

SELECTED SHORTER POEMS OF
THOMAS HARDY

CHOSEN AND INTRODUCED BY

JOHN WAIN

M
MACMILLAN

SELECTED SHORTER POEMS OF
THOMAS HARDY

CHOSEN AND INTRODUCED BY
JOHN WAIN

M
MACMILLAN

This book is copyright in all countries which
are signatories to the Berne Convention.

Selection and editorial matter © John Wain 1966, 1975
Typography © Macmillan London 1966, 1975

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this
publication may be made without written permission. No
paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or
transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with
the provisions of the Copyright Act 1956 (as amended). Any
person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this
publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims
for damages.

ISBN 0-333-05906-9

First published 1966 [as Papermac P157]
Revised edition 1975

Reprinted 1976 (twice), 1977, 1980, 1981, 1985 (twice)

Published by
MACMILLAN LONDON LIMITED
London and Basingstoke

*Associated companies in Auckland, Delhi,
Dublin, Gaborone, Hamburg, Harare, Hong
Kong, Johannesburg, Kuala Lumpur, Lagos,
Manzini, Melbourne, Mexico City, Nairobi, New
York, Singapore and Tokyo*

Printed in Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

THOMAS HARDY was, constitutionally and by inclination, primarily a poet. Had he possessed private means, it is doubtful whether he would have written novels at all, though once he had turned his hand to prose fiction he went on, in his usual strong and steady way, until he had produced a body of work considerable enough to win respect all over the world. Nevertheless, it was poetry that first drew him towards the idea of being a writer. His second wife, Florence Emily Hardy, in *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy* (the first of two fat biographical volumes which are thought to have been written up from material dictated by Hardy himself), gives us a glimpse of the young man, serving his apprenticeship to architecture in a London office, and doggedly pursuing the path of a poet despite disappointment and rejection slips :

‘... he did not by any means abandon verse, which he wrote constantly, but kept private, through the years 1866 and most of 1867, resolving to send no more poetry to magazines whose editors probably did not know good poetry from bad, and forming meanwhile the quixotic opinion that, as in verse was concentrated the essence of all imaginative and emotional literature, to read verse and nothing else was the shortest way to the fountain-head of such, for one who had not a great deal of spare time. And in fact for nearly or quite two years he did not read a word of prose except such as came under his eye in the daily newspapers and weekly reviews.’

Just what is ‘quixotic’ in the young Hardy’s decision to give all his reading time to poetry, I do not know. It seems to me an excellent piece of common sense, much to be recommended to any young person who wants to acquire an insight into the nature of imaginative writing without

taking years over the job. To know English poetry well is to see the richest and most intense workings of the English imagination, whereas to know only English fiction or drama would not only take longer but be less rewarding. And for 'English' read 'French' or (I suspect) any other nationality, certainly in Europe.

These two years of reading the English poets must have been invaluable for Hardy's development as a writer, whether of verse or prose. But prose, for practical reasons, carried the day. For twenty-five years he worked as a novelist — not, indeed, to the total exclusion of poetry, for which he always tried to reserve some of his time and energy. But poetry cannot be written in one's 'spare time', or fed on the energy left when other work has consumed its share. After that quarter-century of effort, Hardy took off his novelist's hat and hung it up for good. The hostility which, in many quarters, greeted *Jude the Obscure* (1895) appears to have sickened him with the novel-reading public, and after one more prose story (*The Well-Beloved*, 1897) he settled down to spend the rest of his life, supported in modest comfort by the royalties from his novels, writing what he really wanted to write: narrative, dramatic, and lyric poetry.

