THE NEW WESSEX SELECTION OF THOMAS HARDY'S POETRY

Chosen by John and Eirian Wain
and introduced by John Wain

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THE NEW WESSEX EDITIONS

The Novels of Thomas Hardy
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The Stories of Thomas Hardy
edited by F. B. Pinion

The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy
edited by James Gibson

The Dynasts
edited by Harold Orel

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INTRODUCTION

THOMAS HARDY'S father and grandfather were each named Thomas Hardy. The first two T.H.s were both in the building trade and both had musical tastes; Hardy the First led the church choir at Stinsford ('Mellstock' in his grandson's Wessex); Hardy the Second played the violin at village feasts and dances. In childhood, Hardy the Third would dance rapturously to the tune of his father's fiddle. All this showed up when in due course he became one of the greatest poets of the English language. His approach to poetry was partly that of a craftsman (he himself was trained as a draughtsman and an architect) and partly of a singer and dancer to music. His work has a double importance. It is the record of an individual mind of great strength and deep originality; and it is also the channel whereby a vital popular tradition flows from a remote rural past to our modern urban world.

I

Mediaeval lyric is still very close to folk-song; plainly visible are its roots in that group activity which comes naturally to agricultural peoples at seasons of harvest when unaccustomed leisure and abundant food produce a mood of exultation, or when their long days of toil unite them in certain physical movements, reaping, flailing, sowing, pulling on oars or ropes. The basis of all such lyric is the solo voice of the song-leader interspersed with the refrain of the chorus; and, since all lyric poetry is related to dance as well as to song, the intricate recurring rhythms and rhymes of lyric verse also have their organic roots in group activity, in the rhythms of work and festival. These qualities cling to them even when social change has abolished the conditions under which the original pattern was laid down. There is a modern parallel in the blues, developed by a black working class whose labour was predominantly agricultural; many of its features survive in the urban mutations of rock and pop, eagerly consumed by a generation of youngsters who have hardly so much as seen a ploughed field.

The richness of mediaeval lyric poetry is maintained without faltering during the Tudor generations, when the life of the populace barely altered from its mediaeval pattern. After that, increasingly, it became sporadic, surviving better in traditional agricultural areas,

dying out by the end of the eighteenth century under the new conditions of industrialism. By the middle years of the nineteenth century, if we are looking for a survival of that mediaeval lyric grace as it comes down through Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline England, we shall find it most easily in the 'backward' areas, however far distant; the kind of English people who crossed the Atlantic, many of them against their will as transported felons or starving surplus labour, and subsequently provided the poor white population of the Appalachian mountains and the valleys of West Virginia, kept alive late mediaeval ballads and Elizabethan lyrics long enough to perform them to the astonished ears of twentieth-century collectors.

Hardy's unique place in English poetry has its basis here. His area of England, the south-west, was agricultural and conservative; he grew up in a tradition of village singing and dancing, of village musicians in church, 'bowing it higher and higher', of jigs, reels, airs and come-all-ye's. It is this that sets him so much apart from the main current of English poetry in his time. There are very few other poets of the later nineteenth century, still less of the early twentieth, whom he in any way resembles. Now and again he shows the influence of Browning (usually disastrous) or Swinburne (hardly less so), and there is a deep natural affinity with the Dorset poet William Barnes. But the real roots of Hardy's poetry are the tough, clinging, gnarled but still green and flowing roots of English popular lyric verse. If we want something that resembles a typical Hardy poem we shall find it more easily between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries than in his own bowler-hatted epoch. The poets who wrote

O mistress, why
Outcast am I
All utterly
From your pleasance;
Sith ye and I
Or this truly — *Or: ere*
Familiarly — *(ere this = formerly)*
Have had pastance
And lovingly
Ye would apply
My company
To my comfort?
But now truly
Unlovingly

Ye do deny
Me to resort.

or,

Rutterkin is come unto our town
In a cloak without coat or gown,
Save ragged hood to cover his crown,
Like a rutterkin, hoyda, hoyda!

Rutterkin can speak no English;
His tongue runneth all on buttered fish,
Besmeared with grease about his dish,
Like a rutterkin, hoyda, hoyda!

