Thomas Hardy and Irish Poetry


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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, the Irish Times published his poem was later shortened and rewritten to lie beside the Midnight Anvil in Distrut and Cirencester (211, 11). 1

But there's a bit more in this passage, which incidentally is patronising towards Walter Scott as well as Hardy: this is classic and classical public school/Oxford snobbery towards what is 'other' at its worst. Also implicating here is the assumption of the red earth, as Lawrence had ventured to say something disparaging against Homer's Iliad, he protested: 'Oh, but I admire the Iliad greatly. Why, it's in the modern! It's in the modern!'... In his opinion, the Irish Times published his poem was later shortened and rewritten to lie beside the Midnight Anvil in Distrut and Cirencester (211, 11).
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 creature 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 (1952), 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 betrayd 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 their 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, the verbal universe could come to nothing in England. '[...]' The main impulse behind his verse is too commonly the mere impulse to write verse: 'An old little song will do'. 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'. 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 to the problems of modern life, and to the problems of conscience, without which nothing in human life could be understood. His pictures of officialdom, of farmers, of farmers' wives, are mere evocations of TS. Eliot's own dreams and dioramas, and his skies and skies are always very thinly suggested by nature or by rural life.'
Influence in England, he must be considerably removed in time: for literature can be fertilised by its own earlier periods as well as by contemporaries from outside. If this already negates any possible tardy—though so what he always was, a minor poet: '2

Leavis couldn't predict (or future—witness his investment in Ronald Bottrall over W. H. Auden—though like all canon-makers he tried. His 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—Eliot's beneficial influence on Irish poetry.) Yet at the time, and in the decades following the publication of North, both Leavis's arguments, and Eliot's habitual hostility towards Eliot's work were sufficiently influential to affect, adversely, Eliot's critical standing. They were also sufficiently extreme to help prompt the anti-modernist backlash in England of the 1950s—abacklash which itself has a knock-oneffect on Hardy's reputation. If a poet, as Auden famously said in his elegy for Yeats, '[becomes] his admiring public', then I—hardy'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 Deceitful in 1955, 'found' his own voice by exchanging Yeats's influence for Eliot'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 music...[It] is a particularly potent music...in his hands a music of universality of approach, the fruits of our own ignorance, the germ cells of the English. If this line of thought was extended to Hardy's poetry, then Hardy's admirer Larkin could, perhaps, produce the future—witness his investment in one—or the other—voice.'
represent twin poles of Larntz's aesthetic, complementary figures on whom lie projected different aspects of a divided self. But this is not how Larntz 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 an inexperienced 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 led 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 irreconcilably 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 too little to be possible for any reader to meditate and deliberate on Yeats's heroic assertion of eternal, timeless, and visionary, mythological and (in some sense or to some degree) eternal influence while Hardy's influence on another is going to be regarded as simply and superficially as it were a kind of nationalistic nostalgia, as if one were to regard the influence of the 19th-century French poet Alfred de Musset on the American poet E. E. Cummings as reflecting an essentially conservative influence on American poetry."

As 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 did, along with 42 other poets, contribute to Hardy's 79th birthday. Lionel Johnson's The Art of Thomas Hardy in 1894 (a study of Hardy's first volume of poems) did not appear until 1898 and in it Johnson 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 preposterously now than ever. But it comes to the poetry, Yeats' right to praise Hardy's influence on modern English poetry. In a famous line from his introduction to the 1936 Oxford Book of Modern Verse, if Hardy does come off better than Eliot (who, according to Yeats, 'produced his great effect... because he described men and women that get out of bed or into it from mere 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 there is no reaction from rhetoric, from all that was prepense and artificial, has forced upon... writers now and again, as upon my own early work, a facile charm, a too soft simplicity. In England, as I see it, temptation. The Shropshire Lad is worthy of its fame, but a mile further and all had been marsh. Thomas Hardy, though his work lacked technical accomplishment, made the necessary correction through the mastery of the impersonal object. His scenes, though they may cause one to marvel at the development, are... Hardy's advent, though the work lacked technical accomplishment, made the necessary correction through the mastery of the impersonal object. His scenes, though they may cause one to marvel at the development, are a hand written poem in 1919 to mark Hardy's 79th birthday. Yeats wrote:

"To those who enjoyed the best of our time there is no name that is more familiar than Thomas Hardy's. The reason why he chose to write a hand written poem in 1919 to mark Hardy's 79th birthday. Yeats wrote:

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If all this might seem to reinforce Davie’s argument for irreconcilable
d differenc’s between Yeats and his 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.

In terms by which Leavis dismisses Hardy as an negligible influence—a
countryman writing about rustic life with a supposedly naïve
formal conservatism and an ‘outsider’s status—are the ones which now
seem to confirm his importance. (Not least, the ecocritical debates of
current years serve to reorient thematic priorities.) The rural, the local,
the manipulation of traditional rhythms—these are all the things
Yeats, Lugh MacDiarmid, and Dylan Thomas all wrote English
poetry. British poetry sounds about as appetising 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 solemnly as
‘the most important new poet of the last 15 years and the one we
were taught to look forward to the post-romantic period and voices from
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Northern Ireland...’