As a poet, Hardy not unnaturally works over the same themes that we find in his prose. His work is concerned mainly with suffering, and in particular with the human sense of impotence in the face of a ruthless destiny. He described himself as an agnostic, but he was in many ways closer to being an atheist in the high Victorian manner, combining disbelief in God with a venomous dislike of Him for not existing. The strength of Hardy's work comes mainly from a tragic stoicism, a blind will to go on living in despite of the malignancy of fate; and also from a considerable curiosity about human nature. Much has been made of Hardy's affinities with Browning, but it seems to me that if he owes anything to any previous poet that poet is Words-

worth, and in particular the Wordsworth of the 'Lucy' and 'Matthew' poems, where he is interested in presenting, without comment or analysis, the odd quirks of the human mind under the pressure of life; so that poems like 'The Two April Mornings' or 'Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known' lead directly to the Hardy of 'In Her Precincts' or 'The Self-Unseeing'. Already in 1868 Hardy was writing in his notebook, 'Perhaps I can do a volume of poems consisting of the *other side* of common emotions.' To view everyday experience from an unusual angle and give the unexpected insight — this was his aim as it was Wordsworth's. They are both poets of normality. But they both understand that normality is not the simple thing it was once supposed.

Another resemblance between Hardy and Wordsworth is that they both had the same knack of slipping in and out of autobiography. Hardy's utter unselfconsciousness in this respect is one of the most interesting features of his work. He builds his poem round a story or a situation, and it appears to make no difference whether the original event happened to him, or to someone else, or just occurred to his imagination. Many poets feel a need to cover their tracks elaborately when speaking of their own experience or situation; others are so compulsively autobiographical that they must re-tell every story, or shape every invention, to put themselves at the centre. Hardy simply goes ahead with what comes to hand. Some of his meditative lyrics deal very directly with his own experience; for instance, the rush of poems that flowed out of his grief at the death of his first wife in 1912 — a grief inflamed by remorse, for their relationship had been a stormy one. Others start from experiences that might, or might not, have been Hardy's own. But his poetic practice is not affected one way or the other. He is entirely pragmatic, working to no theory of self-expression or self-concealment. One feels that Hardy would have scarcely understood a sophisticated distinction like T. S. Eliot's 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an

escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality' — not because he lacked the intelligence to understand it, but because he would have seen no need to draw such careful diagrams.

Stylistically, as in theme, Hardy's poetry is remarkably consistent. He evidently made up his mind very early as to the kind of music he wanted to play on the great keyboard of the English language, and there is hardly any difference in texture and movement between his early poems, written in the seventies and eighties, and those of half a century later. In contrast to this steady consistency of diction there is, of course, his incessant switching of metrical forms. He is for ever varying rhyme-scheme and length of line; if anyone had the patience to go through all the poems Hardy published and count the number of different verse-forms he used, the total would be higher, I should guess, than in the case of any other English poet. And many of these forms must have been of Hardy's own devising. Not that we need, on these grounds alone, bestow on him the title of 'experimental' poet. To vary one's stanza restlessly from poem to poem, to switch from exceedingly short lines to exceedingly long ones, is not experimentation: it probes hardly at all into the nature of poetic effect: nor did Hardy intend it to probe. It reminds us more of the work of a village craftsman who makes tables and chairs, beds and sofas, adapting the shape of each one to fit a different set of circumstances, but always using the same basic local materials.

And indeed Hardy's poems are very like the work of a village craftsman, just as he himself, in appearance and manner, seems to have resembled such a man. ('They say he looks like a little old stone-mason,' wrote Robert Frost to an American friend in 1913.) Like a rural workman, he built plainly and built to last, with no factory-tooled precision but with each new object shaped by the living hand to fit into its own special place. His language is not elegant, his lines do not flow smoothly; when he sets himself a difficult

metrical task and carries it out with a skill born of long practice, the result is never slick or varnished. There is always a certain stiff deliberation, the unhurried gait of the country man going about his immemorial business.

Take any typical stanza :

You were she who abode
By those red-veined rocks far West,
You were the swan-necked one who rode
Along the beetling Beeny Crest,
 And, reining nigh me,
 Would muse and eye me,
While Life unrolled us its very best.

So he thinks, after his wife's death, of their happiest times together, many years earlier. The verse moves one plodding step at a time, with no rhythmical *élan*: the rhymes are matter-of-fact, as if the poet had merely set himself to find certain words that chimed together and had, so to speak, fulfilled his contract when he had lit on them. But highly-finished writing would not be able to convey the feeling that this poem, and the others like it, seek to convey. The plainness, the awkwardness, the crick in the neck, the creak of boots, all heighten the impression of ordinariness, of the inevitable suffering of an unremarkable life, and it is this impression that makes the poems so moving. This conscious plainness, this beautiful clumsiness, are as much in evidence in Hardy's most famous and successful poems as in his run-of-the-mill output.

