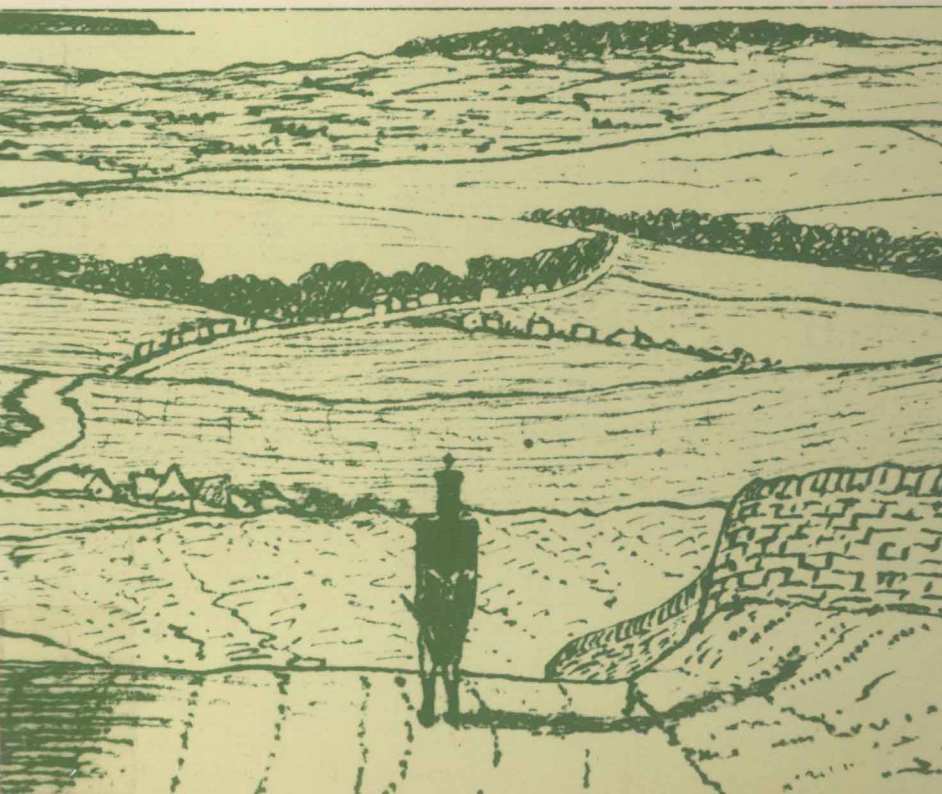
THOMAS HARDY'S ENGLISH

Ralph W.V. Elliott



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Thomas Hardy's English

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Contents

For Margaret

Phonemic Symbols

The following letters are used as phonemic symbols with their usual English values: p, b, t, d, k, g, f, v, s, z, h, l, r, m, n, w. Other symbols are used with the values indicated by the italicized letters in the keywords which follow:

CONSONANTS

ʃ	*sh*ip	θ	*th*in
dʒ	*j*u*dg*e	j	*y*es
ŋ	lo*ng*		

VOWELS

ɪ	s*i*t	ʌ	c*u*b
iː	s*ee*	uː	s*oo*n
ɛ	s*e*t	ʊ	p*u*t
æ	s*a*t	ɔː	b*ough*t
ɜː	*ea*rth	ɒ	n*o*t
ə	*a*bout	ɑː	c*a*lm

DIPHTHONGS

ɪə	h*ere*	ʊə	g*our*d
eɪ	pl*ay*	oʊ	*oa*k
ɛə	th*ere*	ɔɪ	b*oy*
aɪ	fl*y*	aʊ	n*ow*

Slant lines enclose phonemic symbols. A colon after a phonemic symbol indicates length.

Preface

EVERY reader of Thomas Hardy's novels, stories, and poems has had to come to terms with the singularities of his language, especially its vocabulary. This book represents one reader's attempt to do so. Eschewing both the abstractions of literary theories and the technical terminology of linguistics, I have concentrated on the raw materials of Hardy's English, his words, where he found them and how he used them. Largely self-educated, Hardy fashioned his language from many sources, prominent among them the dialect of his native Dorset, his early familiarity with the English Bible, and his wide reading. His architectural training taught him form, his studious visits to galleries made him aware of colours, his love of music inculcated rhythms; all brought enrichment to his English. But through all Hardy's linguistic schooling and practice ran a deep, persistent awareness of the past of the English language and its present heritage. This he exploited to the full, reviving obsolete words, using archaic words, coining new words according to traditional modes of word-formation.

