Thomas Hardy and Irish Poetry


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In his 1929 warmemoir GoodbyetoAllThat, Robert Graves offers a pen-portrait of Thomas Hardy, based on a visit he made to the former's Dorchester home, Max Gate, in the summer of 1920. The excerpt below is from the book.

I wrote out a record of the conversation we had with him. He welcomed us as representatives of the post-war generation. He said that he lived such a quiet life in Dorchester that he feared he was altogether behind the times.

I asked whether I wrote easily, and he said that this poem was in its sixth draft and would probably be finished in two more. "Why!" he said, "I have never in my life taken more than three, or perhaps four, drafts for a poem. I am afraid of it losing its freshness."...He talked of early literary influences, and said that he had none at all, for he did not come of literary stock. [..."] In his opinion verse is Irish in the IrishTimes, 10 December 2000. The poem was later shortened and published in the first edition of Poems and Ballads (1909).

When, in the American Mirror ("["] in this quotation was here replaced by the word "the") in 1906, the Irish Times ran the following notice:

"Thomas Hardy and Irish Poetry"

(Excerpt from "The Yellow River")
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.'4 Gravest 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.'5

'Three year later, in his influential study New Bearings in English Poetry (1952), R. Leavis draws on Graves's memoir to reinforce his own judgement on Hardy:

'Hardy is an 'naive poet of simple attitudes and outlook,... The man who 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 naive conservatism.'In his opinion,' reports Mr. Robert Graves in his superb autobiography Goodbye to All That, 'verses could come to nothing in England.'6 [..] The man who felt the earth, in his best poems, communicated it 'simply a matter of simple attitudes and outlook.'7 He was an influential poet in Hardy's time.7

As Edna Longley observes, 'in Leavis's version of emergent modern poetry, Eliot has out-manoeuvred Yeats, and in New Bearings we can also glimpse the hegemonic advance of T.S. Eliot's critical dicta.'8 Eliot's consistent negativity towards Hardy is of relevance here too. In After Strange Gods, Eliot berates Hardy for his lack of either 'institutional attachment' (the Church) or 'objective beliefs.' He seems to me,' Eliot goes on, 'to have written as nearly for the sake of self-expression as a man well can; and the self which he had to express does not strike me as a particularly wholesome or edifying matter of communication. He was indifferent even to the prescriptive of good manners: 'The man who felt the earth' was 'dreadfully lacking in that faculty.'

The setting, explicit or implied, is generally rural. Hardy was a countryman, and his brooding mind stayed itself habitually upon the simple pieties, the quiet rhythms, and the immemorial ritual of rural life.

It is very largely in terms of the absence of these, or of any trial of rural life.

The problem of the modern poet is the gulf, the gap, the gulf in meaning, and the immaterial between the material life of the poet and the material life of the reader. He who writes to a printed word to have an effect is a poet, indeed, in the fullest sense of the word. His poetic art is to have an effect in the lives of readers. His art is both the act of creation and the act of communication. The poet must be a man of courage, a man who dares to be original in his creation. He must be a man of courage, a man who dares to be original in his creation. He must be a man of courage, a man who dares to be original in his creation. He must be a man of courage, a man who dares to be original in his creation. He must be a man of courage, a man who dares to be original in his creation.
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—lardy—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 is greater. Thomase Hardy, who for a few years had all the cry, appears now what he always was, a minor poet:"

Leavis couldn't predict (lie future—witness his investment in Ronald Bottrall over W. H. Auden—though like all canon-makers he tried. (I stills 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—lardy's beneficial influence on Irish poetry.) Yet at the time, and in the decades following the publication of Mervyn Peake, both Leavis's arguments, and Eliot's habitual hostility towards lardy's work were sufficient to affect, adversely, lardy's critical standing. They were also sufficient to help prompt the anti-modernist backlash in England of the 1950s—backlash which itself has a knock—on effect on Hardy's reputation. If after death, the poet, as Auden famously said in his elegy for Yeats, "becomes his admirers", then lardy's admirer Larkin has also conditioned critical perceptions of his precursors—and not perhaps entirely in the way he intended. It is a critical commonplace to say that Larkin, between his first and second collections, The North (1945) and The Less Deceiving (1955), "found" his own voice by exchanging Yeats's influence for lardy's. "I spent," he writes in 1965, "three years trying to write like Yeats, not because I liked his personality or understood his ideas but out of infatuation with his inarticulate..."