They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
 Uncoffined — just as found :
His landmark is a kopje-crest
 That breaks the veldt around;
And foreign constellations west
 Each night above his mound.

Or, again, the first line of one of the most purely beautiful of all his poems, 'Afterwards' :

When the Present has latched its postern behind my
tremulous stay . . .

Here, the movement of the line is slow, wavering, well suited to its function of suggesting the movements of an old man, slowly walking off the stage of life. Or some old family servant, closing and fastening the postern gate, on a summer's night, behind some departing visitor. The final 's' of 'tremulous', coming immediately before the initial 's' of 'stay', is the sort of double hiss an accomplished verse-writer would avoid (not many of them, I imagine, could be found in Tennyson), yet this slight awkwardness gives the right impression of unpolished, hesitant sincerity.

In fact 'Afterwards' will repay pondering for a number of reasons. It is a poem of thanksgiving : a benediction on the things that have brought happiness during life. Hardy's view of human existence was harsh and gloomy; he speaks of 'the monotonous moils of strained, hard-run Humanity', and as a writer what chiefly interests him is how the stuff of human character is affected by the endless strains to which a hostile destiny subjects it : how people break up, or warp out of shape, or harden into an inflexible bitter defiance. On the other hand, if we compare him with two other poets of the tragic vision, working during the same years, we see that he is very much his own man. W. B. Yeats and A. E. Housman were both poets who took the view that the human condition is tragic : Yeats expressed it with a kind of fierce joy which accepted tragedy but rejected drab submissiveness; he felt that though we time-bound creatures had to go down before our fate, we must go down with banners flying and guns firing; he knew that 'Hamlet and Lear are gay'. Housman, for his part, gives the impression of perceiving the human tragedy through the windows of a

room lined with books and classical busts; beautiful and memorable as his poems are, they are always the utterances of a literary man, distilled by a patient art rather than forced out by the pressure and impact of life. If we come to Hardy after these two other great poets we see at once that we are in the presence of what can only be called a peasant view of life. Hardy has the peasant's realism, his grim resignation to the fact that life will be harsh, that the best part of it will be over soon and after that the years will bear heavily down. But he also has the dour humour, the relish for an odd tale about his neighbour, and the slow endurance that carries on in spite of all. He resents the cruelty of fate, but he would never, like Housman, rail against

Whatever brute or blackguard made the world;

there is a kind of petulance in such railing, and the peasant is never petulant: he has the patience and silent strength of an animal. So, in 'Afterwards', we see the essential countryman, who does not praise the beauty of the countryside, but immerses himself in its slow, fruitful rhythms and enjoys, hardly knowing that he is enjoying them, the common sights and sounds: the hedgehog 'travelling furtively over the lawn', the 'full-starred heavens that winter sees', the church bells whose sound is now carried, now interrupted, by the wind. And the only epitaph the poet wants is that he 'used to notice such things'; he was unobtrusively there, part of the scene, taking note of it all. Housman, in his great hymn to the beauty of rural Nature, 'Tell me not here, it needs not saying', had been careful to dissociate himself from any over-eager sense of 'involvement' with her:

For nature, heartless, witless nature,
Will neither care nor know
What stranger's feet may find the meadow
And trespass there and go,

Nor ask amid the dews of morning
If they are mine or no.

This is the literary man's reaction, using the Pathetic Fallacy to deny the truth of the Pathetic Fallacy. Hardy, by contrast, seems indifferent, as a peasant would be, to whether he is 'at one' with Nature or not. He was there, he moved among these scenes not as a 'trespasser' but as one who lived there by habitual right; he 'used to notice such things'; that is all. And what, finally, gives him the strength to live in spite of the gloominess of his world-view is his sense, again peasant-like, of a steadily moving life which goes forward, day after day, in obedience to the overarching will of Nature, and which without effort includes and transcends all our petty struggles and contrivances. The man harrowing clods, the thin blue smoke from a bonfire, the whispering of the young couple,

 this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

Then again, like anyone who understands a toilsome and monotonous life, Hardy has a great weakness for junketings and good times; the rather roguish gaiety that suddenly flashes out from 'Great Things', or the not very innocent fun of 'The Ruined Maid', are all part of the countryman's reaction to life. So, for that matter, is the flinty hardness of his satire. When Hardy lashes out in sudden anger, it is like a blow from a navvy's fist. Many writers have attacked the folly of war, but no poem tramples it more swiftly and more thoroughly than 'I Looked Up From My Writing'.

