

Leaning on Hardy's Gate

Ronald Walker

In *Goodbye to the West Country* Henry makes much of his visit to Thomas Hardy at Max Gate in the autumn of 1927. His account runs to four pages. Hardy, whose record of it consists of one dry and factual sentence, was clearly less impressed, but at the age of 87 this is hardly surprising; by that time, as Siegfried Sassoon said of him,

He wore an air of never having heard
That there was much that needed putting right!

I am convinced that from time to time Henry Williamson's style shows the influence of Hardy, a blend of meticulous observation and poetic imagery unique among the great novelists. Many examples could be given, but I shall content myself with one that quite recently struck me when reading the 'Gartenfeste' chapter in *The Phoenix Generation*. Parts of this episode went me back to Hardy's *The Woodlanders*. To take the earlier book first, chapter VII contains Hardy's description of the wood through which Grace Melbury and her father are walking, from which I take the following isolated sentences:

'They went noiselessly over mats of starry moss, rustled through interspersed tracts of leaves, skirted trunks with spreading roots whose mossed rinds made them like hands wearing green gloves; elbowed old elms and ashes with great forks, in which stood pools of water that overflowed on rainy days, and ran down their stems in green cascades. On older trees still than these huge lobes of fungi grew like lungs.'

'The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promised sapling.'

'The bases of the smaller trees were nibbled bare by rabbits and at diverse points heaps of fresh-made chips, and the newly-cut stool of a tree, stared white through the undergrowth.'

In chapter VII of *The Phoenix Generation* there are certain sentences which, without laying myself open to the charge of contriving to find what I am looking for, seem to me significantly to parallel Hardy's descriptive method:

'Most of the firs were then leaning from rotted roots, their trunks bored by woodpeckers and old nests of sparrowhawks and magpies in their disverdured tops.' (And what a Hardy-esque word is 'disverdured'!)

'Now all but one trunk was gone... The one fir-tree that remained stood at the narrow end of the plantation, and farthest from the cruel sea-winds'

'The trees had suffered a slow asphyxiation from hard-blown salt upon the leaves by which they breathed. Slowly they died where they stood.'

'At dawn Phillip got up and walked about the hilltop. Above the plantation Polarish shone, coldly but faithfully, six lengths from the beam-end of the Plough. The earth had revolved since he had climbed to the tallet, so that the constellations of night appeared to have moved from east to west. The moon, too, had come up from below Dartmoor, which lay north, and now was descending to the ocean whose great pulse came from the moon.'

'Two days later the north wind brought snow, and in the morning the entire landscape was white, and the tops of the beeches in the plantation north of the field arose above a white cliff. The wind had carved it with flowing lines of sculpture' (The comparison here might more relevantly be with the chapters in *Tess* where the heroine is working

at Flintcombe Ash.)

'The little trees, each about two feet high when last seen, had been hidden under humps of wind-streamed snow; but so heavy had been the second fall that only the top of the six-foot palisade gate was visible the next morning when he tried to open it.'

Evidence of this kind could, with appropriate research, be multiplied throughout the entire *Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* sequence.

Do we know anything factual about Henry's regard for Hardy as a writer? And can anyone explain why, whenever he refers to Hardy's *In Tenebris* (as he does with some frequency), he consistently misquotes the line, '...if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst', substituting 'enacts' for 'exacts', which makes no logical sense!

Perhaps Dr. Wheatley Blench and/or others might consider putting erudite and lively minds to an excursus on the relationship between Williamson and Hardy as artists of nature.

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