Thomas Hardy and Irish Poetry


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Once observed, 'affection' for Hardy the poet is often ruinously shot through with protectiveness, even condescension. Hardy is not thought of as an intellectual force. 

Graves's pen-portrait of Hardy, the very fact of his recording the conversation, might be interpreted as literary adulation, but it reads rather more as anthropological curiosity — Hardy as the strange unworldly creatures sprung illiterate and Antaeus-like from the soil. 'Good', 'consistent', 'truthful' are admirable qualities: but one might as well add 'mediocre', 'uncritical' (in the pejorative sense of not knowing 'good' literature from 'bad'), naive, and have done.

Three years later, in his influential study New Bearings in English Poetry (1942), LEavis draws on Graves's memoir to reinforce his own judgement on Hardy:

Hardy is a naïve poet of simple attitudes and outlook, [..] He was betrayed into no heroic postures. He felt deeply and consistently, he knew what he felt, and, in his best poems, communicated it perfectly. But there was little in his technique that could be taken up by younger poets, and developed in the solution of their own problems. His originality was not of the kind that goes with a high degree of critical awareness: it went, indeed, with a naïve conservatism. 'In his opinion', reports Mr Robert Graves in his superb autobiography, Goodbye to All That, 'verses could come to nothing in England. [..] The main impulse behind his verse is not to write verse: Any little old song will do'. And, often to the regret of popular airs, with a gauzy mixture compounded of the literary, the colloquial, the baldly prosaic, the conventionally poetical, the pedantic, and the rustic, he industriously turns out his despondent anecdotes, his life's little ironies, and his meditations upon a deterministic universe. [..] That the setting, explicit or implicit, is generally rural is a point of critical significance. Hardy was a countryman, and his brooding mind stayed itself habitually upon the simple pieties, the quiet rhythms, and the immemorial ritual of rustic life.

It is very largely in terms of the absence of those, or of any

counterpart, that the environment of the modern poet must be described.
influence in England, he must be considerably removed in time: for a literature can be fertilised by its own earlier periods as well as by contemporaries from outside'. If this already negates any possible tardy—indeed influence on English poetry, the point is then made explicit in the following comparison: 'Of the absolute greatness of any writer, men living in the same period can make only a crude guess. But it should be apparent at least that Yeats, no longer a poet of influence on Irish poetry, the point is then made explicit in the following comparison:

Leavis couldn't predict (the future—witness his investment in Ronald Bottrall over W. H. Auden—though like all canon-makers he tried. Leavis's conclusions relating to poetry and rural culture, for instance, are more questionable in the Irish tradition—of which more anon; similarly, Eliot's views on Yeats and English poetry leave open, if inadvertently, the reverse possibility—tardy's beneficial influence on Irish poetry.) Yet at the time, and in the decades following the publication of Murphy's benefit, both Leavis's arguments, and Eliot's habitual hostility towards tardy's work were sufficient to affect, adversely, tardy's critical standing. They were also sufficient to help prompt the anti-modernist backlash in England of the 1950s—about which Larkin and Eliot (Id. 55.) counselled tartiness.

II

The poeta's distance from a metropolitan centre appeals to a poet who writes of his own need to be on the periphery of things'. What he also learns from tardy is, he says in 1982, 'not to be afraid of the obvious'. Larkin takes some of the terms by which Leavis critiques tardy and makes of them the case for a rather different bearing on English poetry. Asked for his view on poetry in 1955, he produced the following (now famous) statement: 'As a guiding principle I believe that the poem must be its own sole, freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in tradition or in any myth—kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets... Leavison the other hand, even if sometimes and misleadingly associated with the New Criticism, did not believe the poem was its own self-contained universe; he is the great advocate of the great tradition; and allusiveness is at the heart of Eliot's 1920s enterprise. Dismissal here of the myth—kitty (contra Eliot's endorsement of the 'mythical method' in Yeats) is also a dismissal of a Yeatsian animamundi, that 'storehouse' of symbols, or of Yeats's later 'Vision'.