For these reasons we may speak of Hardy as a rural poet, who sees things as the peasant has always seen them. At the same time, we must not fall into the trap of seeing him as a poet of direct vision and technical simplicity who has at his command nothing else but this directness and simplicity. He

was, to be sure, innocent of the obliquity which has so strongly characterised modern poetry and modern art in general. He liked to speak of 'irony', but in fact his own ironies are so transparent and predictable that they come across as Arcadian straightforwardness. Still, he was also a genuine artist, and an artist always has his stratagems and his subtle involvements. Hardy's language, as we have noted, gives the impression of a plain man struggling to speak the awkward truths in his mind. But very often, if we examine this language, we shall find that under the clumping earnestness there is a richness and cunning. Take, for instance, the lines :

Portion of this yew
Is a man my grandsire knew,
Bosomed here at its foot.

The word *bosomed*, there, sounds rustic and old-fashioned, which is appropriate when the subject of the poem is a man's musings in a simple country churchyard. It is only when we try to disentangle the strands that we realise how many there are. The dead man is buried at the root of the yew tree; he is *bosomed* in the earth, held closely in her heart : the word *bosom* implies secrecy and also fondness ('bosom friends', 'secrets of my bosom'). The earth shows love for the dead man, admits him to her innermost sanctuary, allows him to partake in the sacred process of the renewal of life, in this case the life of a tree but no less life for that. By its sound, the word *bosom* may also smuggle into our minds, subliminally, the suggestion of *blossom*. Then there is the visual effect. Most people see an image when they read a statement; admittedly these things are to some extent subjective, but in my case at any rate the image that arises is of the man lying beneath the soil with the roots of the tree coming out of his chest; his heart, traditionally the seat of life and the seat of the vital emotions, is sending its accu-

culated experience upward into the tree's trunk; it grows from his bosom, like the 'Southern tree' from Drummer Hodge's 'breast and brain'. If we were to re-write the line as '*buried here at its root*', we should still be conveying the basic sense, but the richness of suggestion would be lost. And that richness is to be found surprisingly often in Hardy's poetry.

Perhaps this is why, in addition to his strong fascination for the ordinary non-professional reader, Hardy's poetry has always interested other poets. His influence on subsequent poetry has been unspectacular yet persistent. In our reading of twentieth-century poetry, we are constantly coming across echoes and parallels. Robert Frost's 'Death of the Hired Man' is exactly the kind of narrative poem (or, more precisely, situation-poem) that Hardy delighted in; while poems like John Betjeman's 'On a Portrait of a Deaf Man' or Philip Larkin's 'Love Songs in Age' would probably not have come out quite as they did if Hardy had never existed.

Hardy's long life coincided with a time of neglect for poetry. The industrial, urbanised society that developed in the later nineteenth century was, as far as the arts were concerned, a ruthless leveller. It gathered information rapidly and in huge quantities; with the aid of the electric telegraph and the mechanical printing-press it developed the daily newspaper and the inexpensive pamphlet; by uprooting people from their homes, it destroyed the continuity in which fable and tradition survive; and by encouraging the habit of rapid, silent reading, necessary to keep up with the enormous increase in letterpress, it weighted the scales against any form of writing that needs the speaking voice. It preferred literature in a homely, realistic vein; its great love was the matter-of-fact novel. A good many people were completely mystified by the fact that Hardy, at the height of his reputation, abandoned prose fiction and devoted the last thirty years of his life to poetry. (I suspect, from various remarks she lets drop, that his second wife was among

them.) To such observers, it looked as if he were turning away from serious (and profit-making) work to pursue an idle hobby.

