

Types of Obscurity in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and Maurice Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure*

Sabbar S. Sultan *

Abstract

This study is an attempt to view the concept of 'obscurity' as reflected in two fictions belonging to two different writers with different intellectual ideologies and artistic backgrounds.

As the present study shows, each novel betrays its own type of obscurity and careful inspection illuminates both the conscious and unconscious manifestations of this topic as well as their grounds.

* Department English Language- Al Isra University, Amman, Jordan.

Obscurity: The Concept and its Implications

To begin with, the term 'obscurity' underlies a number of references and suggestions. Such is the difficulty to pinpoint its meanings that the New Critic William Empson finds it necessary to devote a whole book to showing and elaborating the various aspects of ambiguity or obscurity in his renowned book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Indeed in this book, Empson undertakes the task of illuminating the semantic and structural aspects of some key words in poetry or in literature in general since the word 'may have several distinct meanings; several meanings connected with one another; several meanings need one another to complete meaning'(p.5). The multiplicity of meanings is not the whole issue here as the arguments in Empson's book revolve around a whole range of linguistic meanings and implications. What is apt to be stated in advance is the host of suggestions and shades of meanings that emanate from the same word. *The Webster Dictionary* differentiates between the literal sense of the word and the metaphoric implications it carries. 'Obscurity' is defined here as 'a diminishing of illumination, the obstruction or impairment of vision'. The metaphoric implication of the word is relevant here, 'the making of the mental perception or object of that perception murky or confused'. The outcome of this additional meaning is the 'illogicality, or confusion, indistinctness'(p.1558). Indeed, as will be shown in the following pages, the 'obscurity' in the titles of Thomas Hardy's novel and Maurice Blanchot's is associated with certain implications in the authors' minds before embarking on the task of jotting it on paper. The extent of success in fulfilling this task will be shown later. At the moment there is a need to elaborate further the philosophical indication of obscurity as used by the existentialists like Sartre, since Blanchot draws upon the findings of this existential philosophy in all his fictions and critical postulates. Such philosophers accuse traditional morality in general, and the Aristotelian, in particular, 'of simplification—namely the simplification of man and morality'(Shourey 4). According to writers like Blanchot, man represented by Thomas and Anne is responsible for making judgments and decisions'(ibid.8).

This specific concept of obscurity is not there in Hardy's bleak world. It is within these terms that this study views the types of obscurity in the two novels and their intellectual starting-points as well as their

different manifestations. Such interpretations of the same topic draw upon the fact that, 'Every writer and artist as well as every reader has his own psychology, his special family background, his own age with its own concerns'(Myers xiii).Indeed this is the crux of the matter in the present study as each writer views and presents his topic differently and eventually creates his own 'obscurity' which stems from different intellectual and cultural perceptions. However, the titles of the two novels in question written by writers of different cultural, intellectual and artistic orientations(the British Thomas Hardy(1840-1928) and the French phenomenologist, Maurice Blanchot (1909-2003) foreground this idea and eventually drive scholars to investigate this type of obscurity which qualifies the disposition and nature of the two protagonists (Jude and Thomas).As such, the best approach in dealing with this elusive topic is to figure out this element in both novels, the meanings intended by the authors and those projected by the readers so that the explicit and implicit levels of meanings and insinuations in both texts will be shown. This task can be attained through a close reading of the texts in order to verify the success or failure of the authors in their original plans and virtual implementation.

Manifestations of ' Obscurity' in Jude the Obscure

Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) is a very good example and fertile field for the contemporary theory of reading or reception of the text put in vogue by Iser, Jaus, Fish, Holland, Ingarden and others. One reason is the ever-increasing chasm between the author's intention and the reader's intentionality. It is representative of what the two New Critics, W.K.Wimsatt and Monroe Bredsley call "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) in that what the author had in mind does not correspond with what is actually stated on paper, the final artistic achievement as will be shown in due course. The novel has succeeded in arousing such controversy and disagreement among critics and fellow-writers that the author has found himself forced to do two things: defend this ill-fated book vehemently and at the same time renounce the act of novel-writing altogether and shift to poetry. The arguments raised by the author are not always distracting or unwelcome as the New Critics keep emphasizing. On the

contrary they are of prime significance in illuminating a very problematic text. If we piece together Hardy's self-righteous apologies and read his own biography written by his wife (*Early Years*, 1930), we can notice some remote parallels between his fiction and reality, the dramatic persona and the real people on whom Hardy has modeled his own characters. The main line of the plot in *Jude the Obscure* is, of course, the endless oscillation between loveless marriage (Jude-Arabella) and the inaccessible and unattainable, yet desirable relation between Jude and his cousin, Sue Brideshead. If Jude is doomed to spend his time in this vicious circle of a one-sided love with a Circe-like woman, the same holds true to his cousin, Sue, who has to struggle desperately to keep her balance in a very hectic and erratic situation. She elopes with her teacher, Phillotson and does her best to make a circumscribing and conventional environment (Dorset) accept her free-wheeling behavior. The long-awaited union between her and Jude takes place and the two have three children in addition to the one by his first marriage to Arabella. Nevertheless, the two characters remain far from happy as the environment does not welcome or support such affairs responding to the dictates of the heart and body. According to the terms set by the novel, the children finally hang themselves in a move suggestive of their utmost despair and the realization that they (the children) have become a burden to their miserable parents. Realizing her fault, Sue at last reunites with her former husband and leaves Jude to spend his last years with his former wife, Arabella. In short, the book hinges on a number of deaths, the most salient of which is the death of hope and ambition. Now let us see how this book has been received by its readers and critics and their concepts of its overriding issue of 'obscurity'. This needs to be contrasted with the author's perception of his own book. As he puts it, 'like former productions of this pen, *Jude* is simply an endeavor to give shape and coherence to a series of seemings, or personal impressions, the question of their consistency or their discordance, of their permanence or their transitoriness, being regarded as not of their moment' (Hardy vii). The subjective side of this book is self-evident here. If we add to this the biographical facts of Hardy's relation with his own cousin, Tryphena Sparks, and hers with Horace Mousle, his dearest friend, the events in the novel already summarized do verify the validity of Hardy's statement or

testimony. Moreover, Hardy undertakes the task of unraveling the thematic sides of the book and the adverse reactions,

For a novel addressed by a man to man and woman of full age; which attempts to deal unaffectedly with the fret and fever, derision and disaster, that may press in the wake of the strongest passions known to humanity; to tell, without a mincing of words, of a deadly war waged between flesh and spirit; and to point the tragedy of unfulfilled aims, I am not aware that there is anything in the handling to which an exception can be taken. (Hardy vii)

In its general framework, the story of *Jude* is similar or perhaps a fictional account of the real sufferings of the father of existentialism, the Danish thinker, Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) whose painful life experiences convinced him about this inevitable duality,

I am a miserable person, fixed since early childhood, in a pain amounting to insanity. The profoundest reason is the disproportion in me between the soul and body. I conceived this disproportion as the thorn in my body, my cross, my limits. I saw in it the price to be paid to get a spiritual power that has been seeking its theory among my contemporaries. (Marquet 335)

Hardy's intellectual premises are sound enough. The problem of obscurity lies in the artistic actualization or implementation, the attempt to put these abstract and philosophical postulates in a suitable shape that would crystallize them in a coherent, convincing and well-wrought way. Out of the welter of various and even sharp reactions to the book and its author, it is evident that what Hardy had in mind does not always go in line with or correspond with what the reader can gather out of this tantalizing text. Hardy's central issue behind writing *Jude* lies in its very title: the author's espousing of classical determinism and its gloomy picture of life. It is exemplified in the following excerpt from the novel,