Larkin may have read as constitutively by Leavis, and makes of them the case for a rather different bearing on English poetry.
represent twin poles of Larkin's aesthetic, complementary figures on whom lie projected different aspects of a divided self. But this is not how Larkin chose to view the matter in the Hardy affirmations found so habitually in his critical writings from the 1950s to the early 1980s, and the existence of this kind of Yeats-Hardy opposition is, on the whole, also how Donald Davie read the situation in the early 1970s. In Thomas Hardy and British Poetry (1973) Davie sets out the powerful thesis that 'in British poetry of the last fifty years (as not in American) the most far-reaching influence, for good and ill, has been not Yeats, still less Eliot or Pound, but Hardy'. It is an influence, he concedes, that not all poets are prepared to acknowledge, notably in the case of Irish, Scottish and Welsh poets who do not care to be indebted to such an intransigently English poet as Hardy. Yet while Davie, by contrast, rightly points towards Hardy's influence on Austin Clarke and others, he also argues that Hardy 'has the effect of locking a poet whom he influences into the world of historical contingency, a world of specific places at specific times', with the consequence that:

Hardy appears to have mistrusted, and certainly Lead other poets to mistrust, the claims of poetry to transcend the linear unrolling of recorded time. This is at once Hardy's strength and his limitation; and it sets him irremediably at odds with, for instance, Yeats, who exerted himself repeatedly to transcend historical time by seeing it as cyclical, so as to leap above it into a realm that is visionary, mythological, and (in some sense or to some degree) eternal. It is just possible for any reader to admire and delight in both Hardy and Yeats, if only because so much of the finest Yeats is concerned with the effort of transcendence rather than with Hardy. Yet the two masters, the choice cannot be fudged; there is no room for compromise.

As for Yeats himself on the subject of Hardy — whom he met in 1912, dining with Henry Newbolt at Max Gate and presenting Hardy with a Royal Society of Literature gold medal — his occasional comments are not encouraging, even if he, along with 42 other poets, contributed to a handwritten poem in 1919 to mark Hardy's 79th birthday. Yeats read Lionel Johnson's The Art of Thomas Hardy in 1894 (a study of Hardy's fiction; Hardy's first volume of poems did not appear until 1898) and observed: 'I feel...that there is something wrong about praising Hardy in a style so much better than his own. I wish [Lionel] had written instead of Dante or Milton.' As Louis MacNeice notes, when it comes to the poetry, Yeats 'conveniently' forgot about Hardy and Housman when it suited him — more particularly, when it suited him to identify the trends and failings of modern poetry and associate them with England rather than Ireland. Yeats's argument that Irish poetry 'moves in a different direction and belongs to a different story' is an instance of the necessary distancings of himself from Eliot and modernism. In Yeats's introduction to the 1936 Oxford Book of Modern Verse, if Hardy did come off better than Eliot (who, according to Yeats, 'produced his great effect...because he had described men and women that get out of bed or into it from sheer habit'), the brief mention of Hardy is less than a ringing endorsement, and his achievement compares unfavourably to Synge's: 'In Ireland, there still lives almost undisturbed the last folk tradition of western Europe. But the reaction from rhetoric, from all that was preen and artificial, has forced upon...writers now and again, as upon my own early work, a facile charm, a too soft simplicity...Hardy appears to have mistrusted, and certainly leads other poets to mistrust, the claims of poetry to transcend the linear unrolling of recorded time.'
If all this might seem to reinforce Davie's argument for irreconcilable divergences between Yeats and Hardy, Davie's contemporary, Denis Donoghue, has painted a different picture (Davie and Donoghue were based, respectively, at TCD and UCD in the 1950s). Contributing to 'AYeats Symposium' for the Guardian in 1989, marking the fiftieth anniversary of Yeats's death, Donoghue observes that:

Increasingly, it seems unsatisfactory to think of Yeats in relation to Modernism; or, to be precise, in close association with Pound and Eliot. Released from these affiliations, Yeats now seems a major poet within the large context of post-romantic poetry; he is closer to Hardy and Stevens than to Eliot, Pound, Joyce, or Wyndham Lewis. 

