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Hardy Biographed

ONE OF HENRY JAMES'S LEAST APPEALING ASPECTS is shown in his remarks about Thomas Hardy—the "good little Hardy" as he once patronizingly called him. In 1874, when *Far from the Madding Crowd* was published, the "breakthrough" novel that brought Hardy many delighted readers, James pronounced in a review in *The Nation* that "Everything human in the book strikes us as factious and insubstantial; the only things we believe in are the sheep and the dogs." Fourteen years later, when *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* appeared (it would make Hardy rich), James wrote to Robert Louis Stevenson—who had disliked the novel—and drawlingly declared about its heroine "Oh yes, dear Louis, she is vile." Both these declarations are quoted in Claire Tomalin's excellent new biography of Hardy in which she notes, with relation to *Far from the Madding Crowd*, that Hardy found his true voice in it and that for whatever awkwardness it contained, the voice was "tuned into experiences and feelings outside the range of Henry James."[1] There was an equally confident "placing" of Hardy a few years after he died by F. R. Leavis in *New Bearings in English Poetry*. Leavis deserves credit for being one of the first critics to claim greatness for some of the poems written after the death of Hardy's first wife, Emma: from *Poems of 1912–1913* Leavis singled out "The Voice" and "After a Journey" as particularly distinguished. Still, he called Hardy "a naive poet of simple attitudes and outlook," a judgment so outrageously misguided as to leave one shaking one's head in disbelief. As for Hardy the novelist, Leavis confided to us, in a casual footnote to "How to Teach Reading" (his response to Ezra Pound's "How to Read"), that "I'm afraid I have given up my long endeavour to see Hardy as a great novelist." Sorry about that.

Both James and Leavis attempted to put Hardy in his place, an effort even more unsympathetically made by T. S. Eliot when, in *After Strange Gods* and mainly on the basis of a single short story, Eliot dubbed him one of the modern heretics. It is of more than passing remark then that the subject of these adverse commentaries should within the last decades have received so much and so distinguished attention from biographers. Claire Tomalin's book appeared concurrently with a correspondingly good one by Ralph Pite, and only three years ago the dean of Hardy biographers, Michael Millgate, produced a revision of his 1982 life. Both Tomalin and Pite acknowledge Millgate's book; Pite also mentions Martin Seymour-Smith's long and polemically inclined one

[1] THOMAS HARDY, by *Claire Tomalin*. The Penguin Press. $35.00.

and, before that, Robert Gittings' extremely readable two volumes from the 1970s.[2] And there have been others, all of them, perhaps not surprisingly, by British authors. Although these biographies differ in details, they seem in general agreement about Hardy's life and its main outline, and they place major emphasis on the sudden death in 1911 of his first wife, a death that issued in the 1912–13 poems that contain a number of his finest. Indeed Tomalin in her prologue claims, somewhat exaggeratedly, that it was at that moment when Hardy became a great poet. But it is nothing against these biographies individually or as a whole to say that, after a crash course in them, I emerged with no ultimate comprehension of the mysteries of human character as embodied in the Man from Wessex.

Hardy would not have minded. The guarded life Pite's title alludes to was well guarded to its very end, which can be said to have begun the morning Hardy went to his study and found that he could not work. It had been almost eighty-eight years previously when he was born, apparently lifeless but then perceived to be alive—"tiny, weak, hardly expected to survive for long, but not dead yet." Tomalin's note to the incident refers us to the account of Hardy's birth in *The Life and Works of Thomas Hardy*, once presumed to have been written by his second wife Florence, but fully ghosted by Hardy himself, concerned as he was to protect against misprision by some unfriendly biographer. In fact the "tiny, weak . . . but not dead yet" sequence consists of words belonging to Tomalin, not her subject. Hardy does, in the early pages of his *Life*, refer to another event from his boyhood that stood out:

> He was lying on his back in the sun, thinking how useless he was, and covered his face with his straw hat. The sun's rays streamed through the interstices of the straw, the lining having disappeared. Reflecting on his experiences of the world so far as he had got he came to the conclusion that he did not wish to grow up.

I was reminded of a moment in John Updike's memoir, *Self-Consciousness*, in which the young boy delighted, when it rained, in taking shelter under the upturned furniture on the side porch where he would "crouch, happy almost to tears, as the rain drummed on the porch rail . . . and touched my wicked shelter." It's one of Updike's most effective images for the urge to guard boyhood, never having to grow up as long as you were crouched quietly enough in shelter.

I don't propose to compare Tomalin with Pite in what they agree about, where they differ, and what they hold most significant in "accounting" for the unaccountable—Hardy's genius as both novelist and poet. In that doubleness of achievement he seems clearly to stand above his competitors. Robert Mezey, in his excellent introduction to

[2] THOMAS HARDY: The Guarded Life, by *Ralph Pite*. Yale University Press. $35.00. Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited* (New York, 2004). Martin Seymour-Smith, *Hardy* (London, 1994). Robert Gittings, *Young Thomas Hardy; The Older Thomas Hardy* (London, 1975, 1978).

the Penguin Hardy *Selected Poems*, mentions Swift, George Meredith, and Kipling as possible rivals but notes that as poets they were not in Hardy's class (nor was Emily Brontë or Robert Louis Stevenson, other practitioners in the two modes). And even someone who thinks as well as I do of Updike's poems or those of Kingsley Amis would not make a case for their competing with Hardy's. We must also bear in mind that although during his years as a novelist Hardy wrote and published a few poems, he waited until he was almost sixty before publishing his first volume.