'We must conform! She said mournfully. All the ancient wrath of the Power above us has been vented upon us. His poor creatures and we must submit. There is no choice. We must. It is no use fighting against God!' (p.417)

These statements presented by the characters and often supported by the author's own interpolations help in crystallizing the leitmotif of the novel and consequently the obscurity of the protagonist. Even the minor characters are endowed with this skill in predicting what is going to befall Jude and cause his endless obscurity. His aunt, for instance warns him about getting married to the flirting and playful cousin, Sue,

And there'll be a worse thing if you, tied and bound as you be, should have a fancy for Sue. If your cousin I civil to you, take her civility for what it is worth. But anything more than a relation's good wishes, it is stark madness for 'ee to give her. If she's townish and wanton it med bring thee to ruin.(p.161)

Scholars of Hardy's fiction and its intellectual background keep stressing his full awareness of ancient classical philosophies, particularly the Greek doctrine of life (Brown 4). Among these, and perhaps the most outstanding of all, is the cool, indifferent world, keen on thwarting man's dreams. In more than one poem Hardy refers to this leitmotif in his thinking,

I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was specter-gray
.....
And all mankind that haunted night
Had sought their home hold fires
The land's sharp features seemed to be
The country's corpse out leant,
.....
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed flavorless as I.(Bayley 19)

Apart from this inescapable influence on Hardy's thought and view of man, the other equally influential factor in his thinking is his response to the challenges of the age, particularly that of Darwinism. Indeed Hardy has remained most of his life loyal to its tenets and debasing views of

man and the universe. By implication, Hardy's religious faith is seen to be weak or even agnostic, in contrast to his wife's sturdy and pious belief (Brown 17). Despite his recurrent apologies that he is not a pessimist and that he is simply 'a meliorist' (Blunden 111), the fact remains that the obscurity of his *Jude* rests in this issue: the pathetic failure to materialize those dreams haunting Jude's imagination. Hardy is not the only one to tackle this topic in his age. Matthew Arnold in his "Resignation" raises the same concept of life and the universe,

Not wilder is the general lot

Because our spirits have forgot

In action's dizzying eddy whirl'd,

That something that infects the world.(Tinker 60)

The same holds true to Carlyle's views of man which inevitably seep in Hardy's works.

Therefore, the obscurity in *Jude*, given the author's preconceived plans and the biographical information about his intellectual background, is a philosophical one: the inescapable outcome of a prevalent and wide-ranging thought that reduces man to a mere, willless puppet. The questions that need to be posed here are: how does the author represent it in a fictional text and what are the potentialities of its success? And above all, how is it viewed by its recipients? Definitely, there is no specific and conclusive answer to these as the novel's emphasis is laid on man-woman relationship and its twists and turns. Obviously the author's intention behind composing the book is the exploration of the various levels of the characters' experiences. In other words, it is a drama of conflicting fates and incompatible desires enmeshed in their constructing world. No doubt, the characters are entangled in a set of whims, desires, conflicts, plans and counter plans in a world which they dimly perceive. Yet the final impression one gets is that the unfulfilled academic ambition of the protagonist turns out to be subsidiary and marginal in comparison with the love affairs and their permutations. In other words, the obscurity of Jude shifts to other levels, those of social and psychic life rather than the frets and struggles to materialize that haunting ambition. This duality

between the emotional and public life is the core of the obscurity. For instance, in chapter one, the novel suggests that Jude's schoolmaster, Mr. Phillotson, before leaving the rustic district of Marygreen tells, Jude, the stonemason, about the glittering life of the city and fascinating academic life,

You know what a university is, and a university degree?

It is the necessary hall-mark of a man who wants to do anything in teaching. My scheme, or my dream, is to be a graduate, and then to be ordained. (Hardy 5)

This farewell statement of a man that has won the admiration and respect (at least so far) of Jude is climactic and decisive in the latter's consciousness. From this moment on, he will start the painstaking process of self-education and scholarly interests. The 'private study' includes Hesiod, the Greek Testament, mathematics, and History. In his interior monologue, Jude refers to his deep-rooted zest for knowledge and self-cultivation. In the following excerpt, there is an unmistakable correspondence between the narrator's voice and the personae's due to its thematic significance,

It had been the yearning of his heart to find something to anchor on, to cling to—for some place which he would call admirable. Should he find that place in the city life? Would it be a spot in which, without fear of farmers, or hindrances, or ridicule, he could watch and wait, and get himself to some mighty understanding like the men of old of whom he had heard?

'It is a city of light', he said to himself 'The Tree of Knowledge grows there,' he added a few steps further on. (p.24)

'It is a place that teachers of men spring from and go to...

'It is about what the many call a castle, manned by scholarship and religion'. (p.25)

This central emphasis laid on Jude's insatiable longing for knowledge soon begins to wane in the rest of the book and this great fire for self-development gradually extinguishes. Instead the protagonist finds himself entrapped by the trammels of love and matrimony affairs and their endless distractions and commitments. Thus only a casual reference to this issue is given as, for example, when his former wife plans secretly to rid him of the malaise of reading and study, 'When he should begin to get frightened a bit, and stick to his trade, and throw aside those stupid books for practical 'undertakings'(p.67). Throughout the many chapters that follow it, the author chooses to keep it as an offshoot or outcome of the emotional and psychological side of the book. The arguments centre on the pangs of the unsatisfied yearning for love instead of knowledge. Indeed it is permeated by Jude's fits of jealousy, self-blame and accusations involving two men (and a third who is absent) and two women and their husbands or lovers. Only at the end of the book does one get an ironic reference when the academic ceremony of conferring degrees takes place at the moment when Jude lies dying. The author's intrusion or interpolation can be felt in the last statement,

From a distance came voices; and an apparent noise of persons stamping.

'What is there?', murmured the old woman.

'Oh, that's the doctors in the Theatre, conferring Honorary degrees on the Duke of Hamptonshire and a lot more illustrious gents of that sort. It is Remembrance Week, you know. The cheers come from the young men'.

'Ay; young and strong-headed! Not like our poor boy here!

(p.489)

As already suggested, this line of the plot has not received its due emphasis and elaboration in comparison with the emotional and erotic one whether in the actual ,physical space assigned to it or the number of events and incidents that are put at its service. The author focuses his primary interest on the man-woman relation (which is a social topic)

instead of elaborating the first topic which is ontological and philosophical (indeed the obscurity springs from this issue, rather than from anything else). The imbalance between these realms of the book's experience leads to some black spots or 'obscure' points or misunderstandings on the part of readers or recipients of his novel. Given this fact, it is not surprising to hear from Hardy himself that a bishop set *Jude* on fire for 'its anti-religiosity', wishing to burn Hardy alive (p.vii). The ostensibly acceptable topic of the tyranny of ill-fate has turned Hardy's book to be in line with those books that have found their way to burning such as Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) or the writings of the mystic speculations of Hussain Bin Mansoor Al Hallaj (858-922 A.D.) In a situation like this, the normal assumption one has about the book is the author's ignorance or unwillingness to enter in a quarrel in which he will be the only loser. However, it is the reading of the text and its interpretation that render the book outrageous in the way it was conceived.

