

The Terrestrial Imagination
—The Poet Hardy in the Romantic Tradition—

Literary Studies Course, Graduate School

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Received 6 September 1999

O, doth a bird deprived of a wing

Go earth-bound wilfully!

— 'The Impercipient,' 29-30

Against the common belief that Thomas Hardy was a novelist dyed in the wool, he wished to be a poet at heart and actually wrote some one thousand poems during the course of his life. "His only ambition," said Hardy about himself as his later wife Florence reports in the last chapter of her Life of Thomas Hardy, "so far as he could remember, was to have a poem or poems in a good anthology like the Golden Treasury." (444) In this lecture* I should like to speak about what kind of a poet he was, in connection with the Romantic tradition in which he, as with most of the Victorian poets, was deeply immersed since the start of his poetic career.

Let us first take a well-known piece and examine its vocabulary in terms of its Romantic inheritance. I quote the whole in the following:

The Darkling Thrush

I LEANT upon a coppice gate
 When Frost was spectre-gray,
 And Winter's dregs made desolate
 The weakening eye of day.
 The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
 Like strings of broken lyres,
 And all mankind that haunted night
 Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
 The Century's corpse outleant,
 His crypt the cloudy canopy,
 The wind his death-lament.

The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited:
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

31 December 1900

No commentary will be necessary on these lines before you recognize that they are evocative of some works or other of the Romantic poets: Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight,' for example, and 'The Eolian Harp,' Gray's 'Elegy,' Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind,' 'To a Skylark' and 'Hymn to intellectual Beauty,' Wordsworth's 'To the Cuckoo,' Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale,' and so on. Note that these are, most of them, the very poems arrayed in the celebrated anthology that Hardy aspired to have taken part in. He seems, as it were, to "have loaded every rift of his subject with ore" in this poem---the ore, that is, of the Golden Treasury.

I do not think it a mere coincidence that Hardy filled his poem with the vocabulary of Palgrave's anthology. Its first edition was published in 1861, and as early as January next year he got a copy of it from a friend (Pinion [1978] 167). After repeated reprints of this edition Palgrave intended in 1897 to cover the period succeeding it, and issued the Second Series consisting of selected works of the poets after 1850. As a matter of course there were no entries of Hardy's poems here, as he had not yet begun to publish his

poetry properly. But when he saw included in this new edition many familiar names of his friends and acquaintances such as Arnold, Tennyson, Browning, Patmore, and above all the Dorset poet, William Barnes, who knows if he was not filled with some secret resolve? It was in the next year, 1898, that he published, virtually for the first time in his life, his poetical achievement under the title of Wessex Poems.

Now 'The Darkling Thrush,' dated the last day of the 19th Century and contributed to the Times on New Year's Day 1901, was I presume another bid for popularity Hardy made as a poet. Its original title as it appeared in the Graphic, 29 Dec 1900, was 'By the Century's Death-bed,' which sounds as much Shelleyan as its theme, culminating to all appearances in "blessed Hope" — a hope somewhat similar to that Shelley had trumpeted in 'Ode to the West Wind': "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" To all appearances, I say. And indeed most critics and commentators, including J. O. Bailey, F. B. Pinion, Tom Paulin, and Donald Davie, seem to agree that in this poem Hardy came up with an optimistic view that man had still a ray of hope for happiness ahead of him. But was that a case? Did Hardy really mean to convey such a Romantic hope, however faint it might be, on the pretext of the thrush's "ecstatic sound"?

Let me now draw your attention to some other connotative traits of the poem. To begin with, the "Thrush" in the title is rather a common bird, less Romantic than a nightingale or a skylark, and besides it is "An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small." (21) What a contrast it makes with the preceding two lines! Was the "full-hearted evensong / Of joy illimited" (19-20) really uttered by this "aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small"? The contrast is bathetic, rather than pathetic; it strikes us as mockery, rather than a lament.

More characteristic examples of such "un-Romantic" diction are the following three words in the last stanza: "carolings," "terrestrial" and "good-night." The first word makes me imagine a Christmas Eve in some happy Victorian home, and the phrase, "carolings of such ecstatic sound," invites me to think not of Keats's nightingale, but of Emma Gifford singing hymns in self-complacent rapture. "Goodnight" also belongs to the vocabulary of domestic life, connoting a good and peaceful human relationship, never to have been selected in place of "Adieu, adieu," when the ghost of Hamlet's Father receded into the darkness or when Keats was deserted by his famed bird. And "terrestrial" is I believe a typically Victorian term of science, commonly deployed by such naturalists as Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin. OED gives two examples, "terrestrial species" and "terrestrial animals," quoted respectively from Lyell's Principles of Geology (1830) and Darwin's Origin of Species (1859).