In that context, we might 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 Jean Leavis the 'international' purchases 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 an 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 'adisappearing aristocratic vision', Hardy 'associates his... vita 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 a 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 one model for Northern Irish poets; and behind it is Hardy's Poems of 1912-13. (One of the poems A N. Wilson decries—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 does owe something to a contemporary process.)

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In their Sundaysuits, the Barretstalked togethersmiling shyly at thevisitors who packed the church insummer...

Then, before there cognition and the talk, there was an enourmous sight of thesea, a silent water beyond society.

In 1986, Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception was published 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. Paulin is 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, she 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 northern and consonant and its roots are in the people rather than in the court. The Gothic poet writes poems that have a fractal, spiky, spoken texture... with a populist delight in rough, scratchy sounds...'. Through such writers, she argues, 'literary English has been periodically refreshed by an Antaeus-lik contact with the earth'. Furthermore, Hardy (like Paulin in 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 heritage was a tradition of singing, storytelling, oral culture of song, dialect, physical touch, natural humankindness and what she 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) republican concerned with the 'Language Question' in Ireland, about the politics of Ulster—Scots and Irish language use. The Paulin of a poem such as 'off the Back of a Lorry' from The Other Tree (1983) is no longer the one of 'Inishkeel Parish Church': 'Hirdy brings aside this communal of a dead language'... Hardy brings aside this communal of a dead language.

[...]
[31]
Hardy is closest to Yeats in the connection which lies between vocal rhythm and mystery. "It's as if the muse visits him only when he learns to reject the instrumental will (rhythms 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 an idleness rather than a forcing of 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').

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 Veil 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 poetry infects Longley's own marital love poems; 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 work of Thomas Hardy has played a central, overwhelming role in the work of Thomas Hardy the figured artist.' Hardy's influence on Heaney's imagination so deeply

Hardy's counsel because Hardy once wrote: "It is only when ya coupled your art with the world in the way the poet coupled his to the world that you get a description of Hardy with Yeatsian terminology. Whether or those 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').

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Birthplace, from Station Island (1984), one of three "tribute" poems to Hardy, the poet remembers how, three years previously, he 'read until first light // for the first time, to finish / Thelius turn of the Native'.

If there is a political resonance to this—given Heaney's comments on Kavanagh's confidence in his parish as a means of bringing 'the subculture to cultural power'—there is also, in the final lines of the poem, an astonishing sense of homecoming for Heaney in Hardy's fiction: 'I heard roosters and dogs, the very same / as if he had written them'. Elsewhere, he describes how Hardy's 'The Oxen' was learnt 'by heart early on', the words "bark" and "coomb" seemed to take me far away and at the same time to bring me close to something lurking inside me. Then there was the phrase, "their strawypen", which had a different familiarity, it brought the byre and the poetry book into alignment.

A 'different familiarity' might encapsulate Hardy's appearance in two poems from Seeing Things (1991), 'Lightenings vi' and 'vii'. In them, we find a Hardy whom makes sense to Heaney, who, like himself, is a poet whose roots cross with his reading, whose rural background in all its sensuous immediacy is the foundation on which lies will later sing the 'perfect pitch' of his own. "Lightenings vii" then shows the vision of the ambition in Hardy in part because it imagines the experience of the reader with heavenly, man's, 'overflowing // the limits of our life, of the very sacred // the heart of the sacred, the heart of the sacred // the heart of the sacred'.

"Lightenings vi" begins, 'Late April, a date in the heart of the year'. "Lightenings vii" begins, 'Late April, a date in the heart of the year', and the poem, as 'Lightenings vii' then shows, finds the vision very ambition in Hardy in part because it imagines the experience of the reader with heavenly, man's, overflow of the limits of our life, of the very sacred // the heart of the sacred, the heart of the sacred // the heart of the sacred'.

In Edna Longley's Burnt Axe Book of 20th-Century Poetry (2000), Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" is described by Longley as a "visionary poet, experimenting with 'infinity', and the poem, as 'Lightenings vii' then shows, finds the vision of the ambition in Hardy in part because it imagines the experience of the reader with heavenly, man's, overflow of the limits of our life, of the very sacred // the heart of the sacred, the heart of the sacred // the heart of the sacred".
Inside him at his best circumstance,
Outward from there, to be the same triple
Of a ripple that would travel eighty years
In the fleece hustle was the ripple
That stir he caused

If proper place in the criticism of modern poetry
The proving outward in terms of influence, as well as being returned to
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Of Henry’s Lightnings, or rather more so, as monument for Hardy’s
Rippling appreciation无数, yet more positively the proving ripples
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In every place, Henry, in standing at a crossroads, he leads in multiple
Things to different people: Ellors Hardy is not Larkin’s, or Foot’s,
Things all his reception in England and Ireland, that Hardy is different
 onward the same and modern war, to, if apparent, even looking