The present reading sees the book as simply an attempt to view and trace the unpredictable behavior of a woman who is so elusive and puzzling in her attitudes that all types of feminists and those interested in psychological theories have found in her an inexhaustible source for all types of investigations and premises. The author has devoted ample space to analyzing or showing her contradictory drives she herself fails to rationalize and understand why she is different from the rest,

I am so cold, so devoid of gratitude, or so something, that even this generosity hasn't made me love him, or repent, or want to stay with him as his wife. (p.284)

Moreover, Jude's position in the list of lovers or husbands is the third (she is already married to an Australian from Sydney and is ready to live with a man (Phyllotson) in a loveless and 'nominal marriage'). In other words she is ready to have a free and physical love in an age and environment that do not approve of such unconventional and iconoclastic acts. It is striking to note the condescending tone of her words in dealing with poor, dumbfound Jude,

It was so kind and tender of you to give up half a day's work

to come and see me! You are Joseph, the dreamer of dreams ,
 dear Jude. And a tragic Don Quixote. And sometimes you are
 St. Stephen, who, while they were storming him, could see
 Heaven opened. O my poor friend and comrade, you'll suffer
 yet. (p.244)

In all these affairs, Jude is far from obscure: he appears to be totally helpless and passive. The author has not exerted much effort to show his challenges and sacrifices for his original ambition, that of being a distinguished scholar. Jude is content to quote Shelley's lines which indirectly comment on his pitiable situation,

There was a Being who my spirit oft
 Met on its visioned wanderings far a lot,
 A seraph of Heaven, too gentle to be human,
 Veiling beneath that radiant form of woman.(p.292)

Accordingly, once Jude's 'obscurity' is stripped from its ontological and philosophical meanings, nothing obscure remains in his character. It is true that he remains all his life the unknown 'stone- mason', only the poor rustic people know. But his position which he loathes does not undergo any radical change due to his inertia and passivity. Instead of committing itself to a deep and intricate investigation of his psychological drives, the book is content to develop those of Sue, the Yang of the novel. What is characteristic about the book is that it is the others who play the game of hide-and-seek with him and he is often left as the underdog, unable to grasp or figure out what is going on. It is through these dealings with Sue that Jude realizes the extent of evil and harm that others can inflict on his life and play havoc in it. Also he perceives much about himself as he is caught in the whirlwind of events: his pathetic failure to cope with the changes imperceptibly taking place in people's consciousness and understanding.

Much has been said about the vague and incompatible conflicts and drives smoldering in Sue's ego which eventually qualify her to be the 'obscure' agent of the book. However, one more excerpt from her

recurrent monologues can enhance this impression and reveal some sadistic or masochistic streaks in her mood,

What tortures me so much is the necessity of being responsive
to this man whenever he wishes, good as he is really!—the
dreadful contact to feel in a particular way...I wish he could beat
me or be faithless to me, or do some open thing that I could talk
about as a justification for feeling as I do.(p.253)

This failure to reconcile the exigencies of the 'flesh and soul' by which Hardy has described Jude's position actually applies to Sue's case. It is Sue who represents those traits fully as the actual action of the book shows (Boumelha 147).

In other words the novel's lines—the topical versus the timeless, the sociological and psychological vs. philosophical—do not receive equal emphasis. Hence the obscurity of the book can be viewed from other angles than the one intended by the author. It is within these lines of argument that Malcolm Bradbury's view revolves, 'its two main characters can seem to be both self-consciously perverse and the victims of an uncomprehending society' (Draper 25). The reservation one can have about this appraisal is that Jude is far from "perverse". It is the others who have this side and he has done all he could to evade its subversive and rampant effects. Here one is apt to refer to Hardy's artistic and intellectual standpoint as it is relevant to the overriding vision of the text. He is quoted to be saying that he admires Henry fielding rather than Emile Zola (ibid. 40).The behaviors and instinctive reactions of the characters show the overwhelming and irresistible impact of the environment on its dwellers. Indeed this is one of the explanations behind Sue's unpredictable fits of chaotic and abnormal conduct,

I ought not to marry—I belonged to an odd and peculiar family
--the wrong breed for marriage.

That's strange. My father used to say the same thing to me.(p.204)

Out of these impressions, conclusions, and statements one can infer the following view: all types of readers and researchers find in the book a catalyzing –point for their preconceived ideas and views of the artistic work and their expectations of it. In the midst of the pursuit of keeping track of these tasks they overlook this self-evident point in the whole structure of the book: the promise to show that Jude is in principle 'obscure.' Hence the different readings of this novel and its author from cultural, ideological, psychological and feminist viewpoints. Indeed psychologists and feminists have excavated this text and its intellectual background. The latter are encouraged to see in the book the image of 'the New Woman, particularly in her sexual life'(Ingham 9). The psychological sides of the book center on the twists and turns in the heroine's disposition and readiness to shift from one extreme to another with equal ease, a point that supports the deep psychological levels of the book (Howe 145). Indeed the striking contrasts between Jude and Sue invite different judgments and evaluations. If Sue has been labelled as a 'human pig' for her indiscriminate sexual life, Jude represents the opposite as he appears to be one of inviolable dignity: he suffers more for others than for himself. Given these facts about Jude's nature, it is logical to state that the elements of obscurity lie in the others with their treacherous and subversive plans and projects rather than the protagonist. In one of his renowned statements, Hardy asserts that 'the business of the poet and novelist is to show the sorriness underlying the grandest things, and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things'(qtd.in Draper 33). When tested according to this yardstick, the balance or synthesis between the two poles of the characters (Jude and Sue) is not fully maintained as Jude's "grandeur" outweighs the sordid facts of his life. The opposite holds true to the frigid and enigmatic Sue.

In a word, the obscurity of Jude is negligible in psychological terms when he is compared with others. He only remains 'obscure' in the academic and scholarly field which remains an always unfulfilled dream. This obscurity has not been elaborated adequately. Thus the thematic and technical or artistic planes of the novel do not have the expected harmony. As such, the reader and the author cannot collaborate in agreeing on the book's final innuendoes and meanings. *Jude* is a text that is susceptible to various interpretations of readers. This multiplicity of readings is neither intended by the author nor approved as seen through his complaints in the preface of his early

editions of the book. It is a direct and unintentional outcome of a text whose structure is so open-ended that it invites all readings, including the drastic ones and their subversive effects on the author and his career as a novelist.

Manifestations of 'Obscurity' in Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure*.

In contrast to Hardy's writings which are exclusively creative, Maurice Blanchot's mode of writing is a hybrid one in its deliberate blurring of the boundaries between what is creative and critical, abstract and concrete. This aspect of his literary product is by itself sufficient to make the reader expect all sorts of obscurity and obfuscation, thematic or technical, deliberate or unintentional. If we realize that he superimposes his work of fiction on a certain myth like that of Orpheus, for instance, as an underlying framework, it becomes necessary to give an account of his intellectual and artist background so that the obscurity of his *Thomas* will become clearer. This is because Blanchot's work in general is a demanding one that entails a great extent of awareness and presence of mind to catch his subtle insights and suggestive touches. As a phenomenologist, Blanchot feels free to transcend the common and unravel unprecedented realms in human consciousness.