It is natural, then, that if Hardy's thrush after all betrays such a Victorian character or is set in such a Victorian landscape, it cannot afford any higher promise of beatitude than the Darwinian climate allows it. The poet says he could think, not feel, "some blessed Hope," but to the reader it appears not more than an insubstantial idea which

cannot find any objective correlatives on the earth. Hardy was well aware of this, and deliberately expressed the irony of thinking Romantically in the Victorian Age.

It is not widely known that Hardy was a would-be Swiftian satirist as a poet. He warned the editors and reviewers of his poetry that they were sometimes deficient in that kind of humour: " Even if they were accustomed to Dickensian humour they were not to Swiftian. Hence it unfortunately happened that verses of a satirical, dry, caustic, or farcical cast were regarded by them with the deepest seriousness " (Life 302). An aspect of his satire is illustrated by the following poem which he composed after sitting at Evensong in Salisbury Cathedral in 1897:

I am like a gazer who should mark
 An inland company
 Standing upfingered, with, " Hark! hark!
 The glorious distant sea!'
 And feel, 'Alas, 'tis but yon dark
 And wind-wept pine to me!'
 —'The Impercipient,' 19-24—

The vocabulary is Wordsworthian, but the thought is sarcastically positivistic in the way the poet mocks the good and pious believers. To him, so it seems, nothing really existed unless he was able to make sure of it with his senses. That is why he could not bring himself to believe in "some blessed Hope," which was not more than "a voice" in the last analysis. It was this realization of the vanity of human wishes, or the illusoriness of the Romantic vision that Hardy reflects in 'The Darkling Thrush,' ironically making use of Romantic images and motifs.

We have the literary term "mock-epic" or "mock-heroic" to denote a work in which the author aims at a satirical effect by treating a trivial subject with the elaborate and dignified devices of the epic. After this fashion I should like to coin the word "mock-Romantic" to characterize the style in which the poet attempts to expose some unRomantic aspects of life by the very use of Romantic diction. Let it be noticed by the way that a mock-epic is not a poem that mocks epic poetry itself. The Rape of the Lock, for example, is a clear evidence of Pope's total immersion in the great epic poems of the past, and is a remarkable indication of how widely they must have been known in Pope's day. Hence what he intended to make fun of in applying the diction and style of the Iliad to the trivial events of the aristocracy, was not the good old heroic world of Homer's grand epic, but the petty society of his own age where feminine vanity and Lilliputian wars passed current as "heroic" subjects for poetry. In the same way, when we call Hardy's 'Darkling Thrush' mock-Romantic, it does not mean that the poem mocks the Romanticism of the Great Romantics. To the contrary, the very fact of the author's admiring and hankering after them made him turn his eyes on the reality of his own day

and realize the mental distance from the former age. So what is mocked in the poem is the spiritual climate in which he lives, and the poet himself who is growing old in it. "An aged thrush... in blast-beruffled plume" is his own image. If so, the narrator who is hearing its vain "carrolings" is another Hardy who, cynically smiling, watches his Romantic self getting hopelessly alienated from the province of Shelley and Keats.

What was it, then, that destined Hardy to this paradoxical alienation from what he had been longing for at heart? The ideological kind of answer that the trend of the times had changed would help us little, nor would the sociological account which ascribes affairs of the imagination to the economic and political forces active in Hardy's time. For in practically the same age when Hardy half-despaired of the Romantic inspiration, Tennyson inherited Romantic lyricism, and later Yeats deservedly counted himself among "the last romantics" (*Poems* 276). Now we are coming to the point, and our argument will be focussed on the peculiar nature of Hardy's imagination.



Here is another poem of Hardy also dealing with birds:

The swallows flew in the curves of an eight
Above the river-gleam
In the wet June's last beam:
Like little crossbows animate
The swallows flew in the curves of an eight
Above the river-gleam.

— 'Overlooking the River Stour' 1-6

In the first line, the swallows flew "in the curves of an eight," which is markedly different from the Romantic traditional flight of birds, the way for example, Yeats's swans depart "wheeling in great broken rings":

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count:
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

— 'The Wild Swans at Coole,' 7-12

Most of the Romantic birds, Shelley's, Keats's, Wordsworth's, as well as Yeats's, visible or not, fly away and vanish into the air, never to return. But to Hardy's eyes, scarcely any birds appear to fly that way or end in vanishment; they always come back "in curves of an eight" or even fall to the ground like stones:

On a roof stand the swallows ranged in wistful waiting rows,

Till they arrow off and drop like stones
Among the eyot-withies at whose foot the river flows :
And beneath the roof is she who in the dark world shows
As a lattice-gleam when midnight moans.