It seems to be a poet comparable to Hardy, and fittingly described in terms of the rural, the local, the manipulation of traditional rhythms — these are all the things in which Yeats excelled. Perhaps the most interesting thing is that, like Hardy, Yeats is a writer who has been consistently and consistently influential, both in his own time and in posterity. His poetry sounds about as appetizing as Traveller's Fare on British Rail. This British business was started by the BBC when they began to flood the air with programmes and voices from Northern Ireland. Seamus Heaney is... described as the 'most important new poet of the last 15 years' and the one we need to look to when we seek to think of Yeats within the larger poetic tradition. On the whole, Heaney is closer to Hardy and Stevens than to Eliot, Pound, Joyce, or Wyndham Lewis. He is a poet who can be seen as comparable to Hardy, and fittingly described in terms of the rural, the local, the manipulation of traditional rhythms — these are all the things in which Yeats excelled. Perhaps the most interesting thing is that, like Hardy, Yeats is a writer who has been consistently and consistently influential, both in his own time and in posterity. His poetry sounds about as appetizing as Traveller's Fare on British Rail. This British business was started by the BBC when they began to flood the air with programmes and voices from Northern Ireland. Seamus Heaney is... described as the 'most important new poet of the last 15 years' and the one we need to look to when we seek to think of Yeats within the larger poetic tradition. On the whole, Heaney is closer to Hardy and Stevens than to Eliot, Pound, Joyce, or Wyndham Lewis. 

In that context, we might well recall the review by A.N. Wilson in The Spectator in 1982 of Motion and Morrison's The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry:

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that give Jeanie the 'international' purchase which for Leavis would have been, ironically, one of the measures of greatness. It's Leavis's 'metropolitan's stance and his association of vers libre with originality that now look rather dated, not Hardy. And Leavis also overlooks the area where Hardy helps to define a genre for his inheritors, which is as elegist. As Jahan Ramazani argues, in his study of modern elegy from Hardy to Heaney, Hardy 'reinvigorates the elegy by helping to shift its psychic bases from the rationalizing consolations of normative grief to the more intense self-criticisms and vexations of melancholic mourning'. Where Yeats links his mourning work to 'an disappearing aristocratic vision', Hardy 'associates his... with... threatened rural outlook': in that sense he is an important influence for a contemporary generation of poets, more particularly with Yeats's 'The Fisherman'; but its speaker's skill in the mourning process does owe something to his contemporaries. When Yeats describes the elegiac mode as one of the most felt and / by discourse with a conscious unity, to counter the dreary effects of the genre's traditional form and manner, Hardy's problem is that his elegiac verse is known for its brightness of outlook and its potent, if not excessive, interruption of a more somber and ironic current in the elegiac mode, for example in his poem 'The Poem of 1912-13'. One of the poems A. N. Wilson derides—Heaney's 'Casualty'—is in an obvious rhythmical dialogue with Yeats, more particularly with Yeats's 'The Fisherman'; but its speaker's guilt in the mourning process also owes something to Hardy, as do its rhythm of rural life.

Hardy is also 'both conservative and radical in matters of form': he 'adheres to the metered line but roughs up prosodic and syntactic polish; he appropriates Romantic diction but fashions many jarring locutions'. There are echoey hints of J. M. Synge's expressed need for verse to be 'brutal', or later of Heaney's desire to 'take the English lyric and make it eatable [that it has never eaten before]'. Like Hardy, Northern Irish poets have come under fire for their adherence to traditional forms and have always rejected too—easy association of experimental form with anti—hierarchical politics. And, not least, Hardy as the poet of place plays an important role in the aesthetic development of Seamus Heaney, Thomas Paulin, or Paulin. In his first critical book is Thomas Hardy: The Poetry and the Perception (1975), based on his PhD thesis. In the introduction to the book, Paulin's concern is, in part, to differentiate his work from, and quarrel with, Davie's Thomas Hardy and British Poets (1973), which was the previous study of Hardy to attempt a comprehensive analysis of his poetry. The Poet of Elegy (1972), based on his PhD thesis, focuses on the major poems of the period and his place in the movement of poetry towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. The Imagery of the Elegiac Vision: Hardy's Poems of 1912-13 (2009), which is a more recent book, explores the way in which the imagery of the elegiac mode is used creatively and contradictorily to create a voice that is both sympathetic and critical of the social and political context in which it was written.
In their Sundaysuits, the Barretstalkedtogether,
Smiledshylyatthevisitorswhopackedthechurch
Insummer...