Since Blanchot's own literary and philosophical view is fully steeped in virtual obscurity and the man swaddled himself in his last decades in total isolation and retreat, the useful approach in a situation like this is to give an idea about his experiences, interests, attitudes and their eventual impact on his fiction and its obscure points. The element that is worth-mentioning in this regard is his deep interest in philosophy which he studied at the University of Strasbourg. There he became the close friend of the French phenomenologist, Emanuel Levinas and the ideas of the latter will be reflected in Blanchot's own philosophical premises. The fact of the matter is that Blanchot is often classified as a phenomenologist whose philosophical views are embedded in his creative and critical books and essays. In the forties of the 20th century (1932-1940) he worked as a journalist with unmistakable right-wing and anti-

Semitic tendencies (Seymour-Smith 507). However, after the occupation of France by the Nazi forces in the World War II and the sham death-sentence made by a Nazi officer and his division on Blanchot (an episode that immediately brings to mind Dostoevsky's famous Siberia act), Blanchot's career underwent a radical change. This will be recorded in his *The Instant of My Death* (1994). Since then he has preoccupied himself with the leftist ideologies and doctrines, especially those of anti-war activities like the war or aggression waged by the French forces against Algeria in the 1960s.

Apart from these tempestuous events in his life and their effect on his world views and judgments of literature and human thought, one is apt to refer to his relationships with other philosophers and writers such as Georges Bataille. Indeed the writings of Bataille, Nietzsche, Camus, Heidegger, Kafka, Barthes, Sartre, Foucault, and many others will inform many of Blanchot's critique and fiction. He is not simply a passive force repeating the ideas of others. Throughout his life he has proved to an influential power that others will take into consideration whether they agree with him or not. He represents an overwhelming influence on the great names of post-structuralism and deconstruction such as Barthes or Derrida. After the subversive years of 1945, Blanchot's career was marked by seclusion and silence. In the last decades of his relatively long career (1907-2003), Blanchot suffered from poor health and many physical ailments. Perhaps this construes the tone of his later writings (Haase 3), particularly *The Writing of Disaster* (1980).

Of all the founders and theorists of contemporary literary theory in the West, Maurice Blanchot remains the most controversial one because of his provocative, fresh, and sometimes uncanny notions about literature, art, philosophy and above all his specific concept of writing and reading. Apart from the mystification of his material, the style itself has got its own particularity. The Bulgarian critic, Todorov, illuminates this side of Blanchot's writing by saying,

Blanchot's critical work is so brilliant that it ends up posing a problem. His statements, at once limpid and mysterious

,exercise an undeniable attraction...any attempt to interpret Blanchot in a language other than his own seems to be impeded by an unspoken taboo. The alternative that remains open seems to be a choice between silent admiration(stupor) or imitation(paraphrase, plagiarism).(Todorov 55)

Many of Blanchot's critical writings have been absorbed and assimilated by the great 20th century French ,American and English critics such as Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, De Man, Hartman, Kristeva...etc. Some of them are ready to acknowledge their debt to him in his overriding influence while others simply negate that altogether. Roland Barthes can only say the following regarding Blanchot's effect on his own critical discourse and practices, particularly in stressing that 'writing accentuates not objects, but their absence, and the Nietzschean exploration of the impossibility, of the nothingness of existence'(Barthes 99). Moreover, Blanchot is an early figure in pointing out the inadequacy of the language. He has drawn our attention in his critical writings, novels and ecrits, to the ever-growing chasm between symbol and object, signifier and signified, expression and thing. Literature for Blanchot is 'not a series of works but a nascent language, a collection of series negating reality, a void, and absence'(Bree 157).Needless to say, such arguments lay the foundation for the postulates of critics like Derrida, Foucault and Barthes in their recurrent emphasis on the ephemerality of the language and the absence of the material object. The literary experience is seen as emphasizing the divorce between the aesthetic world of art and the objective reality. Creative writings and critical ones (and his *Thomas the Obscure* being one of them) have been occupied by this paradox. Shakespeare's *The Tempest*(1611) ,for example, revolves around the verbal insufficiency and incompetence of the linguistic medium so that the audience is forced to 'confront the abyss of linguistic signs'(Walter 61). Beckett's trilogy (*Molloy*,*Malone Dies*,and *The Unnamable*)(1953)explores this problematic situation in detail. Beckett's dream does not end here. In an unpublished novel, he tells us of his desire of solving this situation,

I shall write a book, he moved, tired of the harlots of earth
and air... a book where the phrase is self-consciously smart
and slick. The experience of my reader shall be between the
phrases ,in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the
terms of the statement.(Ben-Zvi 186)

Many of Blanchot's critical and creative texts focus on the act of writing itself, its ephemeral nature, and evanescence. In this particular point ,one may add, Blanchot is not unique or pioneering as the Russian Formalists such as Jakobson or Schklovsky have already investigated this field and emphasized the literariness or 'poetics' of the literary text. If Heidegger believes that 'the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary, uncanny', this call is actually a reiteration of the Russian concept of 'defamiliarization' which Blanchot elaborates as the attempt of literature ' to make the stone stony, a continual search for that which has preceded literature into language'(Schwenger 100).In his experimental novel, *Thomas the Obscure*, these topics actually form the leitmotif or the crux of the book. Here Thomas sees himself in various settings, some or all of them are hallucinatory. As indicated earlier, the writer is seeking to purge himself of the 'ordinary' common poison, his own perception. As one of his critics puts it, Blanchot 'see the word-on-the paper of the writer destroying the object it signifies'(Seymour-Smith 507).Yet Blanchot has his own contribution to this resourceful subject. In his *The Space of Literature* (1955) he emphasizes the absence of a synthesis or rapprochement between the writing subject and what is being written. The critic Paul de Man clarifies Blanchot's critical stand in the following excerpt,

The writer can never read his own works. It is, for him, strictly inaccessible, a secret which he hopes not to wish to confront...
The impossibility of self-reading coincides with the discovery that, from now on, there is no longer room for any added creation in the space opened up by the work and that, consequently, the only possibility is that of forever writing the same work over again.(De Man 65)

What matters here is the priority given to the text while the role of the producer of the writer seems to be negligible or marginal at best. Indeed Blanchot states elsewhere that creative writing is a sort of self-annihilation and that the writer, just like Orpheus in his continuous entanglement between gaining and losing, attains the aesthetic experience while annihilating his individuality.

The reason for all this is that there is no correspondence between what is inside literature and what is there in the objective reality,' the shift from a world where everything more or less has meaning ,where there is darkness and light, to a realm where ,literally speaking, nothing yet has meaning ,towards which ,nevertheless, everything that has meaning reaches back, as towards its origin'(Ray 2). There is much to be said here as the titles of his two influential prose texts, *The Gaze of Orpheus* and *The Sirens' Song* not only evoke classical echoes ,but also they refer to the creative process and the costs it inevitably entails. If Orpheus hinges on the impossibility of achieving a kind of synthesis between creativity and matrimonial life, the story of Ulysses and his challenges of the dangers of the Sirens illuminate these painstaking tasks. Unable to resist the infatuating but destructive songs of these Sirens, Ulysses made his sailors lash him to the mast while they, ears stuffed with wax, piloted the boat to safety. Thus he could cheat the Sirens, hearing their song without incurring destruction. Gabriel Josipovici has the following to say about the connotations of this primordial scene,

Ulysses was cunning and resourceful, but did he in fact triumph over the Sirens? Did he from the safety of his ship, really hear the true song? Or is that reserved for those who go to the Sirens openly? One could also say, from another perspective, that Ulysses was not in fact saved, since after hearing them he was condemned to repeat their song for ever in the words of the *Odyssey*?(Blanchot,1982, 8)

This idea of the indeterminacy and endlessness of the meaning which keeps taking different forms and manifestations will be the favorite field for critics like Derrida and his renowned concept of 'différance', the

endless postponing of the literary meaning and concealment as a result of the writer's failure to command his own medium or the slippery side of the language itself. Also Barthes's famous article 'Death of the Author' (1967) and Foucault's 'What is an Author' (1970) have their own starting point in Blanchot's cogent arguments stated in *The Space of Literature* and many other books. As De Man puts it, Blanchot 'wants us to take the work for what it is and thus to rid it of the presence of the author' (de Man 64). Thanks to Blanchot's critical discussions, the idea of 'the death of literature' takes its final and conclusive shape. The manifestations of this epistemological and intellectual malaise are many. Among these is the realization that the reader gradually replaces the author in determining the final meaning of the literary text and the critic competes and defeats the writer in the literary process (Kernan 2). Blanchot anticipated the calls for the vigorous role of the reader when he mentioned that 'It is said that every writer writes in the presence of a certain reader' (Blanchot, 1995,359).