To study Hardy's English closely is to become aware of a thousand years of linguistic history; his works are a place, to quote his own words in the first chapter of the final book of *A Laodicean*, 'for a mediaevalist to revel in, toss up his hat and shout hurrah in, send for his luggage, come and live in, die and be buried in'. I make no apology for repeatedly drawing the reader's attention to what I believe to be the key to an understanding of the often idiosyncratic character of Hardy's English, its timelessness. It is both ancient and modern, one moment stilted archaic and the next contemporary colloquial. It manages to be Anglo-Saxon Wessex and Victorian Dorset rolled into one, sometimes uneasily, at other times superbly so. But it is always unmistakably his English.

In the dialect with which Hardy was familiar from childhood, ancient words long since abandoned by the standard language sur-

vived in current usage. Grammatical forms and aspects of syntax as well as regional pronunciation, puzzling to the reader, were part of Hardy's mother tongue, certainly of his father's tongue and of the tongues of all those humble kinsfolk of whom in later life he so often felt ashamed. But for his early introduction to the speech of Wessex, seconded by the example of William Barnes, the Dorset poet, schoolmaster and philologist, Hardy's English could not have developed as it did. Nor would the Wessex novels and poems have acquired their unique music, the cadences of modern English reverberating insistently with echoes of the past.

Many of the echoes are literary; some inhere in the Wessex names which Hardy shaped out of real places. And just as rustic words and phrases force themselves into narrative and dialogue, so does the life of the countryside form itself into simile and metaphor. Moreover, there is a continuity of themes and attitudes in Hardy's work which links the earliest novels and poems unmistakably with the rest and makes increasing demands upon his linguistic resourcefulness. Hence a study of Hardy's English must embrace his verse as well as his prose, for they are all of a piece – 'this demonstrably coherent *oeuvre*', as a recent reviewer called it, a description that is also chronologically appropriate, for 'Hap' and *Desperate Remedies* are as demonstrably products of the same pen as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and 'We Are Getting to the End'.

Since the expiry of Hardy's copyright, editions of his works have multiplied, and I have therefore quoted poems invariably by their titles, the texts being those of *The Complete Poems* edited by James Gibson. Hardy's short stories are similarly identified by their titles, accompanied by the title of the collection of which they form part in Macmillan's Wessex Edition. The texts used are those of The New Wessex Edition. All longer quotations and, where appropriate, some of the shorter illustrations are accompanied by references to chapters, or books and chapters, and in *The Dynasts* to part, act, and scene. This should facilitate consultation by the reader without restriction to a given edition.

I have refrained from the barbarous practice of referring to Hardy's novels by abbreviated titles like *Tess* or *The Mayor*, or by initials, preferring to spell them out in full as Hardy entitled them. As Hardy gave much thought to the titles of his books they deserve to be respected. Footnotes have been kept to a minimum, and full details of books or articles to which reference is made in the text will be found in the Select Bibliography.

All labourers in the Hardy vineyard are greatly indebted to their many precursors among whom Richard Little Purdy, Michael Millgate, and F.B. Pinion merit special mention. I am conscious of numerous debts to other scholars, critics and students, and gratefully acknowledge them herewith. I owe a special debt to Professors Claude Abrahams, Cleanth Brooks, J.T. Laird, and Gordon Williams, and to Mr. Gregory Hill for invaluable research assistance. Thanks are also due to Paul and Margaret Williams of Winterbourne Abbas; to the Curator and staff of the Dorset County Museum; to Mr Charles Pettit and his colleagues at the Dorset County Library; to the Librarian and staff of the Australian National University Library and of the State Library of South Australia; to the Director and staff of the Humanities Research Centre in Canberra; and to the Trustees of the National Humanities Center in North Carolina for awarding me a Visiting Fellowship, and to the Director and staff of the Center for making my visit such a fruitful and pleasant one. I also wish to thank the Editor of The Language Library, Professor David Crystal, for helpful advice and Mrs. Sara Menguc for skilfully steering the book through the press.

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Oxford University Press: *Our Exploits at West Poley*, ed. R.L. Purdy, 1978; *The Woodlanders*, ed. Dale Kramer; *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, ed. R.L. Purdy and Michael Millgate.

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Columbia University Press: *The Personal Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed. R.H. Taylor.