As a bachelor during his first extended stay in London in the 1860s when he worked as an architectural assistant to Arthur Blomfield, Hardy, as Tomalin puts it, "fell more deeply in love with poetry than with any of the girls he met in London." But she mentions only briefly his most significant poetic discovery of those years—Swinburne. Here Pite is useful, more so than any previous writer on Hardy, providing six pages of commentary on how much Hardy got out of the erotic and pagan sensibility revealed in Swinburne's poems. Swinburne gave Hardy, writes Pite

> a feeling of sudden, absolute release on several levels. He need not any longer submit to Christian doctrine or conventional morality. His sexual feelings were nothing to be ashamed of and neither could he be frightened any longer of putting his love in words.

So these potentially "abnormal" feelings could be explored rather than guiltily concealed, and not yet mainly in poems but in the novels he published, from *Desperate Remedies* (1871) to *The Well-Beloved* twenty-six years later.

Those novels have been accurately and usefully written about in scores of books and essays, none of which have substantially improved on the sympathetic estimates provided by Irving Howe forty years ago. Perhaps the most radical re-estimating of them was given by John Bayley who somewhat demotes the last two important ones, *Tess* and *Jude the Obscure*, in comparison with earlier ones where Hardy more freely explored life.[3] Tomalin speaks of how in those late books Hardy "coerced" his plots by—especially in *Jude*—"piling on the agony." She remarks, impressionistically but truly, that reading *Jude* is "like being hit in the face over and over again." Both she and Pite much admire the novel James did not, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, for its warmth and weight. For me it is the book where Hardy's famous rustics can be enjoyed without any annoyed sense of Here Come the Rustics Again, Talking in Their Funny Way. Pite has good things to say about *Two on a Tower* and what goes wrong with it; and both biographers pay attention to what, on balance, is my favorite of all his novels, *The Woodlanders*, about which Pite says, "Hardy had always been an acute observer of the natural world, its minutiae and its grandeur but he had never written about it so precisely, so movingly or, at times, so strangely as he did

[3] Irving Howe, *Thomas Hardy* (New York, 1967). John Bayley, *An Essay On Hardy* (London, 1978).

there." He thinks that perhaps its quality might have had something to do with the fact that Hardy completed it at the time when his friend and mentor, the Dorset poet William Barnes, was dying. (Hardy's poem about Barnes's funeral, "The Last Signal," is one of his most moving and least known.)

In one of Hardy's letters, he insists that his writing career, especially during the 1880s, was increasingly devoted to making his fiction more honest, despite the cowardices of publishers and some readers: "I have felt that the doll of English fiction must be demolished, if England is to have a school of fiction at all." The development of what he called "a more virile type of novel" culminated in *Tess* ("Oh yes, dear Louis, she is vile"), which became a bestseller and also marked the point at which relations with Emma began significantly to worsen. The worsening had something to do with Hardy's fascination with a series of younger women, none of whom made themselves available for a sexual liaison. (The most notable of them was Florence Henniker, who figures in such Hardy poems as "At an Inn" and "A Broken Appointment.") As Hardy became more outspoken in matters of sex and—in *Jude*—religious unbelief, Emma dug in her heels, grew more orthodox in her Christian principles and more censorious about Hardy's "freedom," both on and off the page. In 1899 she wrote a ludicrously solemn letter to a woman who had asked her for marital advice, instructing the woman that when a man reached age fifty (Hardy was about to turn sixty) "Eastern ideas of matrimony secretly pervade his thoughts and he wearies of the most perfect and suitable wife chosen in his earlier life." It is amusing to think of the Dorset stoic suddenly falling prey to the sensual corruptions of the East, but obviously Florence didn't find it so.

Ralph Pite points out how vulnerable Hardy was to unfavorable criticism of his books and suggests that this vulnerability stemmed from wanting "mutually contradictory things; to be admired and, at the same time, to be unflattering about the people whose admiration he sought; to be accepted and to behave unacceptably." In this respect he may be contrasted with George Gissing, who remained true to his novels' dark vision of things—novels that in no way set out to entertain, as, for all their gloom, Hardy's always did. But it's a romantic simplification to say that—as I had always assumed—he was wounded by unfriendly responses to *Tess* and *Jude*, and thus decided to stop writing novels. In fact, at age fifty-six, with no financial worries and surely feeling the strain of extended novel composition, he could afford to "retire" and return to poetry, his early love. Of course nobody warned him that he would live for another thirty years of unabated lyric production.