Now that poetry has survived that long winter, and come back into something like its own, Hardy's recognition of his own deep compulsion to write in verse seems only natural and commendable. He was always bitter about the current neglect of the art he loved most. 'The poet,' he wrote in 1918, 'is like one who enters and mounts a platform to give an address as announced. He opens his page, looks around, and finds the hall — *empty*.' But many things have happened in the years since that complaint was uttered. And one of them is that the hall has quietly been filling up. Let us take our seats with the others, and listen to the voice of a man whose deepest wish was to be a major English poet, who toiled at his art so devotedly that he has left us nearly a thousand examples of it; none of them quite without interest, and some of them fit to rank with the greatest achievements of modern lyric verse.

JOHN WAIN

CONTENTS

Introduction

page ix

Wessex Poems and Other Verses

NEUTRAL TONES	3
SHE AT HIS FUNERAL	3
SHE, TO HIM, I	4
SHE, TO HIM, II	4
SHE, TO HIM, III	5
SHE, TO HIM, IV	6
NATURE'S QUESTIONING	6
'I LOOK INTO MY GLASS'	7

Poems of the Past and the Present

War Poems

DRUMMER HODGE	II
---------------	----

Poems of Pilgrimage

SHELLEY'S SKYLARK	12
-------------------	----

Miscellaneous Poems

AT A LUNAR ECLIPSE	14
TO AN UNBORN PAUPER CHILD	14
TO LIZBIE BROWNE	16
A BROKEN APPOINTMENT	18
HIS IMMORTALITY	19
THE PUZZLED GAME-BIRDS	19
THE DARKLING THRUSH	20
A WASTED ILLNESS	21
THE RUINED MAID	22
THE SELF-UNSEEING	23
IN TENEBRIS	24

Time's Laughingstocks and Other Verses

Time's Laughingstocks

A TRAMPWOMAN'S TRAGEDY	page 29
THE HOUSE OF HOSPITALITIES	33
SHUT OUT THAT MOON	33
THE DEAD MAN WALKING	34

More Love Lyrics

THE CONFORMERS	36
THE END OF THE EPISODE	37

A Set of Country Songs

FORMER BEAUTIES	38
-----------------	----

Pieces Occasional and Various

A CHURCH ROMANCE	39
SHE HEARS THE STORM	39
THE UNBORN	40
THE MAN HE KILLED	41

Satires of Circumstance

Lyrics and Reveries

THE CONVERGENCE OF THE TWAIN	45
'MY SPIRIT WILL NOT HAUNT THE MOUND'	47
IN DEATH DIVIDED	47
A PLAINT TO MAN	49
AT DAY-CLOSE IN NOVEMBER	50

Poems of 1912-13

THE GOING	51
YOUR LAST DRIVE	52
THE WALK	54
RAIN ON A GRAVE	54
'I FOUND HER OUT THERE'	56
WITHOUT CEREMONY	57
THE VOICE	58
AFTER A JOURNEY	58
AT CASTLE BOTEREL	60
THE PHANTOM HORSEWOMAN	61
WHERE THE PICNIC WAS	62

Miscellaneous Pieces

IN THE SERVANTS' QUARTERS	page 64
'REGRET NOT ME'	65
SEEN BY THE WAITS	67
THE WORKBOX	67

Satires of Circumstance

I. AT TEA	70
II. IN CHURCH	70
XII. AT THE DRAPER'S	71
XV. IN THE MOONLIGHT	72

Moments of Vision and Miscellaneous Verses

AFTERNOON SERVICE AT MELLSTOCK	75
HEREDITY	75
ON A MIDSUMMER EVE	76
LINES TO A MOVEMENT IN MOZART'S E-FLAT SYMPHONY	76
'SOMETHING TAPPED'	77
THE ANNOUNCEMENT	78
THE OXEN	78
IN HER PRECINCTS	79
TRANSFORMATIONS	80
GREAT THINGS	80
OLD FURNITURE	81
LOGS ON THE HEARTH	83
DURING WIND AND RAIN	83
PAYING CALLS	84
'WHO'S IN THE NEXT ROOM?'	85
MIDNIGHT ON THE GREAT WESTERN	86

Poems of War and Patriotism

IN TIME OF 'THE BREAKING OF NATIONS'	87
'I LOOKED UP FROM MY WRITING'	87

Finale

AFTERWARDS	89
------------	----