Then, before therecognitions andthetalk,
Therewasanenormoussightofthesea,
Asilentwaterbeyondsociety.

In 1986, ThomasHardy: The PoetryofPerception waspublished in a
second edition, with a new introduction. This time Paulin begins, not
with Grigson, but by ecumenically associating Hardy with Hopkins,
and the positioning of the work on Hardy has completely changed.
Paulinis no longer tinkering around the edges of Donald Davie and
British poetry; this is a new 'funky' Hardy for Ireland in the 1980s, and
for a 'new' Toni Paulin. Both Hopkins and Hardy, he argues, 'hold to an
aesthetic of "cunningirregularity" and aim for a poetry of syncopated
texture rather than melodious veneer. For them, the highest form of
poetic language is rapid, extempore, jazz-like and funky. Both are
associated with a Gothic tradition. That tradition 'is northerland
consonantal and its roots are in the people rather than in the court.
The Gothic poet writes poems that have a frenetic, spiky, spoken
texture... with a populist delight in rough, scratchy sounds...'. Through such
writers, he argues, 'literary English has been periodically refreshed by
an Antaeus-like contact with the earth'. Furthermore, Hardy (like
Paulin himself?) is, in this reading, anti-(British) establishment:
Imperialist, racist, reactionary, sexist... Tennyson is in brilliant
command of a dead language... Hardy belongs outside this
institutional, official reality. He grew up in a rural society where
most peoplespoke dialect and whose literacy was normal... As a
writer, Hardy was caught between a provincial oral culture of song,
talk, legend, and a metropolitan culture of print, political power
and what linguists used to term R.

And when Hardy asserted
that 'a certain provincialism of feeling' was invaluable in a writer
and set that idea against Arnold's idea of culture — an idea hostile to
provincialism — he was referring to a mode of feeling that is bound
with song, dialect, physical touch, natural humanity and
what he terms "crude enthusiasm". It does not mean provincial
in the Chekhovian sense of stilled ambition and anxious mediocrity.
Partly the revision of the introduction here brings it into line with
Paulin's changed political thinking in the 1980s, as a (protestant)
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Flardy's lines draw profoundly on the folk imagination. And... that
imagination overridesthe great division between life and death —
locates there resurrection in the self-delighting wildness of sheer
rhythm. And this resembles Yeats's remark that passion at rhythm
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Hardy is closest to Yeats in the connection which lies between vocal rhythm and mystery. "As if the muse visits him only when he learns to reject the instrumental will (rhythm of choice) for a more intuitive, 'rougher' type of verse which is rooted in rural speech, the Dorset accent and the formally very sophisticated dialect verse of William Barnes. This can only be discovered through a surrender to natural magic and superstition, through a creative idleness rather than forcing ambition."

Where Larkin's own creative process required the artificial separation of Hardy and Yeats, Paulin's requires their artificial yoking together. Whether or not these sentences are wholly convincing, it's notable that they litter a description of Hardy with Yeatsian terminology—'the great division', 'resurrection', 'self-delighting', 'Antique-like', 'mystery', 'natural magic' (which is, for Yeats, in 'The Celtic Element in literature', Ireland's 'ancient religion').