Rutterkin shall bring you all good luck,
A stoup of beer up at a pluck,
Till his brain be wise as a duck,
Like a rutterkin, hoyda, hoyda!

or,

Weep you no more, sad fountains;
What need you flow so fast?
Look how the snowy mountains
Heaven's sun doth gently waste!
But my Sun's heavenly eyes
View not your weeping,
That now lies sleeping
Softly, now softly lies
Sleeping.

Sleep is a reconciling,
A rest that peace begets;
Doth not the sun rise smiling
When fair at even he sets?
Rest you then, rest, sad eyes!
Melt not in weeping,
While she lies sleeping
Softly, now softly lies
Sleeping.

– these unknown poets were Hardy's masters, less because he consciously imitated them than because they established the tradition in which it was natural for him to work. By a supremely fortunate

chance, a poet with immense technical skill and a beautifully sensitive ear was plugged in to a popular, unsophisticated tradition which had always maintained a commerce with high, 'literary' poetry for the printed page, but never at the cost of its own identity.

Hardy was unquestionably a lyric poet; lyrical and reflective. His dramatic blank verse does not represent his genius nearly so well, and *The Dynasts* comes to life chiefly at those points where the action is clinched or commented on in lyric vein. Now, appreciating and enjoying lyric poetry is largely a matter of being alive to its blend of elements. Starting from the relatively simple group-activity of song and chorus, movement and dance, it moves always towards the personal and unique. When lyric forms are adapted, as they always are, to the expression of those thoughts a man has when he is meditating in solitude, we are in the presence of a hybrid that owes a great deal to both parents. Now and again these unknown mediaeval poets throw off a lyric which is immortal, blending a personal emotion with a shared form, that has the fragile delicacy of a soap-bubble. These are the lyrics we all know, 'Sumer is icumen in,' or 'Foweles in the frith', or 'The maidens came/When I was in my mother's bower' with its refrain 'The bailey beareth the bell away'. When we read and marvel at these things we are very close to Hardy's poetry, which combines the deeply personal with the deeply shared, and which wears its raiment of long tradition as unselfconsciously as an old jacket.

II

It is, in fact, an important part of Hardy's temperament that he feels at home with tradition, likes the presence of things that have weathered and endured. His imagination responds to customs and beliefs and societies that have lived on through the generations, and also to the immensities of geological time; he muses on the contrast between the frail thing of blood and bones and nerves that is a human being, and the unimaginable age of the earth he walks on. Not necessarily to draw the conclusion that human life is insignificant by the side of these ancient works of creation – sometimes, indeed, virtually the opposite:

Primaeval rocks form the road's steep border,
And much have they faced there, first and last,
Of the transitory in Earth's long order;
But what they record in colour and cast
Is – that we two passed.

Many, though by no means all, of Hardy's poems were written in later life – he is one of the many exceptions to the once-prevalent Romantic view that poets are at their best in flaming youth and subsequently decline steeply – and he characteristically approaches his subjects down a perspective of memory. For all of us except those who die very young, all experience is a twice-told tale: there is the event as it actually happened and as it affected us at the time, and the event as we recall it in the light of later knowledge and later development within ourselves. When we muse on our experience and re-create it in memory, we become very like ghosts haunting the scenes of former action. It is this strand in Hardy that makes him so sympathetic to the idea of ghosts and hauntings. He is on record as saying (in the *Life* published under his second wife's name but evidently written mostly by himself):

> '. . . if there is any way of getting a melancholy satisfaction out of life, it lies in dying, so to speak, before one is out of the flesh; by which I mean putting on the manners of ghosts, wandering in their haunts, and taking their views of surrounding things. To think of life as passing away is a sadness: to think of it as past is at least tolerable.'

He likes, and this may be an overlap between Hardy the poet and Hardy the novelist, to reflect on the way things have turned out, the endless *sequelae* of life, what T. S. Eliot calls 'The trailing consequences of further days and ways'. Very much a poet of the emotions, he describes with particular accuracy the strange, patchy and unpredictable way in which they persist; the youthful emotions, in an ageing person, do not die down steadily in a long tranquil curve, but gutter out and flare up like a dying fire on a gusty night: so

> *. . . time, to make me grieve,*
> *Part steals, lets part abide;*
> *And shakes this fragile frame at eve*
> *With throbbings of noontide.*

Or consider the old dame in his narrative poem 'The Dance at the Phœnix', who re-lives her flirtatious girlhood for one deliciously mad evening and then gets back into bed and dies before morning – a memorable haunting!

These two features of Hardy's mind – his sympathy with the old and