— 'On Sturminster Foot-Bridge' 6-10

Some may protest that if the swallows actually flew that way, there is nothing extraordinary in Hardy's describing their flight as it was. But I don't think so. Suppose the poet stayed outdoors for some time, he might have watched many different birds fly in many different ways. And yet if a particular flight of some birds alone should have caught his eyes and left him with a lasting impression, we may reasonably presume that there must have been some selective factor in his sensibility that had given priority to the unique perception. This Hardy himself explained in terms of "idiosyncrasy":

'... As, in looking at a carpet, by following one colour a certain pattern is suggested, by following another colour, another; so in life the seer should watch that pattern among general things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe, and describe that alone. This is, quite accurately, a going to Nature; yet the result is no mere photograph, but purely the product of the writer's own mind.'

— Life 153

So far as the above-quoted poems are concerned, the closed or earthward movement of his eyes is certainly a mode of his idiosyncrasy, "a going to Nature" if you like, and the cause of his selective perception.

Birds are not the only objects of his downward gaze. In 'On Sturminster Foot-Bridge,' what he sees "beneath the roof" is his former wife Emma, now dead, whom he thought he had neglected in life, looming up through his dark memory. In the following poem he fixes his eyes on the moon reflected in a pond, and will not look up at the sky where the real moon is shining:

And I cared not for conning the sky above
Where hung the substant thing,
For my thought was earthward sojourning
On the scene I had vision of.

— 'At a Rashy Pond' 9-12

Then he recollects, with his eyes still lowered, "a secret year" (13) when he met his former love, Tryphena Sparks, at this same spot:

And the troubled orb in the pond's sad shine
Was her very wraith, as scanned
When she withdrew thence, mirrored, and
Her days dropped out of mine.

— 21-24

A similar phenomenon is described in the fourth stanza of 'Overlooking the River Stour.' The poet has been standing in the room looking out of the window. After watching the swallows his eyes are lowered first to the surface of the river where a moorhen is splashing, then to the closed kingcups in the mead spreading below the window, and lastly to the window-panes just in front of him. What he saw there overlapping with the things outside was the mirrored image of Emma standing behind him:

And never I turned my head, alack,
While these things met my gaze
Through the pane's drop-drenched glaze,
To see the more behind my back...
O never I turned, but let, alack,
These less things hold my gaze!

— 19-24

His mental perplexity apart, the mode of Hardy's ocular movement and selective perception bears witness, I presume, to the idiosyncrasy of his imagination itself. His imaginative eye is bound to close, descend, and converge on earthly objects attentively observed: his imagination is, in a word, "terrestrial."

The Romantic imagination as we usually understand it is quite different in vector and character. It soars "higher and still higher" like Shelley's skylark, "from the earth thou springest" (602). It transcends the mundane world and fetches the fire of inspiration from the loftiest heaven that sends forth "the white radiance of Eternity" (443). Keats's imagination also led the poet often to an empyreal height, though substantially he remained in "the realm of Flora, and old Pan" (71) and produced a wealth of sensuous imagery imbued with mythological metaphors. To Coleridge "the one Life within us and abroad" (101) was the source of his shaping spirit of imagination, whose "intellectual breeze" (102) he was always waiting for to sound the Eolian harp. Wordsworth's source of imagination was at the farthest end of recollection where "our souls have sight of that immortal sea / which brought us hither" (IV, 208). He was continually pursuing "the visionary gleam," only to have it lost, as 'To the Cuckoo' shows, in "an unsubstantial, faery place."

What is common to all these poets is that their imagination has a transcendental quality. It enables them not only to experience the revelation of something beyond time and space, but also to represent the intuition by means of metaphors and symbols, as Coleridge suggested in his theory of the primary and the secondary imagination. In 'Destiny of Nations' he says:

For all that meets the bodily sense I deem
Symbolical, one mighty alphabet
For infant minds; and we in this lower world

Placed with our backs to bright Reality,
That we may learn with young unwounded ken
The substance from its shadow.