Whether putting the Ulster into Hardy or the Vees into Ulster, this criticism stands as testament to Hardy's cultural (and political) significance for the Northern Irish writer at a particular moment in history. That significance is also true, in a different way, for Michael Longley and for Seamus Heaney. Longley's 'Poetry' (from The Valerian in Japan, 2000) traces the link between Hardy and the poets of the Western Front—among them Edward Thomas—whose influence pervades Longley's own work too: 'When Thomas Hardy died his widow gave Blunden/As a memento of many visits to Max Gate/His treasured copy of Edward Thomas's Poems.' For Longley, Hardy's love poetry infects Longley's own marital love poems; his 'Mayo Monologues' cross Kavanagh's influence with Hardy; and as one of the outstanding elegists of his generation, for whom the Great War protest-elegy looms large in his own development, Hardy's refiguring of elegy affects Longley's own practice, even if at one remove. For Heaney, as Tara Christie persuasively demonstrates, his fifty-year engagement with the work of Thomas Hardy has played a central, unifying role in the work of Thomas Hardy's literary development. His Yeatsian perspective of Hardy's life, his willingness to challenge dominant views of Hardy, is in the service of the development of his own thinking. His understanding of Hardy's poetry is informed with Yeats's, and as one of Yeats's most esteemed posthumous editors, he has been able to bring the poet's Yeatsian self to the fore. He has also been able to bring the poet's influence to the fore, through a new understanding of how Yeats's poetry and thought have informed his own.

For Heaney, Hardy's parish, like Kavanagh's, makes its own importance: the two poets connect for him in the formation of his own aesthetic, and in his sense of place. 'I always,' Heaney says, 'felt something familiar about Haunts landscape, and indeed about the figures in his landscape.' (In Stepping Stones, Heaney relates how, on meeting Kavanagh, 'I either recommended Thomas Hardy or asked what he himself thought of Hardy, but he was not to me like a shot—suspected I was making too fifty-year link between one country poet and another...').

Whilst a lecturer at Queen's University Belfast in the late 1960s, Heaney taught a series of undergraduate seminars on Thomas Hardy. The texts were as follows:

The Return of the Native
The Mayor of Casterbridge
The Woodlanders
Tess of the D'Urbervilles
Selected Poems
Edward Thomas, Love Poems, ed. Carl Weber

The seminar on Hardy was to concern itself with the following topics:

1. Character and plot in Hardy's novels: determined or self-determining?
2. Suffering in the novels: scourge or salvation?
3. The poetry: culmination of Hardy's vision?

The texts are given in chronological order of publication, but The Return of the Native is placed first in the following order of publication:

1. The Return of the Native
2. The Mayor of Casterbridge
3. The Woodlanders
4. Tess of the D'Urbervilles
5. The Woodlanders
6. The Return of the Native
The opening of section I—'Everywhere being nowhere/who can prove/one place more than another?'—is not so much about a denial of specific place as a recognition that Hardy. like Heaney after him, has 'proved' a particular place, not merely named or noted it, but made it his own, part of his own experience. This is the conditions of the poem, Hardy's 'metamorphosis into a true poet'. It is, in the first line of the poem, Hardy's recognition that he is part of the world he describes, that he is a part of that world, that his experience is a part of the world's experience. The poem begins with the line 'Everywhere being nowhere/who can prove/one place more than another?', which introduces the theme of place and the idea of a place being 'proven' or 'named'. The poem goes on to describe the landscape of Hardy's Wessex, the 'place' where he lived and worked, and the people who lived there. The poem ends with the line 'Everywhere being nowhere/who can prove/one place more than another?', which is a statement of uncertainty, of the impossibility of proving the existence of a place. The poem is about the way in which we experience the world, and the way in which we are part of the world. It is about the way in which we are shaped by the landscapes we encounter, and the way in which we shape the landscapes we encounter. The poem is a reflection on the way in which we are part of the world, and the way in which we are shaped by the world around us.
It is apparent even looking briefly at his reception in England and Ireland, that Hardy is different things to different people. Eliot's Hardy is not Larkin's, or Paulin's, or Heaney's. In standing at a crossroads, the leads in multiple directions; and the danger is that in being at once everywhere he is fully appreciated nowhere. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty. Yet more positively, the choice he has made, and the engine of influence, as well as being returned to, has this quality of lightheartedness, of light verse, as metaphor for Hardy's literature, of his apparent novelty.