



Mark Ford, *Thomas Hardy: Half a Londoner* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), ISBN: 9780674737891, 305 pages, £20

Reviewed by

Nicolas Tredell
(Freelance, UK)

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'[H]alf a Londoner': Thomas Hardy's self-description in a letter to Edmund Gosse of 13 December 1916 (qtd 13) provides the subtitle and encapsulates the central claim of Mark Ford's book: that 'the focus on Wessex in critical responses to Hardy's work has obscured the importance of London to his career and development' (xiii). The challenge to 'Wessex Hardy' is not new: it was mounted back in the early 1980s by, for example, the late Peter Widdowson (1942–2009), who, at the height of the controversy over his edited book *Re-Reading English* (1982), argued that 'Wessex Hardy' was an ideological construction of bourgeois literary critics anxious to play down the more radical implications of his work; Ford does not go down the demystification road (now fallen to disuse, since demystification, in literary criticism as in politics, has proved predictable and powerless); rather, he employs a more traditional approach, effectively that of the 'critical biography', combining empirical evidence drawn from documentary sources with astute literary analysis of Hardy's prose and poetry to create an absorbing narrative that provides the fullest and most fascinating account yet of a Hardy torn not only by time (like the speaker of the poem 'A Broken Appointment') but also by space, divided between the rustic and the metropolitan.

Hardy first visited London at the age of nine with his mother – she took him with her to deter the unwelcome male attentions that a woman travelling alone might attract – but it was on 17 April 1862, at the age of 21 (his birthdate was 2 June 1840), that he set out (with a return ticket) for London to advance his architectural career. He stayed

in the capital for five years, working in architects' offices in St Martin's Place, Adelphi Terrace between the Strand and the Thames, and Bedford Chambers, and pursuing a demanding programme of self-education not only through books – which he might have done in Dorchester – but also through gallery, museum and concert visits for which only London could have provided such ample opportunities. He published only one literary item in that half-decade – what Ford calls the 'Dickensian skit' (12) 'How I Built Myself a House', published in a magazine based in Edinburgh, not London, *Chambers Journal* (March 1865). But it was in those years, Ford affirms, that Hardy 'composed some of his most original and inventive poetry' (xiv) – mainly at 16 Westbourne Park Villas, where he lived from 1863–67, and which is noted (sometimes as 'W.P.V.') as the place of composition at the end of certain poems.

Hardy then lived intermittently in the capital and its suburbs until his early forties; his longest sojourn in that period was for three years, from 1878–81, at 1 Arundel Gardens, Trinity Road in Tooting, and 'Near Tooting Common' is given (in parenthesis after the poem's title) as the setting of one of his most notable poems, 'Beyond the Last Lamp'. Another well-known poem, 'Snow in the Suburbs', has, on its manuscript, the alternate title 'Snow at Upper Tooting', rubbed out but still readable (195). Other striking poems are set in central London – for example, 'Coming up Oxford Street: Evening', which Ford clearly sees as an important point of reference for both Hardy's work and life, citing it ten times in his main text. This poem portrays its titular thoroughfare alchemized by a setting sun personified as a 'warm god' that dazzles the eyes of a westward-walking city-clerk with failing vision who feels trapped until death in the capital. In the first published version of the poem, which appeared in *The Nation & the Athenaeum* on 13 June 1925 and which is reproduced in facsimile opposite the title page of Ford's book, the last section switches into the first person and ends with the clerk saying, in dull despair: 'And I go along with head and eyes drooping forlorn, / Taking no interest in things, and wondering why I was born'. (Hardy later changed this into the third person (*Works*, 680).) 'In the British Museum' dramatizes an exchange with a visitor without formal education whose contemplation of a stone pillar-base from Areopagus where St Paul preached transports him, like a virtual version of H. G. Wells' time machine, across aeons to the past, vouchsafing him an aural epiphany denied to his more sophisticated interlocutor and giving him the last word:

'I'm a labouring man, and know but little,
Or nothing at all;
But I can't help thinking that stone once echoed
The voice of Paul.' (*Works*, 359)

A Pauline teleportation also occurs on a visit to the London cathedral that bears his name, in the poem 'In St Paul's: 1869' (its title was later changed to 'In St Paul's a While Ago'). This evokes the speaker entering the cathedral on a July afternoon and imagining how those who haunt the commercial market around it would dismiss the saint, if he tried to speak on its steps in the present day, as 'An epilept enthusiast' (*Works*, 679). One wonders whether anyone cited this poem at the time of the Occupy London camp around St Paul's in 2011–12, when the pressures of 'the encircling mart'

quickly trumped the 'vision-seeing mind' (*Works*, 679). No Damascene conversions transformed the idolaters of Mammon in Gresham Street or Paternoster Square.