—18-23

Or in 'The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry' Yeats also confirms this transcendental character of images and symbols exemplified in Shelley:

He must have expected to receive thoughts and images from beyond his own mind, just in so far as that mind transcended its preoccupation with particular time and place, for he believed inspiration a kind of death; and he could hardly have helped perceiving that an image that has transcended particular time and place becomes a symbol, passes beyond death, as it were, and becomes a living soul.

—Essays 80

A surprising fact is that in Hardy's poetry what we may properly call metaphors and symbols are very few, if any. "Moments of Vision" is the only symbolist poem Hardy ever wrote; it isolates a symbolic, magic mirror which is then applied in poems like 'Old Furniture,' 'The Pedigree,' etc." (Paulin 189) In most other poems the moon is always the moon, and birds are nothing but birds. He would never say of a skylark, "Bird thou never wert" as Shelley did, but "a pinch of unseen, unguarded dust"(4):

The dust of the lark that Shelley heard,
And made immortal through times to be;—
Though it only lived like another bird,
And knew not its immortality:

Lived its meek life; then, one day, fell —
A little ball of feather and bone;
And how it perished, when piped farewell,
And where it wastes, are alike unknown,

—'Shelley's Skylark', 5-12

Hardy's terrestrial imagination keeps him bound to the earth not only in perception but also in representation.

I know I am telling only half the truth, however. The following quotation illustrates how Hardy made little of mere optical effects in representing landscapes, and how he thought it important for the mind to discover the "deeper reality underlying the scenic" or be awakened to the "tragical mysteries of life," and coalesce such inner awareness with the outer object; "and the two united are depicted as the All," he says lastly:

I don't want to see landscapes, i. e., scenic paintings of them, because I don't want to see the original realities — as optical effects, that is. I want to

see the deeper reality underlying the scenic, the expression of what are sometimes called abstract imaginings.

The "simply natural" is interesting no longer. The much decried, mad, late-Turner rendering is now necessary to create my interest. The exact truth as to material fact ceases to be of importance in art — it is a student's style — the style of a period when the mind is serene and unawakened to the tragical mysteries of life; when it does not bring anything to the object that coalesces with and translates the qualities that are already there, — half hidden, it may be — and the two united are depicted as the All.

—Life, 185

This union or coalescence of the inner and the outer is apparently in line with another important phase of the Romantic theory of the imagination, that is, the belief in the cooperation of the subject and the object, the inward mind and the outward nature.

Wordsworth declares:

How exquisitely the individual mind . . .
to the external world
Is fitted: — and how exquisitely, too . . .
The external World is fitted to the Mind;
And the creation . . . which they with blended might
Accomplish.

— V, 5, 63-71

But the crucial difference lies in the question where the inner and the outer are supposed to meet and combine themselves into poetic images. With the Romantics the meeting point is usually intangible, placed far beyond the physical world or deep in the subliminal abyss of the mind. Hence their image-making often misses fire for want of substance; "Deep truth is imageless," says Demogorgon in Shelley's Prometheus Unbound (238). A fairly successful case was Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud.' The "host of golden daffodils" he gazed at in the real world was absorbed into his mind, and after a few years of blending with the unconscious self, "They flash upon that inward eye." For him the meeting point is the "inward eye," though it is set deep within himself and attained only in a special state of the mind.

With Hardy, on the other hand, the meeting point is always outside, before his bodily eyes. It is very often substantialized as the water surface or the window-panes, upon which his earthward imagination blends both the physical landscape and his inner self, that is, his unshaped emotions and thoughts recollected from the long past. We have already observed how the moon was mirrored in the pond and coalesced with the past image of a woman. An even more striking case is recorded in 'The Pedigree.' Here it is

late at night and the poet sits by the window scanning a family pedigree, when he is lured as if by magic to look up at the window-panes through which the shining moon and the drifting clouds ought to have seen. But, to his amazement, he finds:

It was a mirror now,
And in it a long perspective I could trace
Of my begetters, dwindling backward each past each
All with the kindred look,

— 15-18

Feeling that he is a mere "mimicker and counterfeit" (30) of his own stock, the poet mutters his protest feebly. At the instant, he says,

The Mage's mirror left the window-square,
And the stained moon and drift retook their places there.

— 35-36

The poem ends here. Now it is clear that the window-panes have acted as a translucent screen, rather than a mirror, temporarily falling between the night sky and the poet, and bringing together the outward scene of the moon and the clouds and his subliminal awareness of hereditary blood. On this meeting point not only the skyscape and the mindscape come together, but also the present and the past, what he is now and what he originally was are united. This is the magic of Hardy's terrestrial imagination, which makes it possible to visualize the "deeper reality" underlying man and the world without transforming anything on the surface of the physical universe.