It is a particularly potent music...and has ruined many a poet. Larkin takes some of the terms by which Leavis critiques Hardy, and combines them in a different way.

"When on the other hand Hardy's second volume, Hardy's Poems, is read with a more developable understanding, it becomes apparent that the theme of this poem, the раздел of the poet's life, is not the schoolboy's,..."
represent a twin pole 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 in American) the most far-reaching influence, for good and ill, has been not Yeats, still less Eliot or Pound, not Lawrence, 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 to Hardy's influence on Austin Clarke and others, he also argues that Hardy 'has the effect of locking an artist who he influences into the world of historical contingency, a world of specific places at specific times', with the consequent that:

As Larkin 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 did, along with 42 other poets, contribute to a hand-written 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 first volume of poems, which 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...had written instead of Dante or Milton.' As Louis MacNeice notes, when it comes to poetry, Yeats 'conveniently' forgot about Hardy and Housman when it suited him—more particularly, when he wished to identify 'the trends and failings of modern poetry and associate those trends with England, then America, then France, and elsewhere' (which was done by David Lodge). lodge (in a passage pointing to Hardy's 'Crown Memoir', which was written in 1894) observes that Hardy's 'remarkable oeuvre, which included three volumes of poetry, four novels, a collection of stories, a play, and numerous other works, is out of the question to be in Hardy's position or to be in Hardy's thoughts.
The emphasis, which we have discussed briefly elsewhere, on the question of traditional rhythms, has been reinforced by the fact that the rhythm of a line of poetry often conveys more than the meaning of its words. The rhythm of a line of poetry is closely linked to the traditional forms of poetry, and it is through the rhythm of a line of poetry that the poet expresses his or her ideas and emotions. The rhythm of a line of poetry can also be used to create a feeling of tension or suspense, which can heighten the impact of the poem. In addition, the rhythm of a line of poetry can be used to create a sense of balance or symmetry, which can make the poem more pleasing to the reader.

II.

THE YELLOW NIN

From Heineken on Thomas Lahr and [Ishu Potter]
Jeaney's international purchase which for Leavis would have been, ironically, one of the measures of greatness. It's Leavis's 'metropolitan' 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 consolation of normative grief to the more intense self-criticisms and vexations of melancholic mourning'. Where Yeats links his mourning work to 'a disappearing aristocratic vision', Hardy associates his... with threatened rural outlook: in that sense he is an important influence for a contemporary generation, repelled by Yeats's autocratic politics if not by his forms. Ramazani argues convincingly that Hardy's elegies anticipate those of Yeats, Eliot and Pound, that he is a 'key transitional figure' who 'presages the tension in much 20th century poetry between the elegiac and the anti—elegiac'.

The intensities of the Northern Irish experience over the last four decades, as site of contested memory and space, with its tensions between religious tradition and secularity, have brought elegy into particular focus. The Great War protest-elegy of a model for Northern Irish poets; and behind it is Hardy's Poems 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 Yeats.) Hardy's as do the figures of Yeats have come under fire for their adherence to traditional forms and for their eventual experiment with Yeatsian free verse. But his 'metropolitan' 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 consolation of normative grief to the more intense self-criticisms and vexations of melancholic mourning'. Where Yeats links his mourning work to 'a disappearing aristocratic vision', Hardy associates his... with threatened rural outlook: in that sense he is an important influence for a contemporary generation, repelled by Yeats's autocratic politics if not by his forms. Ramazani argues convincingly that Hardy's elegies anticipate those of Yeats, Eliot and Pound, that he is a 'key transitional figure' who 'presages the tension in much 20th century poetry between the elegiac and the anti—elegiac'.