Hardy settled with his first wife Emma at Max Gate on the outskirts of Dorchester in 1885, but between 1884 and 1910 he stayed in the capital at least thirty times, usually for two, three or four months annually. His London addresses included – in a city of increasingly precise postal destinations, thanks to civil servants like the novelist Anthony Trollope – 23 and 29 Montague Street; 56 Great Russell Street; 14 Bedford Place; 28 Upper Bedford Place; 5 Campden Hill Road; the West Central hotel in Southampton Row; Shirley's Temperance Hotel in Queen's Square; 5 Upper Phillimore Place; 20 Monmouth Road; 5 Chapel Place, Cavendish Square; 12 Mandeville Place; Beaumont Street; 70 Hamilton Terrace; 16 Pelham Crescent; 90 Ashley Gardens; 9 and 20 Wynnstay Gardens in Kensington; the Jeunes at 79 Harley Street; 27 Oxford Terrace; 13 Abercorn Place in St John's Wood; 1-K Hyde Park Mansions; and 4 Blomfield Court in Maida Vale. This rich itinerary of London residences, identified on the key of a helpful map in between the Preface and Introduction of Ford's book, would enable an enterprising guide to mount a programme of Hardy tours of London to complement Hardy tours of Wessex.

Like Hardy's Wessex, however, Hardy's London is a mental as well as material zone, traceable on the maps of the mind as well as on those of physical topographies. Just as Hardy's fiction helps to create Wessex, his distinctive vision of Dorset, so it helps to create his distinctive vision of London and the two visions are deeply interfused in his oeuvre. Two novels are especially important to his London vision: his fifth, *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876) and his last, *The Well-Beloved* (1897). Ford finds that the first of these, while 'in many ways [...] fascinating', is 'a resolutely guarded and self-conscious performance' that can 'be read as expressive of the difficulties and anxieties that Hardy himself experienced when performing his own "London man" persona' (169) – as Ford has pointed out earlier, "London man" is a phrase Hardy uses in his third-person autobiography (x). Hardy's second key novel in relation to his London vision, *The Well-Beloved*, is, in Ford's view, the one in which the 'dialogue between Wessex and London conducted in Hardy's fiction achieved its most stylized and schematically patterned articulation' (221). *The Well-Beloved* also contains, in chapter eleven of its middle section, what Ford calls 'one of Hardy's most evocative descriptions of the streets of London' (228); here is the moment in this description when Jocelyn Pierston, the sculptor-protagonist, steps out on to his balcony:

Over the opposite square the moon hung, and to the right there stretched a long street, filled with a diminishing array of lamps, some single, some in clusters, among them an occasional blue or red one. From a corner came the notes of a piano-organ strumming out a stirring march of Rossini's. The shadowy black figures of pedestrians moved up, down, and across the embrowned roadway. Above the roofs was a bank of livid mist, and higher a greenish-blue sky in which stars were visible, though its lower part was still pale with daylight, against which rose chimney-pots in the form of elbows, prongs, and fists. (Hardy (2000), 93; qtd Ford 228 – the latter version has a comma in between 'greenish-blue sky' and 'in which')

As Ford observes, we can link such a passage with Hardy's interest in late Turner; with the 'representations of London', adapting 'French Symbolist modes of depicting Paris' (229), by fin-de-siècle authors such as Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons and John Davidson; and, as Keith Wilson contends in 'Thomas Hardy of London' (*A Companion to Thomas Hardy* (2012), 153), with modernist visions of the city in works by writers like Conrad, Joyce, Woolf, and T. S. Eliot (228). Hardy's London of the imagination thus encompasses, across his work, developing and differing modes of literary representation; in his prose, as in his poetry, the last Victorian is also a proto-modernist, admired by Proust and Pound.