The only defense or justification for such a lengthy introduction is the fact that Blanchot is a puzzling figure in the creative and critical scene not only for people from different languages and cultures but also for his own European community. Leaving his critique aside, we find that his fiction never veers from this pivot. Indeed his fiction, represented by his *Thomas the Obscure* belongs to the self-referential type inaugurated by Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760-7) and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914). It seeks to investigate its own tools and reminds the reader of the fictionality of its text. Moreover there is a successful wedding between the creative and the critical, or if you wish, the creative is made to serve the critical and exemplify it, concretize it, as it were. His fictional texts pursue one invariable line: the keen interest to show how 'the formal features of a text, matters of style, can be indices to large intellectual and cultural matters' (Strier 211). The linguistic levels of his fiction can not be isolated from his thematic ones. In one of the anecdotes of *Thomas*, the common notion of reading virtually inverts: it is the text that reads the reader,

Under the pressure of a liminality that binds reader to what he reads, Thomas's reading mutates until it begins to manifest the

enigmatic properties that it finds in the book he is reading—
like a language with no bottom, rooted in the absolute ,a
spontaneous cabala opening the worlds on the page intensively
read. (Quash 218)

This great emphasis on the linguistic components of literature is part and parcel of the intellectual movement that Balnchot initiates or founds (post-modernism) whose overriding principle is the view that language is not simply a means of knowing the truth; rather it is the means of producing or generating that truth. Hence the whole issue in his fiction is a celebration or the attempt to show the different variations of this topic. Out of this linguistic texture keenly wrought the reader is expected to pick up the topics he feels gaining foregrounding and charge with various connotations and references.

One of these issues informing *Thomas the Obscure* is the impossibility of death. Thomas repeatedly fails to reach the end that death signifies. He therefore remains consigned to the state of indeterminacy and vacillation. Anne's death appears to be a gift for him so that he can have the ideal image of death. In *The Space of Literature*, there is detailed rationale of this topic in *Thomas*. Here is his account,

At first glance, the preoccupation of the writer who writes in order to be able to die is an affront to common sense. It would seem we can be sure of at least one event: it will come without any approach on our part, without our bestirring ourselves at all, it will come. That is true, but at the same time it is not true, and indeed quite possibly it lacks truth altogether. At least it does not have the kind of truth which we feel in the world, which is the measure of our action and of our presence in the world...This explains why no one is linked to death by real certitude. No one is sure of dying.(p.95)

The title of his *Thomas the Obscure* also brings to mind some echoes of a famous sample in Western thought, the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus or Heraclites (540-480 B.C.), remembered for his cosmology and the mystery enveloping his personal life. Heraclitus complained that men failed to comprehend the logos ("reason"), 'the universal principle through which all things are interrelated and all natural events occur, and thus lived like dreamers with a false view of the world' (*Encyc.* 860). Indeed the duality of truth and fiction which is the core of Heraclitus's thought is at work in Blanchot's 'obscure' figure of his novel. This is tantamount to saying that Blanchot's novel is actually an abstract and even obtuse piece of fiction that reaches the borders of dream, illusion, the nature of language, its inherent barriers and above all the impossibility of creating an artistic work without arousing at the same time the assumption that the whole thing is fictive, a make-believe. Take the following excerpt which represents his technical and linguistic assumptions about the fictional text,

Anne saw him coming without surprise, this inevitable being in whom she recognized the one she tried in vain to escape, but would meet again everyday. Each time he came straight to her, following with an inflexible pace laid straight over the sea, the forests, even the sky [...] Anne enveloped in this profound insensitivity, silent immobility, carried away by which revealed her, feeling all the calm of the universe condensing in her through him, just as the sparkling chaos of the ultimate noon was resounding, mingled with the silence, preserved by the greatest peace, not daring to make a move or to have a thought... (p.86)

A further example is helpful in enhancing this fictive-factual relationship. Thomas is often interiorized in Anne's consciousness so that his own reality gets more and more questionable. It is a state in which there is an overlapping between these two levels,

Thomas came in. But the presence of Thomas no longer had any importance in itself. On the contrary, it was terrible to see to what extent the desire to enjoy this presence, even in the most ordinary, had faded. Not only was every motive for clear communication destroyed, but to Anne it seemed that the mystery of this being had passed into her own heart, the very place where it could no longer be seized as an eternally badly formulated question.(p.70)

Indeed Anne's ruminations, obsessions and misgivings are no less indicative than Thomas's in betraying the destabilizing states of consciousness, intimacy and virtual solitude,

In all the souls which surrounded her like so many clearings, and which she could approach as intimately as her own soul, there was a silent closed and desolate consciousness [...],and it was solitude that created around her the sweet field of humans contact where among infinite relationships full of harmony and tenderness, she saw her own mortal pain coming to meet her.(p.72)

In his critical essays about his own art and that of others, Blanchot gives his rationale of what the novel should be. For instance, in his article, 'The Pure Novel'(1943), one comes across some illuminating insights about his own ideal of the novel and its objective. As he puts it, there is a need to dispense with the verisimilitude which is considered as the pillar of the Balzacian type of fiction and prioritizes Lautermant's type,i.e., the inner world to produce likeness to the outside world. It disclaims the very similitude that every existence presupposes; regardless of habit and custom, it seeks to fashion, to mould the form in which it will become manifest [...], since the role of verisimilitude has no value, the novel is free to transform reality not just colour it different[...], It secretes its own world. It is master of its own appearance.(Holland 39)

In another article in the same book, he states his unmistakable admiration of William Faulkner's *The Sound and Fury* (1929).In 'The Novel is a Work of Bad Faith'(1947), he spells out this problem or weakness in the art of fiction: the inescapable lack of correspondence between the fictional personae and the writing subject. If the character is schizophrenic, psychopath or retarded, there is always the risk of not presenting a true picture of what is going on. He quotes William

Faulkner's statement or testimony concerning the difficulty of presenting such situations,

Clearly, I who am writing am not one that level, which means there is a degree of bad faith, and there is always literature. For if I wish to be 'unreflecting' consciousness', then I am not one, since I am obliged to know what one is and thus to reflect.(ibid. 64)

