The Tone in the Tune: An Echo of Burns in Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush"

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The most anthologized of Thomas Hardy's poems, "The Darkling Thrush,"[1] is also a site of contesting themes of skepticism, agnosticism, denial, and regret influenced variously (according to which critic one reads) by the Boer Wars, rejection of Romantic transcendence and intransigent Victorian industrialization and class divisions, as well as by the contrary intellectual influences of Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Darwin, Spencer, and Bergson, and the influences of birds in poems by Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, Whitman, and Swinburne. Yet there is a chorus of agreement about the downcast tone of the poem. Representative are Noyes who hears it as pessimistic, [2] Howe as grave,[3] Perkins as wistful,[4] Paulin as weary,[5] Ramazani as elegiac,[6] Maynard as ironically joyless,[7] Hawkins as gloomy,[8] Cook as hopeless,[9] Brooks as regretful,[10] Hughes as somber,[11] and Bailey as despairing.[12] All hear variations of a tone of sadness.[13]

This agreement about tone seems the more correct on recalling that Hardy had originally entitled the poem "By the Century's Deathbed," which he later dated "31st December 1900,"[14] a title and time consonant with the poem's funereal imagery, austere landscape, evening hour, and melancholic mood, features granting the poem an ancestry dating to the Graveyard School poetry of the mid-eighteenth century.

But a different tone may become audible when recalling Hardy's love of music. His wife remembered that he "loved adventures with the fiddle. . . . [He] played sometimes at village weddings . . . [and] once at a New Year's Eve party" and tirelessly and excitedly in other village homes (most times, no doubt, in a spirit and tone different from that heard by the critics of "The Darkling Thrush").[15] Pinion records Hardy's romance with music since ecstatically hearing his father's fiddle-playing; his own lifelong playing the violin; his choir-boy days and love of church music; Christmas hymns and carols; the magnetism of concerts and Italian opera in London; and

waltzes and country dances in Dorset.[16] From boyhood, music was part of Hardy's life and sensibility.

And music came to his poetry. As James Southworth counts, "more than twenty-five [of Hardy's] poems carry the parenthetic 'song' beneath their title; one group of poems is called 'A Set of Country Songs,' more than ten have a reference to 'song' or 'singing' in their titles and others to 'music' and 'musical.'"[17] Elna Sherman finds 200 of Hardy's poems containing references to music or dance.[18] Excepting some dialogues and satires, virtually all other of Hardy's 947 poems are lyrics.

Oddly, few of Hardy's critics, even those who have devoted books, articles, and chapters to the music, although they note the obvious musical imagery of "The Darkling Thrush"—*broken lyres, death-lament, voice, evensong, carolings, ecstatic sound*—has noticed its musicality. An excellent exception is P. E. Mitchell who shows that many of Hardy's poems are typically indebted to folk songs.[19] But by its not fitting the folk pattern, Mitchell excludes "The Darkling Thrush" from musical analysis. And one other prominent reader wholly dismisses music in Hardy's poems: indeed, Samuel Hynes thinks them to be "impossible to read musically," concluding that they are "assertively unmusical and often harsh."[20] He sees the cause of their unmusicality as the "manipulation of syntax, sound, and diction so as to defeat lyric fluidity and to restrict the movement of the verse to a slow, uneven, often uncertain pace."[21]

But besides Hardy's long and deep love of music, his generic preference for lyrical poetry, and his presence at New Year's Eve parties, his wife recalls quantities of Hardy's "notes on rhythm and metre, with outlines and experiments in innumerable original measures, some of which he adopted from time to time."[22] In Hardy's vast collection of musical scores, including the songs of Robert Burns, was John Hullah's *Song Book: Words and Themes* (1866) that C. M. Jackson-Holston claims that "there is little doubt that [Hardy] used."[23] Number CXXI in the Song Book is Burns's "Auld Lang Syne." Is it so unlikely, then, that the tune of "The Darkling Thrush" may be an adaptation of Burns's "Auld Lang Syne"?

In the definitive study of its provenance, James Dick calls "Auld Lang Syne" "the best known and most widely diffused song in the civilized world."[24] He traces the evolving versions of the lyrics and

music redacted and printed through 1725, 1726, 1750, 1787, and 1795. Dick establishes further that the now familiar New Year's Eve melody had been set by 1799[25] when Burns's adaptation of the old song saw print in George Thomson's *Select Songs of Scotland.* Recall that in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1874) Donald Farfrae is asked to sing "Auld Lang Syne" at The Three Mariners,[26] and by the time that Hardy had dated "The Darkling Thrush" 31st December 1900, New Year's Eve, the current harmony, rhythm, and melody had long been set.

One needs only to sing Hardy's lyrics to the tune of Burns's song to appreciate the perfect blending. Arguably, *evensong* (v. 19), the measure of Hardy's poem, might therefore be thought its tonal key. In Anglican hymnals *Evensong* is designated CM or common measure (four alternating verses of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter rhymed abab or abcb), and with it a lower, somber tone emerges. But Hardy's eight-line iambic tetrameter stanzas combine two ballad stanzas in a veritable jaunty measure each in perfect ballad rhyme, abcb. And, imagery aside, to recognize the tune of Burns's "Auld Lang Syne" in the poem is to hear a tune hardly somber—its pace becomes more brisk; the iambic stresses fall chiefly on strong consonants to downplay the poem's somber assonance; and the sibilants convey a reflective hush in the wistful and happy merger with Burns's tune.