Hardy's identity as a space-torn man, split between capital and country life, was anatomically enacted after his death in the division of his remains: his heart was cut out and taken to Stinsford Churchyard in Dorset to be buried beside Emma (later to be joined, on the other side, by Florence), while his body was driven from Max Gate to Woking for cremation and the urned ashes, coffin-clad for effect, were consigned to Westminster Abbey: the ten pallbearers there were a roll-call of political, academic and literary worthies ranging from Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, to Bernard Shaw, the sociable socialist. If this symbolized Hardy's accession to a British Establishment able to tolerate and incorporate rebels such as Shaw, it would be through Wessex rather than Westminster that Hardy would be recuperated as an acceptable author for mid-twentieth-century literary criticism – and, as Ford points out, Hardy himself had already encouraged the Wessex weighting for commercial reasons. Ford puts London firmly back on the Hardy scales; he reinstates the railway lines of Wessex which are absent from the maps of the region that often accompany Hardy's novels, lines which lead, not always directly, to and from the metropolis, their traffic marshalled in complex and intricate ways in his fiction and poetry.

In Ford's critical and biographical marshalling yard, there are sometimes strained couplings when he tries to connect what are, in effect, different kinds of rolling stock. He attempts to join the formal and thematic features of Hardy's work to Hardy's life by assertions that such features express Hardy's personal dilemmas, as in the claim, quoted above, that *The Hand of Ethelberta* 'can [...] be read as expressive of the difficulties and anxieties that Hardy himself experienced when performing his own "London man" persona' (169). If the ghost of Peter Widdowson, at least in his *Re-Reading English* days, were, like the deceased husband in Hardy's poem 'I Rose Up as My Custom Is', to return to this mortal world one night and read Ford's book he might, like that husband, finally withdraw in the dim dawn to Death's inviolate halls feeling disappointed that the ideological illusion of the author, which might have seemed, in the 1980s, a tattered thing upon a stick soon to be consigned to the conceptual graveyard, now stalked the corridors of criticism again in full fig. The attempt of Widdowson and other critics in the later twentieth century to disperse the idea of the author into such fields as semiotics, history and sociology was perhaps always flawed and could not survive the celebrity culture of the twenty-first century, in which authors living and dead became, more than ever, saleable commodities; but that abortive assault on the author might still usefully prompt scepticism about the notion that a literary text 'expresses' the experiences of the person who wrote it. Such a notion, of

course, is part of Ford's chosen 'critical biography' approach; but he sometimes assumes too simple a relation of causality and continuity between Hardy's life and work.

His book also exhibits at moments a rhetorical over-insistence on biographical connections in the absence of harder proof. One signal of this is the adjective 'surely'. For example, he asserts that the 'fragility of Hardy's financial situation [...] *surely* informs the fiscal worries of Hardy's heroine' in *The Hand of Ethelberta* (173, italics added) and goes on to declare, on the next page, that 'it was *surely* a consideration of the difference between their hands [those of the working women he had previously courted] and Emma's that generated the odd comparison in chapter 5 [of the same novel] of a series of candles to "the fingers of a woman who does nothing"' (174, italics added). This latter instance is especially regrettable as it uses biographical speculation to explain away and avoid analysis of an 'odd' image. Even if the image could be biographically sourced, for instance through an entry in a Hardy notebook, this would still evade rather than engage with its strangeness. It also seems significant that the image, which Ford references to p. 46 of the 1996 Penguin edition of *Ethelberta*, does not occur in chapter 5 of Macmillan's New Wessex edition of the novel, where the candles are described thus: 'the snow-white lengths of wax showed themselves clammy and cadaverous like the fingers of a corpse' (Hardy (1975), 65–6). This discrepancy seems worthy of comment both stylistically and biographically.

Ford, however, is an accomplished poet as well as critic, so we may allow that his own creative experience grants him privileged insight into the possible interconnections of a writer's life and work. His enjoyable and enlightening book reconfigures the Wessex bard as half a Londoner both for common readers (if such still exist) and for Hardy critics and will be indispensable for any future consideration of his work and for those exploring literary representations of the capital.

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Note on Contributor

Nicolas Tredell is a freelance writer who has published on authors ranging from Shakespeare to Martin Amis. He is Consultant Editor of Palgrave Macmillan's Essential Criticism series and formerly taught at Sussex University, UK. His recent books include *C. P. Snow: The Dynamics of Hope* (2012), *Analysing Texts: David Copperfield and Great Expectations* (2013), *Shakespeare—The Tragedies* (2014), and new and updated

editions of *Novels to Some Purpose* (2015), his study of Colin Wilson's fiction, and *Conversations with Critics* (2016), his interviews with twenty leading writers.

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