ‘blank misgivings’, it can be noted, are borrowings from the ninth stanza of Wordsworth’s Intimations Ode, of which more later]. Heine observed nearly a hundred years ago that the soul has her eternal rights; that she will not be darkened by statutes, nor lullabied by the music of bells. And what is today, in allusions to the present
author's pages, alleged to be 'pessimism' is, in truth, only such 'questionings' in the exploration of reality, and is the first step towards the soul's betterment, and the body's also. If I may be forgiven for quoting my own old words, let me repeat what I printed in this relation more than twenty years ago [in 1901, in Poems of the Past and the Present], and wrote much earlier [in 1895–96, presumably] in a poem titled 'In Tenebris':

If way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst:

that is to say, by the exploration of reality, and its frank recognition stage by stage along the survey, with an eye to the best consummation possible: briefly, evolutionary meliorism.¹

With remarkable uniformity, critics have followed Hardy in using this line, the fourteenth of the second poem of the trilogy and in itself not a complete line, to illustrate a fusion in Hardy of a fundamental optimism and a stubborn realism. In the words of one of them, the fourteenth line of 'In Tenebris, II' offers 'a positive strategy of hope based on honest realism.'² Another has urged that Hardy's 'reliance upon taking "a full look at the Worst" as the only 'way to the Better' runs through his works', the novels as well as the poems.³ Only one critic, Frank Pinion, has taken exception to this view of the line. He had pointed out, in his Commentary on the Poems, that the fourteenth line stands in antithetical relation to the thirteenth ('Let him in whose ears the low-voiced Best is killed by the clash of the First'), then conjectured as follows about the meaning of the two: 'It may be that as an evolutionary meliorist Hardy assumed that the First was the Worst, that civilisation had to progress slowly against the forces of evil and unenlightenment.'⁴ It is my view that just the opposite is so, that is, that for Hardy the First was the Best, and civilisation (as well as time and consciousness) a deteriorative process. But Pinion is correct to say that lines thirteen and fourteen are closely wed. Furthermore, he is the first critic to see in line thirteen and its ambiguous word 'First' a glance at time and history, though in my view it is a despairingly nostalgic glance into the past. This gloss on 'First' is important to describing a personal element in line fourteen, as shall be seen. I will now quote lines thirteen and fourteen together, along with the two lines that follow, for in fact lines thirteen through sixteen, the last four lines of the poem, are neither grammatically nor semantically detachable from