Tomalin's claim that it was only with the poems written in response to Emma's death that Hardy became a great poet tends now to be accepted, so it is worth noting how many fine poems preceded them. His first volume, *Wessex Poems* (1898), is relatively weak compared to the three that followed: *Poems of the Past and the Present* (1901); *Time's Laughingstocks* (1909); and the poems collected in *Satires of Circumstance* (1914) that were written before Emma's death. Here is my short list of

permanently valuable ones from those years: "Neutral Tones," "Thoughts of Phena," "'I Look Into My Glass'," "Drummer Hodge," "At the Pyramid of Cestius: near the Graves of Shelley and Keats," "A Broken Appointment," "Wives in the Sere," "The Darkling Thrush," "The Self-Unseeing," "The Rejected Member's Wife," "On the Departure Platform," "Channel Firing," and "The Convergence of the Twain." This is fairly stringent choosing, leaving out entirely the ballads and narratives of country life; and the poems chosen range from the public-celebratory (the ironic lines on the *Titanic*'s sinking) to the briefest personal bit of human sadness—brought on by memory—as in "The Self-Unseeing," Hardy's recall of music making and his father playing the fiddle:

> Here is the ancient floor,
> Footworn and hollowed and thin,
> Here was the former door
> Where the dead feet walked in.
>
> She sat here in her chair,
> Smiling into the fire;
> He who played stood there,
> Bowing it higher and higher.
>
> Childlike, I danced in a dream;
> Blessings emblazoned that day;
> Everything glowed with a gleam;
> Yet we were looking away!

There are depths in that closing exclamation.

But of course all the poems written previous to the ones after Emma's death are impersonal—guarded, you might say. Suddenly, the first of *Poems of 1912–13*, "The Going," begins as follows:

> Why did you give no hint that night
> That quickly after the morrow's dawn,
> And calmly, as if indifferent quite,
> You would close your term here, up and be gone
>   Where I could not follow
>   With wing of swallow
> To gain one glimpse of you ever anon!

There had been first-person speakers in Hardy's previous poetry ("I leant upon a coppice gate / When frost was spectre gray") but nothing comparable to the fullness with which, in the poems from this sequence, an "I" unburdens himself, questioning, lamenting, remembering, even on occasion giving the departed one a chance to speak (see "The Haunter," the poem from the 1912–13 group Yvor Winters

thought the best). Donald Davie has written brilliantly about these poems, especially in their Virgilian provenance, and to my judgment "After a Journey" and (especially) "At Castle Boterel" stand at the very top of Hardy's achievement as a poet. But surely some of the glamour that attaches to them has its origin in how utterly unlike they were to Hardy's usual, expert construction of stanza and rhyme.

He would go on to publish four further volumes (Tomalin notes that between 1913 and 1916 there were 150 new poems!), many of them written in his seventies and eighties. After World War I, he was visited by a younger generation of poets and literary figures including Graves, Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, and T. E. Lawrence. Ezra Pound consulted him, sent him *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, and Hardy wrote him appreciatively, praising its "racy satire." Then there are the well-recorded visits from E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf. Forster gives a hilarious account of Hardy's lugubrious presentation of the "Pet Cemetery" at Max Gate, home of many dead cats that had been scrupulously buried.[4] But Woolf's words about her visit in 1926 have not been bettered:

> He seemed perfectly aware of everything; in no doubt or hesitation; having made up his mind; and being delivered of all his work, so that he was in no doubt about that either. . . . The whole thing—literature, novels, etc., all seemed to him an amusement, far away too, scarcely to be taken seriously. . . . But what his secret interests and activities are—to what occupation he trotted off when we left him—I do not know.

We do know at least that he paid attention to Wessex, the dog known to one visitor, Tomalin notes, as "Florence's unspeakable dog 'Wessie.'" Wessex bit many postmen, maids, and visitors, but was fed "from their own plates at tables and sometime on the table." Hardy arranged for the dog to sleep on an eiderdown in his study, gave him goose and plum pudding at Christmas, and kissed him goodnight each night. Wessex became so fond of the wireless set Hardy purchased that the master would get up early and go downstairs to turn it on for the creature's pleasure. The dog died a year before Hardy, unlamented except by its owners. But a detail like that one about turning the wireless on early in the morning is worth a thousand words of psychological investigation into Hardy's psyche.

[4] "T.H. showed me the graves of his pets, all overgrown with ivy, their names on the head stones. Such a dolorous muddle. "This is Snowbell—she was run over by a train . . . this is Pella, the same thing happened to her . . . this is Kitkin, she was cut clean in two, clean in two – – – " "How is it that so many of your cats have been run over, Mr. Hardy? Is the railway near?"—"Not at all near, not at all near – – – I don't know how it is. But of course we have only buried here those pets whose bodies were recovered. Many were never seen again." I could scarcely keep grave—it was so like a caricature of his own novels or poems." *Selected Letters of E. M. Forster,* ed. by Mary Lago and P. N. Furbank (Cambridge, 1985), Vol. II, p. 31.