It is within these terms that one can tackle *Thomas the Obscure*. As a novel, it hinges on certain clear-cut epistemological and ontological views pertaining to man and his apprehensions, premonitions, and reactions to the incessant pressures and challenges of the outside world. As in the philosophical texts of Sartre, Barthes, Beckett, Foucault, Heidegger, and Derrida, literature is no longer a realm for imaginative and fanciful flights. As Blanchot identifies its role on one of his critical works, 'Let us suppose that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question'(ibid. 300). The 'question' posed by *Thomas the Obscure* is the sincere and serious effort to come to grips with reality and perceive its challenges or demands. This philosophizing of literature is part and parcel of Blanchot's intellectual and artistic enterprise. It is like stating the obvious when one refers to the fact that he studied philosophy in Strasbourg and had a lasting friendship with the French phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas. His philosophical trend has its disciples and admirers in the practices of Marguerite Doras, Samuel Beckett and Jacques Derrida, to mention only a few. In terms of disposition and idiosyncrasy, Blanchot is known for his reticence and eventual silence. According to Michel Leiras, 'He was astonishingly silent and seemed to me remote, even absent'(qtd.in Bident 8). In reading this uncommon and exceptional novel, one immediately has the impression that the author is intent on not falsifying or oversimplifying reality in order to coax the reader. Such practices are beyond the scope of Blanchot's interests both as critic and novelist. Uhlmann's cogent arguments about Beckett's fiction hold true to that of Blanchot since the latter, after all, created a rapprochement between art and philosophical disciplines,

The writer and philosopher might at times be said to approach similar ideas[...] The philosopher often sets out from the concept

to describe a sensation, whereas Beckett (or Blanchot) sets out from sensations which indicate or congeal about concept.(p.28)

As already indicated, the novel deliberately throws overboard all the conventions of the traditional fiction—time, place, plotting, solid, characterization,...etc. If Blanchot has put an end to all these ingredients of fiction (here he goes further than what has already been done by the Irish James Joyce), the overall outcome is a daring attempt of stripping the narrative in the hope of excavating the characters' consciousness and capture what lies underneath. As he puts it in his epigraph, his primary objective is daring if not hazardous,

If one is right in making no distinction between the figure and that which is, or believes itself to be, its center, whenever the complete figure itself expresses no more than the search for an injured center.(Blanchot,1988,3)

What sort of person or figure is this Thomas, the obscure? The author willfully and wistfully shuns any relevance or contextualizing of his events or people. There are no specific or useful details or entries that would help the reader to perceive or visualize the contours of his characters, let alone a full and identifiable name. The book is content with yoking the main character's presence with the epithet 'obscure'. Is this putative obscurity inherent in Thomas's character or a trait imposed by those surrounding him? Such questions are hard to answer with a reasonable degree of assurance. However they bear crucial import for the main point in the novel. In general, *Thomas the Obscure* is marked by a great extent of parentheses, digressions, and free association of ideas. Such ruminations, vertigos, self-expressions, interlocutions epiphanies, figments of the mind, ricochets, impossibilities, investigations, revelations, psychic indulgencies and above all the impossibility of speaking or establishing actual and fruitful contacts with others. For instance, the author investigates Thomas's consciousness and probes the half-perceived dualities informing all his actions and perceptions,

I had apart of myself submerged, and it was to this part, lost in a constant shipwreck, that I owed my direction, my face, my necessity.(p.97)

The obscurity then lies in this particular side of Thomas's character and his vague relationship with Anne and its ramifications. It is not only the split ego that emerges to the forefront in Thomas's thinking, but the physical and psychological presence and absence as well. Indeed most of the arguments Blanchot presents in his critical analyses have their convenient space in this novel. A character of Thomas's hypersensitive nature is fit to articulate the deep philosophical ideas the novel abounds with. Here Blanchot could explore the intriguing questions of life and death, the overlapping between the two in addition to the intricate question of the meaning of existence,' Death was a crude metamorphosis beside the indescribable nullity which I nevertheless coupled with the name Thomas' (p.97). In another situation following Anne's death, Thomas talks about this the striking state of ambivalence where death can be a new life or life-in-death,

Her face, more beautiful from one instant to the next was constructing her absence. There was not a single part of her which was still the prop of any sort of reality. It was, then, when her story and the story of her death had faded away together and there was no one left in the world to name Anne, that she attained the moment of immortality in nothingness, in which what has ceased to be enters into a thoughtless dream.(p.91)

The pursuit of the ephemeral and evanescent in the conception and awareness of the human experience bestows upon the novel a distinct touch. The psychological manifestations of the 'obscurity' of the title can be shown in the following excerpt when Thomas is given the vantage-point of psychoanalyzing his innermost drives,' My existence became entirely that of an absent person, who, in every act I performed, produced the same act and did not perform it'(p.100). Interestingly, Thomas perceives keenly his own 'strangeness' or obscurity as the hallmark of his own personality,' I was like her. My strangeness had as its cause all that which made me not seem strange to her'(p.100).

Rarely does the author present plausible or logical reasoning for Thomas's alienation. The reason behind this, as far as one can guess, is that this fiction is not primarily concerned with the outside reality and its

main interest is what lies or simmers within the ego. Thomas appears in a split of ego: two incongruous states cohabiting in one body,

With one hand showing that I was indeed there with the other-what am I saying?-without the other, with body which, imposed on my real body, depended entirely on a negation of the body, I entered into absolute dispute with myself.(p.97) .

Hence it dispenses with the tools of daily contacts with the visible or observable reality. *Thomas the Obscure* is permeated with the striking sense of inertia or inaction. The only element that is at work is the mind. The two characters in the novel (Thomas and Anne) are seen to be entrapped in suffocating worlds. Yet they have keen sensations about what is going on beneath the level of consciousness. This is not surprising if we recall that the philosophical aspect of the present novel lies in this very aspect of obscurity and deliberate contextualization. If the novel has got a certain meaning, yet it has a new concept of it, or as it has been described, 'its meaning is the talking about meaning'(Popovics 154).Part of the difficulty fostered by the novel and its radical construction lies in its choice of a very slippery area in human experience: the subject or human ego in its daily encounters with reality and its different fluctuations. As Schweiger rightly suggests, 'it is the impossibility of establishing a stable self and representing an individual's life through language'(p.147).

In the first page, we see Thomas swimming alone and enjoying the inner peace and solitude. The human-natural relation is pretty central here, A piercing cold paralyzed his arm. The water swirled in whirlpools. Was it actually water? One moment the foam leapt before his eyes in whitish flakes, the next the absence of water took hold of his body and drew it along violently. His breathing became slower; for a moment he held in his mouth the liquid of which the squalls drove against his body.(Blanchot,1988,8)

The pleasure indulged in here will be followed by his solitary stretching body among the trees on the seaside. In the hotel the reader gradually perceives the extent of his aloofness and alienation (a typical image of what Colin Wilson labels as the outsider in his famous book in the 1960s).Such is the indifference towards others (or at least, this is what he

conceives) that he makes a puerile gesture to draw the attention by tapping violently on the table. In the mean time he slights those who show some interest in him,

He was invited to sit down. He passed up the invitation. They encouraged him more strongly and an elderly woman next to him asking if he had swum that afternoon. Thomas answered yes. There was a silence: a conversation was possible then? Yet the woman looked up at him with a reproachful air and got up slowly.(p.19) This keen sense of isolation will soon be dispersed the moment he gets in touch with Anne, the equally vague character in the book. She is' the tall, blonde girl whose beauty awoke as he looked at her. She had seemed very pleased when he came to sit with childish wish to keep apart'(p.20).