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CHAPTER I

The Charm of a Muddy Country Road

'SIGHING about Hardy's style is a fairly old game among critics', remarks Robert B. Heilman, 'and one could make quite an anthology of despairing and witty observations about Hardy's verbal manners.' Since style, at its most basic, is 'proper words in proper places', in Swift's phrase, and since the present book is concerned with Hardy's words, such an anthology may serve as an appropriate introduction to a study of Hardy's English. Responding to Heilman's hint, Norman Page has recently given us the skeleton of such an anthology in his excellent essay 'Hardy and the English Language', a skeleton that deserves to be furnished with some flesh in the more leisurely context of the present study.

* * *

There are a few faults of style and grammar, but very few. 'Whomsoever's' is an odd formation, and 'factitiously pervasive' is a clumsy expression. A lawyer, too, might find fault with a deed full of stops, and containing the phrase 'on the determination of this demise', and a surgeon with '*os femoris*', but these technical errors are few. On the whole, the chief blemish of the book will be found in the occasional coarseness to which we have alluded, and which we can hardly further particularize, but which, startling as it once or twice is, is confined wholly to expressions, and does not affect the main character of the story. If the author will purge himself of this, though even this is better than the prurient sentimentality with which we are so often nauseated, we see no reason why he should not write novels only a little, if at all, inferior to the best of the present generation.

Review of *Desperate Remedies*, in *The Athenaeum* 1 April 1871

We have found it hard to read, but its shortcomings are easier to summarise than to encounter in order. Mr. Hardy's novel is very long, but his subject is very short and simple, and the work has been distended to its rather formidable dimensions by the infusion of a large amount of conversational and descriptive padding and the use of an ingeniously verbose and redundant style. It is inordinately diffuse, and, as a piece of narrative,

singularly inartistic. The author has little sense of proportion, and almost none of composition.

Review of *Far from the Madding Crowd* by Henry James, in *The Nation* (New York), 24 December 1874

The style is pellucid, as a rule, but there are exceptions. 'Human mutuality' seems, to myself, an ill phrase. 'There, behind the blue narcotic haze, sat "the tragic mischief" of her drama, he who was to be the blood-red ray in the spectrum of her young life'. Here is an odd mixture of science and literature. A face is, or rather is not, 'furrowed with incarnated memories representing in hieroglyphic the centuries of her family's and England's history'. . . . Why people who are drinking beer should be said to 'seek vinous bliss' is not apparent. A woman, at the public-house in the evening, finds her troubles 'sinking to minor cerebral phenomena for quiet contemplation, in place of standing as pressing concretions which chafe body and soul'. Here is the very reef on which George Eliot was wrecked. However, tastes differ so much that the blemishes, as they appear to one reader, of Mr. Hardy's works may seem beauty-spots in the eyes of another reader. He does but give us of his best, and if his best be too good for us, or good in the wrong way, if, in short, we are not *en rapport* with him, why, there are plenty of other novelists, alive and dead, and the fault may be on our side, not on his.

Review of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Andrew Lang, in *New Review*, February 1892

As the naturalist with a bone, so Mr. Hardy with a word can construct for us the whole manner of a man, the whole aspect of a place. Not the looks of definite objects only, but their surrounding and intervening atmospheres, become plain to us; the blue mists, or dusty gold lights, or thin gray breaths of air: once familiarised with one of his places, we know all about it . . . But if we search Mr. Hardy's books, to discover why we know this so surely, we are hard put to it for a reason: so delicate has been his manner, so natural and unobtrusive his 'mental tactility', that we have learned it all from his pages, as we should learn it by experience: our certainty and familiarity have grown upon us . . . It is no small task, to set whole spheres of life and work in a light so true, that all must own its truth. Patience and loving study alone can do it: no brilliant epigram, nor biting phrase, can make us understand the slowly prevailing, gently lingering, charm of all those rural lives and ways. It is the province of a deeper art: an art, patient, studious, and sure.

Lionel Johnson, *The Art of Thomas Hardy*, 1894

I mention this singular inaptness of expression, because I regard it as a sign of the general slackening of attention, the vagueness showing itself in the casual distribution of the subject-matter; showing itself, as we shall see

in lack of masterful treatment of the Reader's attention, in utter deficiency of logical arrangement. These are the co-related deficiencies due to the same inactivity and confusion of thought.