To Hardy, however, the present outer reality, if left to itself, is characteristically dark and desolate and doomed, as we have seen in 'The Darkling Thrush.' If there be any hope whatever, it will only come from the successful fusion of outer and inner to promote the "poetry of place," Hardy seems to suggest. The next case illustrates such hope by describing a landscape which itself works as a screen. In 'After a Romantic Day,' a young man is on a train returning from a tryst. The train is passing through a cutting and there is nothing to delight his eyes except the moonlight:

And the blank lack of any charm
Of landscape did not harm.
The bald steep cutting, rigid, rough,
And moon-lit, was enough
For poetry of place: its weathered face
Formed a convenient sheet whereon
The visions of his mind were drawn.

— 7-13

The "poetry of place" is Hardy's naming for the meeting point that we have been discussing. Here the landscape serves both as the source of his sense perceptions and as

the vehicle on which his endearing memory of the immediate past is visualized.

This interposition of a substantial screen between the subject and the object, though it was a natural outcome of Hardy's earth-bound imagination, gives another unexpected advantage to his poetry. In his poems, as well as his novels and stories, nature appears permanent, inviolate, as opposed to the uncertainty and fragility of the human mind. Describing Egdon Heath as the most invariable part of nature, he narrates in the famous opening chapter of The Return of the Native: "The great inviolate place had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim. . . The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained" (36). Indeed, all that appeared variable in his poems are the poet's own passions and feelings visualized on the mirror or the screen on which they are projected. But the very use of these remarkable devices makes it possible not only to give shape to his inward emotions, but also to leave what lies beyond them untouched. No matter how his mind be perturbed, how accordingly his images woven on them be varied, everything above or beyond them, either the "substant thing" above the troubled pond ('At a Rashy Pond'), or the moon and the clouds drifting past the window-panes, or the rough face of a bald steep cutting, continues to exist for thousand years undisturbed. And sometimes such outer existence may lend an aspect of its permanence even to human affairs.

In the poem 'Beyond the Last Lamp' Hardy recalls that on a rainy night he saw a sad-looking pair of lovers walking slowly on a desolate lane and he now wonders what has become of them:

Whither? Who knows, indeed. . . And yet
To me, when nights are weird and wet,
Without those comrades there at tryst
 Creeping slowly, creeping sadly,
 That lone lane does not exist.
There they seem brooding on their pain,
And will, while such a lane remain.

— 29-35

The curious part of this stanza is the lines "Without those comrades. . . / That lone lane does not exist." Do they not conflict with the following two lines, where the poet suggests that the lovers go on meeting there "while such a lane remain"? Tom Paulin takes the former lines to mean: "The ugly lane. . . would be meaningless without the human figures that occupy it" (22). It is quite right, and yet I am afraid it does not do justice to what Hardy intrinsically wants to convey between the lines. We have a reason to believe that to the positivist Hardy it is almost unthinkable that the lane he saw thirty years ago should cease to exist under any circumstances. To quote from the Return of the Native again, referring to "an aged highway" in Egdon Heath he suggestively says:

Though the gloom had increased sufficiently to confuse the minor features of the heath, the white surface of the road remained as clear as ever. (36)

So must this lane be; and as long as it remains, some lovers must be walking there now, and will forever. It is certainly true that human figures make this lone lane meaningful, but at the same time it is reversely implied that the indubitable existence of the lane renders human figures and their actions as lasting as itself. It is a meeting place, so to speak, not only of these lovers, but also of everlasting nature and many such transient dramas of men and women.

It is undeniable, by way of a conclusion, that Hardy did not have the transcendental imagination which enabled the Romantic poets to represent with symbolic or mythological images "the light that never was, on sea or land," as Wordsworth describes it in 'Elegiac Stanzas' (IV, 259). Instead he was blessed with what I ventured to call the "terrestrial imagination" that led him to the unique device of a poetical screen, on which the mind and the world combine and weave substantial images. To him visible and tangible nature is eternal in itself, and renders something of its permanent stability to bewildered human beings, just as the landscape of Grasmere does to us. Here lies, I believe, the inimitable beauty of Hardy's literature. Pining for Romanticism at heart, yet denied its ascending imagination, Hardy the earth-bound poet developed a new poetical territory to be inherited by, for instance, Philip Larkin and Seamus Heaney.

*Lecture at Wordsworth Summer School in Grasmere, 6 August 1997.

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