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In their Sundaysuits, the Barretstalkedtogether,
Smiled shyly at the visitorswhopacked the church
Insummer...

Then,before therecognitions and thetalk,
Therewasanenormoussight of thesea,
A silent waterbeyondsociety.

In1986, Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception was published in a
second edition, with a new introduction. This time Paulinbegins, not
with Grigson, but by ecumenically associating Hardy with Hopkins,
and the positioning of the work on Hardy has completely changed.
Paullinis 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, lhe argues, 'hold to an
aesthetic of "cunning irregularity" 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 norther-n and
consonant and its roots are in the people rather than in the court. The
Gothic poet writes poems that have a fricative, spiky, spokentexture
... 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 adead language. [...] Hardy belongs outside this
institutional, official reality. He grew up in a rural society where
most peoplespoke dialect and where literacy was normal. [...] Asa
writer, Hardy was caught between a provincial oral culture of song,
talk, legend, and a metropolitan culture of print, politicalpower
and what linguists used to termed R.1. .... And when Hardy asserted
that 'a certain provincialism offeeling' was valuable 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
inwith song, dialect, physical touch, natural humaneness and
what herteems "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)
republican concerned with the 'Language Question'in Ireland, about
the politicsof Ulster—Scots and Irish language use. The Paulin of a
poem such as 'off the Back of a Lorry' from Lthat Tree (1983), with
its 'gritty/sort of proto baroque/Imust return to/like my own book',
has travelled some way from 'Inishkeel Parish Church'. In changing
the terms of the debate about Hardy, Paulin separates himself from
the Anglocentricity of the Davie/Larkin axis. And Hardy becomes a
fellow-traveller on this journey. 'Funky' language Hardy, dialect, song:
these all connect to Paulin's own language preoccupations in Ulster;
the 'northern Gothic' obliquely evokes an Anglo—Irish Protestant
gothic tradition from Edgeworth to Stoker. He also assertsthemargin
against the 'centre', a post-colonial reinvigoration of a dying English
tradition. Hardy (like Paulin himself?) is, in this reading, outside
this imperial and institutional centre, thus becomes the bedfellow of Yeats and Joyce, as of Yeats and Paulin—those who took, as Joyce has it in
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, the language that was not 'theirs', and yet made it their own.

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Grigson, but by ecumenically associating Hardy with Hopkins,
and the positioning of the work on Hardy has completely changed.
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 a forcing of ambition.

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

Iv.

Whether putting the Ulster into Essex or the Essex 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 Veal in Japan (2000), traces the link between Hardy and the poetsof 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 marriage poetry; his 'Mayo Monologues' cross Kavanagh's influence with Hardy; and as one of the outstanding elegist 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 worksof Thomas Hardy has played a central, formative part in his work. Hardy has been a part of Heaney's imagination so completely and continuously that Heaney's poetic voice, from his earliest, most tentative beginnings, bears his mark.'
...and by down the mountain path, chiming.

[Poem text]

But the effect seems to be dead.

Once a child in a field of sheep,

Out of the dead sheep's feet, the poem traces a path...

[Poem text]

...In that minimalist-blank-landscape space

And by down the mountain path, chiming.

[Poem text]
onward the same "and modern war." It is apparent even looking
briefly at this reception in England and Ireland, to be the same triple
Outward from there, to be the same triple
Of a trippe that would travel eighty years

In the fleece-hushtle was the oft-wind

That stir he causd

This proper place in the criticism of modern poetry
was the original, as well as being returned to
reaching outward in terms of influence, as well as being returned to
of Hardy's "Lightnings," well-seen as metaphor for Hardy's
fully appreciated nowadays. Yet more positively, the classical
things to different people: Hardy's Hardy is not Hardy's or Hardy's
beyond all reception in England and Ireland, their Hardy's different
ontoward the same "and modern war." It is apparent even looking

Inside him at his last circumferenee.

In the fleece-hushtle was the oft-wind

That stir he causd