Thomas Hardy and Irish Poetry


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in his 1929 warmemoir GoodbyetoAllThat, RobertGravesoffers a
pencil-portraitofThomasHardy,basedonavisithemade,withhis
wife NancyNicholson, to Hardy'sDorchester home,MaxGate, inthe
summerof1920. The skitik is a collectionatclydrawn, but Graves
is honest about his own ends too:
I wrote out a record of the conversation we had with him. He
welcomed us as representatives of the post-War generation. He
told me that he lived such a quiet life in Dorchester that he feared
he was altogether behind the times. He, for instance, wanted to
know whether we had any sympathy with the Bolshevik regime,
and whether he could trust the MorningPost's account of the Red
Terror.

...I asked whether I wrote easily, and he said that this poem was
in its sixteenth draft and would probably be finished in two
more. 'Why!', he said, 'I keep track of my work more than
tone or two small meals'. He then went on to ask about the
representation of Hardy here is one of the reasons Sassoon and
Graves fought so bitterly in the aftermath of the publication of
GoodbyetoAllThat. Sassoon complained to Graves in 1930 that
'There was too much about you and too little about the
Hardy's greatness. The picture of him in your book is misleading,
because it shows his simplicity without his impressiveness. Also
you have got the Marmion anecdote wrong. I was there when it
did happen', Gates explained. 'The plume of his Irish Times, 10 December 2000. The poem was later shortened and

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If we're to take note of the conversation we had with him. He
talked of early literary influences, and said that he had none at all, for he did not come of literary stock. "I'm a
skeptic, as you've heard me say before, and would probably be
silenced if faced with the question of whether I consider it
more of a trick or a trade. He then went on to ask about the
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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 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* (1932), 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 to comically, the mere impulse to write verse: 'An old song, will do'. Ashes says. And, oftentimes, to the view that the poet's life, with any ideal of 'truth' and 'consistency', has nothing to do with the poetic art. Yet, there is a great deal of ruralism in the work of Hardy — the countryman, and his brooding mind stay in this essentially rural condition of ritual, habit, and custom.

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

...
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—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, not Hardy, is the greatest poet of his time.' If this is an attempt to elevate Yeats, the author then goes on to say that 'Leavisian' influence has been manifest for Hardy, whereas Yeats himself was the chief beneficiary of a literary tradition which for Hardy, appears to consist simply of 'the Long Poem'.[

Leavis's view of Hardy's influence on other poets, such as Yeats, is often neglected. However, Leavis's influence on literary criticism and theory has been significant, and his ideas about the nature of literature continue to be debated. His arguments about the influence of Hardy on Yeats have been particularly influential, and have been subject to much criticism.

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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 them 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诗人 who lies influenced into the world of historical contingency, a world of specific places at specific times', with the consequence that:

Larkin appears to have mistrusted, and certainly led others to mistrust, the claims of poetry to transcend the linear unfolding 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 exerts himself repeatedly to transcend historical time by seeing it as cyclical, so as to leap above it into a realm that his inspiration, mythology and (in some sense or to some degree) visionary, is capable of. So to read above it into a realm that is separate, he is, it seems, too. to line above it into a realm that is separate. Hardy appears to have mistrusted, and certainly led others to mistrust, the claims of poetry to transcend the linear unfolding 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 exerts himself repeatedly to transcend historical time by seeing it as cyclical, so as to leap above it into a realm that is separate, he is, it seems, too.

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If all this might seem to reinforce Davie's argument for irreconcilable differences 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.

Donoghue's phrasing is ('seems') tentative, but to associate Yeats most closely, not with international modernism, but with a poet once seen as the quintessence of a provincial Englishness, marks a sea-change. And that sea-change probably owes something to the work of Irish poets who, from the 1970s onwards, have asserted Hardy's relevance to modern Irish poetry.
that gives Jean 

Int. pur. (Leavis) 

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 a elegist. As Jahan Hamazani argues, in his study of modern elegy from Hardy to Heaney, Hardy 'revivifies the elegy by helping to shift its psychic bases from the rationalizing consolations of normative grief to the more intense self-criticism and vexatious melancholic mourning. Where Yeats links his mourning work to 'a disappearing aristocratic vision', Hardy associates his... with a 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 one model for Northern Irish poets; and behind it are 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 itsspeaker's guilt in the mourning process also owes something to Hardy, as do its rhythmsofrural 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 echoes here 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 at once'.

In his poem 'The Yellow House' (1976), Wilson derides—Heaney's'The Fisherman'; but itsspeaker's guilt in the mourning process also owes something to Hardy, as do its rhythmsofrural life.)

Paulin's study also comes at a time when the poet's work on this first major critical book is published. In the introduction to the book, Paulin's concern is, in part, to differentiate his work from, and quarrel with, Davie's 1973 Thomas Hardy and British Poetry. Davie comes under fire for insufficient appreciation of Douglas Dunn's work, and for anxieties that aren't Hardy's problem but Davie's (what Paulin detects as his 'dissatisfaction with a confused entity composed of Hardy's poetry and Larkin's work').

In part, in his part, it is part of the broad and systematic efforts at rethinking and rereading Hardy and the avant-garde of the period. In his part,
In their Sundaysuits, the Barretstalkedtogether,
Smiledshylyatthevisitorswhopackedthechurch
Insummer...
...1
Then,beforetherecognitionsandthetalk,
Therewasanenormoussightofthesea,
Asilentwaterbeyondsociety.