I will not go over the subsequent passages again; my Reader can verify at a glance this lack of coherence, of sense of direction, particularly if he will bear in mind, for comparison, Stevenson's marvellously constructed account of his descent from one Cévennes valley into another, and of their respective physical and moral characteristics. The two passages – Hardy's and Stevenson's – represent, within the limit of endurable writing, the two extremes of intellectual slackness and intellectual activity.

'Vernon Lee' (Violet Paget), *The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology*, 1923

Do we insist that a great novelist shall be a master of melodious prose? Hardy was no such thing. He feels his way by dint of sagacity and uncompromising sincerity to the phrase he wants, and it is often of unforgettable pungency. Failing it, he will make do with any homely or clumsy or old-fashioned turn of speech, now of the utmost angularity, now of a bookish elaboration. No style in literature, save Scott's, is so difficult to analyse; it is on the face of it so bad, yet it achieves its aim so unmistakably. As well might one attempt to rationalise the charm of a muddy country road, or of a plain field of roots in winter. And then, like Dorsetshire itself, out of these very elements of stiffness and angularity his prose will put on greatness; will roll with a Latin sonority; will shape itself in a massive and monumental symmetry like that of his own bare downs.

Virginia Woolf, 'The Novels of Thomas Hardy', *The Second Common Reader*, 1932 (written in January 1928)

The work of the late Thomas Hardy represents an interesting example of a powerful personality uncurbed by any institutional attachment or by submission to any objective beliefs; unhampered by any ideas, or even by what sometimes acts as a partial restraint upon inferior writers, the desire to please a large public. He seems to me 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 prescripts of good writing: he wrote sometimes overpoweringly well, but always very carelessly; at times his style touches sublimity without ever having passed through the stage of being good.

T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, 1934

Though I shouldn't think of calling Hardy a great poet, I do believe that he wrote a certain amount of major poetry. And this major poetry is hardly ever represented in the anthologies that bring him in. It is a very small amount, though he wrote a great deal of verse: there are nine

hundred and fifty pages in the collected volume, and to go through them again, as I did before writing this note, was to be, if possible, still more convinced of the need for a strictly discriminating justice. The judicious admirer wishing to ensure proper attention for Hardy would select a very small proportion indeed of that mass.

The best things are lost in it, and prolonged exploration is discouraging and blunting. Never did a writer of good poems show less promise and distinction in the common run of his work . . . In saying that his characteristic verse has no distinction one is not intending to deny that it is characteristic: it is positively, even aggressively, so. Lack of distinction in Hardy becomes a positive quality. If one says that he seems to have no sensitiveness for words, one recognises at the same time that he has made a style out of stylelessness. There is something extremely personal about the gauche, unshrinking mismarriages – group-mismarriages – of his diction, in which, with naïf aplomb, he takes as they come the romantic-poetical, the prosaic banal, the stilted literary, the colloquial, the archaistic, the erudite, the technical, the dialect word, the brand-new Hardy coinage . . .

These [examples quoted] are representative; they give a fair idea of what one may expect to find at any opening of the collected Hardy. They scarcely, however, suggest how the assertive oddity of the Character can begin to look like the strength of a poet. He who handles words in this way, it might reasonably be concluded on such evidence (which could be multiplied indefinitely), couldn't possibly be a distinguished writer of any kind. Nevertheless, it is an unusually dull patch when half-a-dozen pages don't yield instances in which the same assertively characteristic hand achieves a decided expressive strength or vivacity.

F.R. Leavis, 'Hardy the Poet', *Southern Review*, Summer 1940

Hardy was not a careless writer. The difference between his first and last editions proves this, in matters of style aside from his painful reconstruction of his manuscripts mutilated for serial publication. He wrote and wrote again, and he never found it easy. He lacked elegance, he never learned the trick of the whip-lash phrase, the complicated lariat twirling of the professed stylists. His prose lumbers along, it jogs, it creaks, it hesitates, it is as dull as certain long passages in the Tolstoy of *War and Peace*, for example. That celebrated first scene on Egdon Heath, in *The Return of the Native*. Who does not remember it? And in actual rereading, what could be duller? What could be more labored than his introduction of the widow Yeobright at the heath fire among the dancers, or more unconvincing than the fears of the timid boy that the assembly are literally raising the Devil? Except for this in my memory of that episode, as in dozens of others in many of Hardy's novels, I have seen it, I was there. When I read it, it almost disappears from view, and afterwards comes back, phraseless, living in its somber clearness, as Hardy meant it to do. I feel certain. This to my view is the chief quality of good prose as dis-