Two other considerations make the familiar melody of "Auld Lang Syne" the more probable in "The Darkling Thrush." First, none of Hardy's three other year-end poems, "New Year's Eve" (1906); "A New Year's Eve in War Time" (1915-1916); and "At the Entering of the Year" (1920) uses ballad meter or Burns's tune. Second, the poem "New Year's Eve" (1906) is a direct or formal satire with the requisite persona and adversarius. In it Hardy sets a bitter dialogue between himself and God in which God admits "the shortness of my view" (v. 23) in creating a universe without logic or ethics. And Hardy gives his persona the last word: "And [God] went on working evermore / In his unsweeting way" (vv. 29-30). Here is an angry Hardy in a tone more cynical than sullen. And third, he had, after all, changed the dismal title of "On the Century's Deathbed" of 29 December 1900 as printed in *The Graphic* to "The Darkling Thrush" and reprinted it as such in *The Times* of 1 January 1901.[27]

Hardy's new title deemphasizes death and doom and headlines the thrush, since the Middle Ages, a symbol of love, devotion, and harmonious living. And Burns's tune lifts Hardy's poem from the elegiac to the symbolic thrush's "ecstatic sound" of communal friendship heard then and now in "Auld Lang Syne."

Final evidence of the festive tune in "The Darkling Thrush" is Hardy's own decision to choose it as one of nine poems for exhibit for the Library of the Royal Dolls' House at Windsor Castle. His intention for the poem is clear: "The copy there has [is marked] 'carollings.'"[28] Hardy's own intention affirms the poem's tune, like that of "Auld Lang Syne," to be that of a carol, not, as most critics believe, a dirge.

Yet the question of still another tone remains, one beyond the perimeter of this intertonal and hypotextual argument. By using the tune of "Auld Lang Syne" is Hardy's own tone ironic? Certainly the texture of the poem itself—a solitary man, an old haggard bird, the dreary winter setting, the funereal imagery—stands against the tone of Burns's song. But because the poem's tune is certain, is Hardy, with his "born sense of humour"[29] winking his eye on that New Year's Eve of 1900 by implying the disjunction between his own and most peoples' happily communal spirit on that night?

Notes

1. *The Variorum Edition of the Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 150. Further references to Hardy's poems are to this edition and are cited by verse number in the text.

2. Alfred Noyes, "The Poetry of Thomas Hardy," *The North American Review* 194 (July 1911): 96.

3. Irving Howe, *Thomas Hardy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 3.

4. David Perkins, "Hardy and the Poetry of Isolation," *ELH* 26, no. 2 (June 1959): 253.

5. Tom Paulin, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), 151.

6. Jahan Ramazani, "Hardy's Elegies for an Era: 'By the Century's Deathbed,'" *Victorian Poetry* 29, no. 2 (1991): 131-43.

7. Katherine Maynard, *Thomas Hardy's Tragic Poetry: The Lyrics and* The Dynasts (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 171.

8. Desmond Hawkins, *Hardy: Novelist and Poet* (London: David & Charles, 1976), 173.

9. Cornelia Cook, "Thomas Hardy and George Meredith" in *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Patricia Clements and Juliet Grindle (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1980), 93.

10. Jean Brooks, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 55.

11. John Hughes, *"Ecstatic Sound": Music and Individualism in the Work of Thomas Hardy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

12. J. O. Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 166.

13. A dissonant voice is Martin Seymour-Smith, who hears a tone of hope. See *Hardy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 625.

14. Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 376.

15. Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1928* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962), 23. It is believed that Hardy himself had at least scrutinized, if not written, much of this book by his second wife.

16. F. B. Pinion, *A Hardy Companion: A Guide to the Works of Thomas Hardy and Their Background* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 189. Pinion notes also "Hardy's love of various forms of music-orchestral, harpsichord, military, dance, religious, and theatrical" (192).

17. James Granville Southworth, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), 181.

18. Elna Sherman, "Thomas Hardy: Lyricist, Symphonist," *Music and Letters* 21, no. 2 (1940): 143.

19. P. E. Mitchell, "Music and Hardy's Poetry," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 30, no. 3 (1987): 308. Mitchell shows that Hardy's poems typically are indebted to folk song, vigorous, rugged, racy, heavy with country locutions, and varied in rhythm and melody to let the words fit the music. But "The Darkling Thrush," not fitting this particular folk pattern, is not an appropriate specimen.

20. Samuel Hynes, *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 60.

21. Ibid.

22. *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, 301.

23. C. M. Houlston-Jackson, "Thomas Hardy's Use of Traditional Song," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 44, no. 3 (1989): 307.

24. James Dick, "'Auld Lang Syne'—Its Origin, Poetry, and Music," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 26 (1891-1892): 379.

25. Ibid., 388.

26. Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, ed. Phillip Mallett (New York: Norton, 2001), 43.

27. Kent Puckett, "Hardy's 1900," *MLQ* 75, no. 1 (2014): 67-75.

28. *Variorum Edition*, p. 150.

29. *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, 302.

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