In1986, ThomasHardy: ThePoetryofPerception 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.
I'aulinisnolongertinkering 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 '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 consonantal and its roots are in the people rather than in the
court. The Gothic poet writes poems that have a spiky, spokentexture...
with ajropolitical 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. [...1Hardy belongs outside this
institutional, official reality. He grew up in a rural society where
most peoplespoke dialect and where literacy was normal. [...]
As a writer, Hardy was caught between a provincial oral culture of
tone, 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 offeeling' was invaluable in a writer
and set that idea against Arnold sidea of culture—an idea hostile to
provincialism—he was referring to a mode of feeling that is bound
in with song, dialect, physical touch, natural human kindness and
what he terms 'crude enthusiasm'. He does not mean provincial
in the Chekhoviansense 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
poemsuch as 'off the Back of a Lorry' from Little Tree (1983), with
its 'gritty/sort of prodbaroque/Imust return to/like my own book',
hastradecommunity. The Paulin of 'Inishkeel Parish Church'.
In changing
the termsof the debate aboutA(lar)dy, Paulin separates himself from
the Anglo-centricity of the Davie/Larkin axis. And simply 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 assertsthe margin
against the 'centre', a post-colonial revivification of a dying European
tradition of language. In this reading, Hardy is, as a fellow-traveller,
outside this imperial and institutional centre, thus
becomethe bedfellow of Yeats and Joyce, as of Leaney and Paulin—
those who took, as Joyce has it in AP ortrait of the Artist as a Young
Man, the language that was not 'theirs', and yet made it their own.

In 1986, ThomasHardy: 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,
Hardy is closest to Yeats in the connection which lies between vocal rhythm and mystery. It is the way 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, superstition, through a creative idleness rather than a 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', 'Antieus-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 Veal Her 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... 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's. As one poet gently influences the other, on the other hand, is consciously motivated, as the influence of Yeats on Paulin shows. Hardy's refiguring of elegy affects Longley's own practice, even if at one remove. For Heaney, as Tara Christies persuasively demonstrates, his 'fifty-year engagement with the work of Thomas Hardy has played a central, unifying role in Heaney's poetic identity.'

His influence was so intimately and seamlessly blended into Heaney's poetic vision from its outset that Hardy's presence in Heaney's poetry has largely gone unnoticed. For Hardy has never not been a part of Heaney's poetic landscape.
In "The Birthplace", one of three "tribute" poems to Hardy, the poet remembers how, three years previously, he'd read until first light for the first time, to finish "The 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 "barton" and "coomb" seemed to take him far away and at the same time bring him close to something lurking inside him. Then there was the phrase, "their strawy pen", 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), 'Lightening 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 is all its sensuous immediacy is the foundation on which lieaney'll later sing the 'perfect pitch' of his own.

Once, as a child, out in a field of sheep, Thomas Hardy pretended to be dead and lay down flat among the dainty shins. In that sniffed—at, bleated—into, grassy space he experimented withinfinity.

This might seem to be a version of the natural, unsophisticated, grounded Hardy, derided by Leavis and Eliot, celebrated, conversely, by Heaney, and a long way from Paulin's gritty, funky, political Hardy. Nevertheless, Heaney here creates his own Hardy too, and for different ends. Heaney's Hardy is also a visionary poet, experimenting with 'infinity', and the poem, as 'Lightening vii' then shows, finds the visionary ambition in Hardy in part because it misrepresents the visionary ambition in Hardy in part because it misrepresents the visionary ambition in Hardy. The very first poem in that anthology, "The Darkling Thresh"—"That day, we were like one / momentarily implying the two poets' affinity, only to transform the speaker into a (suffering) character in one of Hardy's novels: "like one / of his troubled couples, speechless / until he spoke for them". The poem allows 'I leaney', the Hardy then novelist, also the Hardy of 'The Voice', to articulate Heaney, all the while speaking both to and for Hardy, Heaney simultaneously creating a character of his own.

The opening of section I—'Everywhere being nowhere / who can prove / one place more than another'—is not so much a denial of specificity but a recognition that Hardy, like Heaney after him, has 'proved' a particular place, be it Wessex or Anahorish, against those who would dismiss it as insignificant. To the extent that it can become, at least for Heaney, an image of a realm—'utterly empty', as he has it in the 'Clearances' sequence of The Late Land (1997)—it also becomes a place for memory, a place where dreams have been real and where a 'different familiarity' might appear. That ability to mix the two is one of Heaney's considerable gifts. He has written that he is 'a writer with both feet on the ground', and his work has often been marked by a sense of homecoming. He is down on all fours, seeking the creatures facetoface. He is 'a writer with both feet on the ground', and his work has often been marked by a sense of homecoming. He is down on all fours, seeking the creatures facetoface.
It is apparent, even looking briefly at this 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 Hardy. In standing at a crossroads, he leads in multiple directions, and the danger is that in bickering at once everywhere he is fully appreciated nowhere. Yet more positively, the choice he is offered the possibility of fashioning his own direction, and he does it. In the fleece of his own invention, he was the original ripple that would travel eighty years outward from there, to be the same ripple, in the fleece, of thirty years, as the original that caused it. The fleece has the idea that said he caused it of his own invention.