A situation of this sort betrays the caprice and whimsical attitudes of Thomas in his oscillation between longing and loathing, between desire and apprehension. If he has slighted the gracious and encouraging act of the old lady, it is now his turn to be ignored by the much desired girl. Indeed the book abounds with situations and examples of Anne's uncommon idiosyncrasy before she surrenders to her obscure and unexplained mental breakdown. That is what actually precipitates her death. Her slow death is manipulated to comment on and elicit different reactions of those surrounding her, including her own mother, Thomas and other acquaintances. So it has become evident that the novel is not concerned with showing the rationale behind the striking disruption in human ties and the rampant air of indifference and antipathy. Also gradually nit transpires that the gist of the matter in this novel is obscurity and its philosophical implications. The author is content with giving a minimalist and suggestive picture of his characters. One of Blanchot's disciples, Michel Foucault refers to Blanchot's people and their tragic drama. He identifies Blanchot's unusual use of the sense of place as 'placeless places'(Foucault 2).The pathetic failure of Thomas to get integrated within the social fabric or at last to fulfill what is expected of him represents the quintessential pint of the whole book. Thomas appears to be a typical outsider who is content with observing rumination and analyzing the phenomena and attitudes of others and himself. Hence the ever-growing rift Adorno talks about is strikingly present. Thomas appears.'To be a historical category,both the outcome of the capitalist

process of alienation and a defiant protest against it'(Adorno 249). Anne's presence in the novel, apart from giving Thomas a means or *raison d'être* for thinking outside his egotistic concern, is a further clue reinforcing the overall impression that the whole book is a journey within the folds of the human ego and the various reactions of the human riddles. What matters here, as Deleuze argues, is 'the interiority of experience'(p.315). If Thomas's behavior is marked by this intentional interiority, the same holds true to Anne's. Indeed her lack of response to others is an issue the novel is at pains to elucidate,

In this exploration which she had taken so naively believing that she might find the last word on herself, he recognized himself in search of the absence of Anne, of the most absolute nothingness of Anne.(p.62)

If the indirect interior monologue accentuates the puzzling nature of her presence, it is normal that Thomas is perceived from the same angle, that is, as an individual whom she misunderstands and misconceives.

Anne saw him coming without surprise, this inevitable being in whom she recognized the one she might try in vain to escape, but would meet again every day[...]. Each time when the world was emptied of everything but the sun and this motionless being standing at her side, Anne, enveloped in his silent immobility, carried away by this profound insensitivity.(p.41)

Technically speaking, Thomas's obscurity is manifested through description and presentation, recalling and evoking and associating. In all these Thomas appears as subject and object, perceiving and perceived. Thomas's vision appears throughout all these that it is sprinkled with images of void, ambiguity, passivity and sheer silence. Blanchot resorts to the most rhetorical diction to represent Thomas's blight,

Like a man walking up alive in his coffin, terrified, he saw the impalpable earth where he floated transformed into air without air, filled with swells of the earth, of rotten wood, of damp cloth.(p.57)

Blanchot's own biographical data can be taken as a means of shedding some light on the obscurity enveloping Thomas's life which is indicative of the author's own painful experiences during the German occupation of his own country (France) during the Second World War. In these hectic

days, Blanchot has to resort to deliberate obscurity. In those hard times, Blanchot, as Holland asserts, found in literature a means of coming to terms with what seemed increasingly like the imminence of the end. By the time *Thomas the Obscure* appeared in 1941, the end that had for so long seemed imminent had really come. (Holland 6)

The atypicality of the novel is manifested in more than one plane, particularly the multiple voices: Thomas's and Anne's which eventually intensify the characters' images in the reader's consciousness, although the motives and intents of the characters in question remain vague and subject only to guessing. What is striking most is the recurrent image of suffocation and vertigo inherent in Thomas's character,

He surrounded her, like an abyss. He revolved about her. He entranced her. He was going to devour her by changing the most unexpected words she would no longer be able to expect. (p.50)

In his 'Negative Eschatology of Maurice Blanchot', Kelvin S. Fitzgerald has the following to say concerning the connotations of this uncommon, if not bizarre relation that ties the two to each other, 'With this couple Blanchot examines the extent to which we are separated from our fellow human beings by our solipsistic natures' (p.1). The sinister and mysterious side pertaining to man-woman is no doubt the leitmotif of the whole novel. Blanchot's philosophical premises revolve around the notion that human beings are riddles to others as well as to themselves. Anne harps on this idea as she ruminates on the obscure Thomas,

Not only was every motive for clear communication destroyed, but to Anne it seemed that the mystery of this being had passed into her own heart, the very place where it could no longer be seized except as an eternally badly formulated question. (p.70)

In his influential book, *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot sheds some light on the controversial subject-object relation and its twists and turns. It is a relation that is swaddled by misconception and mystery, impossibility in relation with the Outside; since this relation without relation is the passion that does not allow itself to be mastered through patience, impossibility is the passion of the outside itself. (p.46)

The impossibility of establishing any human contacts is the primary postulate of the novel: human beings are doomed to be wide apart, although they do their utmost best to bridge the gap or overcome such barriers. Obviously this is beyond their conscious will,

The only possibility I would have to diminish the distance between us would be to remove myself to an indefinite distance. But I am infinitely far away now and go no farther. As soon as I touch you Thomas...(p.55)

As this is the main issue of the novel Blanchot elaborates it and shows its various dimensions, especially the presence of others which represents a sort of intimidation a neutralizing force, Slowly, by a pitiless protocol, they took from her the tenderness and friendship of the world. If she asked for the flowers she loved, they gave her the artificial roses with no sent [...].They had exiled the pleasant seasons, asked the children to cry out in joy elsewhere, called into the streets all the anger of the world.(p.79)

If others have downgraded her position in society, ignored her most intimate desires in her moribund state, Thomas sees that she typifies the best thing he admires,

'I suppose', he said, and 'that Anne had premeditated her death. This evening she was peaceful and noble...without the last cowardice which makes the dead wait to die by the doctor's hand.(p.89)

It is a tautology to state that in the above-mentioned excerpt Thomas has some imperceptible change in his character, thanks to Anne's sustaining role in his life. However, the final outcome of this imperceptible transformation does not change the status quo in that he remains essentially an alien individual, failing pathetically to unravel the threads of his predicament.

Blanchot's narrative structure deserves a further elaboration as it serves to represent the obscurity of the title and its implications. In the first six chapters of the book, it is Thomas's conscious thought that is foregrounded and the reader's perspective concentrates on his character. The rest of the book (with the exception of the last chapter) is devoted to showing Anne's perceptions where Thomas engages the forefront. If we

put this situation in Hegelian terms, we can say that the first section is the thesis. Its antithesis lies in showing the various manifestations of Anne's consciousness and her dealings with Thomas, her family and acquaintances. The synthesis or resolution is what follows Anne's death and its concomitant changes in Thomas's realization of people and objects around him. The positive side that distinguishes the final pages of the novel is indicative of a change, however flimsy and ephemeral, taking place in his character. Only in this section of the book does the reader recognize the unmistakable biographical touch in the novel as a work of art written at a very early stage in the author's career,

It is I, the origin of that which has no origin. I create that which can be created. Through an all-powerful ambiguity, the uncreated is the same word for it and for me.(p.108)

This long-awaited epiphany about the invaluable role of the creative writer is coupled with a fresh view of the natural world where things suddenly acquire a fresh turn,

The fruitless trees; the flowerless freshness and youth at the tips of their stems[...]the spring enveloped them like a sparkling night and he felt himself called softly by this nature overflowing with joy. For him, an orchard bloomed at the centre of the earth, birds flew in the nothingness and an immense sea spread out at his feet.(p.113)

For all the endless speculations, judgments and investigations of Thomas's inner misgivings and conflicts, the right question that needs to be posed here is: do we really understand Thomas, or ourselves, for that matter? The answer is only embedded within the title of the book as Thomas's very existence is swaddled with ambiguity and lack of understanding of himself and others. Hardly could he seek to evade and transcend his mounting solipsism and ego-centric interests and obsessions. The whole book is a journey into the interior ego of the character where there are shimmering images of a world that never stops intimidating its denizens with threats and demands. From this perspective, one could argue that Blanchot's novel is a philosophical text where the individual and the other are put in polar opposition and the reconciliation is hard to attain. In contrast to Hardy's world, Blanchot's fundamental premise is that the real beginning is to understand ourselves

as the first clue towards understanding those surrounding us and the world at large.

A Comparative Analysis of the Two Novels

Throughout the abovementioned pages, it has become evident that Thomas and Maurice Blanchot belong to totally different intellectual and artistic starting-points and orientations that are exemplified in their characteristic treatments of the topic of 'obscurity' in both *Jude the Obscure* and *Thomas the Obscure*. The following points can be gleaned from the analyses of the manifestation of the obscurity as perceived by the two writers.

The time span in Hardy's novel is long and it traces the various stages in Jude's career and his strife to rid himself of the obscurity that has been his lot. He appears oscillating between the demands of his merciless environment and the yearning to academic distinction. Time here is clockwise and mechanical. It is linear and is judged by its virtual passing as seen in the culminating moment of the graduation ceremony. It is the indication of the end of the dream once and for all. In contrast, Blanchot compares the whole situation around one event (Anne's uncommon relationship with Thomas and her slow death). This is a roundabout way of saying that Hardy's fiction is traditional and Victorian, while Blanchot's is postmodernistic where the action is minimized and the consciousness is brought to the fore. Beckett's trilogy will be no more than a recapitulation of Blanchot's experimental fiction. By implication the external action in Hardy's novel is stressed, although the psychological effects are explored, but not as deeply as in Blanchot's introspective novel. Blanchot, as has been shown in the excerpts from his novel, pays much attention to the inner world and half-perceived visions swarming in the memory and consciousness. In other words, the external and internal worlds can be considered as the touchstone for gauging the success or failure in typifying and embodying the obscurity of the two protagonists. Although their objectives are the same, that is, 'obscurity', their final achievements are different. So are the reactions of their readers, given the artistic schools they belong to and the objectives they have in mind.

Death is certainly pivotal in both novels. Death can be the virtual death the individual as seen in Anne's case or in Jude's children. Also it can be the death of Jude's dream or ambition as in his characteristic reactions and ruminations about his painful experiences and grievances. However, in Blanchot's novel, this experience becomes part and parcel of the very structure of the book and its impact will be wide-ranging in Thomas's view of life and those surrounding him. In Hardy's novel, death is not given the priority one finds in Blanchot's novel, as Hardy's interest lies in reflecting a vast realm of experience in which death only represents a merely passing phase.

The narrative point of view in both novels is interesting and worth elaborating. Obviously Hardy tends to adopt the male viewpoint in presenting the fictional material, especially the behaviors and attitudes of his free-wheeling Sue. Blanchot, however, maintains a careful balance between Thomas and Anne so that the thematic fulcrum of the novel draws upon the two characters (male and female), while Hardy's world tends to be close to the virile world. As shown in the arguments within the corpus of this study, his obscurity rests in the failure to reach his long-desired dream of social distinction. The writers show us that those surrounding Jude have their own 'obscure' points in their hidden stratagems and plans that only represent a source for Jude's discontent and self-flagellation.

If Hardy has focused the theme of obscurity on Jude 's impatience with the dictates of his world and the intolerable pressures exerted on him, Thomas's 'obscurity ' chooses to be aloof from its distracting effects. In other words, the obscurity in Hardy's novel stems from the outside, while in Blanchot's, it is an inner one and I would say a voluntary and quite conscious choice. Psychologically and intellectually, Thomas feels isolated from his environment, although there are hints that the ' other' shows readiness to rid him of his ontological ordeal. The only actual event in Blanchot's novel is interiorized in such a way as to suggest a host of visions, recollections, sensations and self-investigations. The French novel has a time-honored tradition in such realms where the memory, consciousness and evocation of the inner sides of the human experience are fully explored. The names of Proust, Beckett and Doras bask large

here. Even the writings of Henry James and James Joyce have smacks of this unmistakable side.

On the linguistic level, the excerpts already given show unequivocally that Hardy capitalizes on the direct statement whether through the dialogues or the authorial comments or interpolations. Conversely, Blanchot makes much use of the indirect interior monologue which gives much freedom and space for his discursive statements and impressions where the objective and subjective are inextricably intermingled. The fact of the matter is that these explorations, insinuations and visions constitute the main issue of the novel and the only possible answer or explanation for Thomas's obscurity. The rich and suggestive language of *Thomas the Obscure* intensifies the poetic side of the book and drives the serious reader to search for the unstated levels of Thomas's obscurity. A further example of this particular point is helpful as it once again brings to mind how Blanchot has his own distinct way in dealing with his protagonist's obscurity. Anne's ecstasy is represented here as she borders the experience of death. This ontological experience is presented in a highly poetic way that the demarcation lines between prose and verse nearly diminish,

In the perspective of a strange horizon, Anne, like something which could not be represented, no longer a human being, among the mayflies and the falling suns, with the agonizing atoms, doomed species uncoupled illness, ascended the course of waters where obscene origins floundered.(p.83)

In both novels, there is an overwhelming sense of frustration and spiritual estrangement. Although Jude in Hardy's novel is a typical country young man, endowed with a great will to achieve some of his dreams, he ends up as a crushed, weary man that has to accept the fact that some marriages can be a humiliating experience that would eventually unman the individual and strip him of his virile pride. In contrast, Thomas's agony is typically existential and has got nothing to do with the community obligations. It is related to the failure of man to grasp what anxieties and inflictions that befall him and under which he continuously smarts. The burden prevalent throughout the pages of this short novel is beyond the individual's grasp and realization. As a matter

of fact, Thomas is the author's mouthpiece and surrogate in commenting on man's shaky position in a world that has gone topsy-turvy due to many catastrophic forces. Indeed such forces have dashed all man's hopes of a better life and new potentialities. Hence is the ceaseless pursuit of the inaccessible and the disillusionment of any real intimacy with other fellow men.

Conclusion

Seen as a whole, the two novels betray polar views concerning their central issue, that is, the 'obscurity' of their main characters. As already shown, Jude's obscurity has been caused and exacerbated by the twists of his fate, a point that engages the center of Hardy's thinking. Jude has exerted a gigantic effort to get rid of his vulgarity and backwardness which are the inevitable outcome of a very crippling milieu. However, all these efforts are doomed to fail and he has to recognize his obscurity as a point that will accompany him throughout the remaining years of his life. In contrast, Thomas's position is more sophisticated and stimulating for the simple fact that it is the product of a mind that has shifted the interest from the metaphysical to the physical, from the outside to the inside, from the object to the subject. Here man is the master of his will. He has attained his own freedom by his own efforts. This new position has its own set of challenges and demands. Thomas's obscurity is more convincing even though the actual size of the book is closer to the novella rather than the full-fledged novel. The readers of this novel are usually the elitist and specialized as the problem the book tackles is different from the mainstream of the interests of fiction. Though brief and compressed, lacking many constituents of the traditional novel, *Thomas the Obscure*, has the prerogative of suggesting more than what it states. It is the incarnation of the art of understatement par excellence. In short, Blanchot gives us a world where things are capable of being interpreted from more than one perspective. Hence the richness and suggestiveness of this text which contrasts vividly with Hardy's where all things serve a preconceived and invariable image. Thomas's obscurity, given the abovementioned account, serves a thematic or rather philosophical turn, a point Hardy's work fails to represent.

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