11-1996

Review of Hardy's Literary Language and Victorian Philology.

*Dennis Taylor.*

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Dennis Taylor, the author of two highly regarded studies of Thomas Hardy’s poetry, has here embarked upon an analysis of Hardy’s literary language in the context of the late Victorian debate concerning the relevance of historical linguistics to our understanding of present usage. Hardy was an active participant in that debate, and his entire career as a writer might well be regarded as a continuing dialogue with the professional linguists of his day. Hardy corresponded with James Murray, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), and many of his linguistic innovations are recorded in that dictionary, which Hardy frequently mined for its motherlode of obsolete, archaic, dialectal, and otherwise exotic words. Indeed, a photograph of Hardy’s study circa 1900 shows the first five volumes of the OED prominently displayed, and his annotations in those volumes bear witness to his active engagement in the Victorian practice of philology. Hardy’s Literary Language and Victorian Philology explores the various ways in which Hardy’s poetry derives from, and responds to, an awareness of the history in words which characterized the study of language in Victorian England.

Hardy left his native Dorchester and emigrated to London in 1862, embarking upon a literary career that coincided with the original publication of the OED (1888–1928). While the OED represents the triumph of historical lexicography in the late Victorian period, Taylor points out that its publication is “one of the great unacknowledged scandals of the synchronic age,” since “the principles on which it is organized were supposedly overthrown by the structural insights of synchronic linguistics” (p. 5). The publication of Ferdinand de Saussure’s Cours de Linguistique Générale (Paris, 1916) marks the final culmination of a synchronic approach to the study of language that was already well underway during the 1870s, when Alexander Ellis and Henry Sweet established the study of phonetics as a rigorously scientific alternative to the etymological speculations of “antiquarian philology” (p. 370). The fierce controversy between diachronic and synchronic linguistics that raged during Hardy’s lifetime raised profound questions about the nature of language that seem especially relevant today, when a renewed interest in historical approaches to literature has troubled the dogmatic complacency of post-Saussurean theorists. Hardy’s poetry brings into focus some of the most vital and enduring questions concerning the relation between the historical development and the present structure of language. What is the influence of past language on present thinking? Does the history of a word elucidate its current meaning? Is there any truth in the “etymological fallacy”? 
Taylor addresses these questions through a meticulous analysis of Hardy’s literary language. His first chapter, “Hardy and the ‘Dialect’ of the Tribe,” examines the ways that contemporary reviewers chastised the “awkwardness” of Hardy’s poetic diction. Throughout his poetry, Hardy uses words that jar against conventional expectations, and his reviewers often condemned these violations of stylistic decorum. Indeed, one reviewer criticized Hardy’s Wessex Poems (1898) for losing “all sense of local and historical perspective in language, seeing all the words of the dictionary on one plane” (p. 42). Hardy cheerfully accepted this description of his poetic language, and it does vividly convey Hardy’s actual method of composition, which entailed the ransacking of the OED and various other dictionaries for their most peculiar, outlandish, abstruse, and unfamiliar words. If Hardy’s reviewers tended to advocate the prevailing Victorian standards of usage, then his repeated and intentional transgression of these standards may be seen as a deliberate challenge to the established hierarchical mode of linguistic decorum, as exemplified by the novels of Sir Walter Scott, in which any historical or dialectal variations of the literary lexicon were presented as instances of “local color” within a framing perspective of normative educated speech. Taylor describes how Hardy developed a richly idiosyncratic vocabulary composed of socially, geographically, and historically diverse strands of diction, arguing that “Hardy uses the historical dimension of language to undo the synchronic spell of language” (p. 8).

In subsequent chapters, Taylor does not flinch from scrutinizing Hardy’s most egregious “chillings of misprision” (p. 290) in poems that stage catastrophic train wrecks of colliding diction. The final chapter, “Hardy’s ‘Minute Way’ of Looking at Style and Idiom,” demonstrates how Hardy’s poetry “challenges the covert rules of collocation and idiom” (p. 291). Rather than seek to normalize such indecorous usages, Taylor endeavors to show how this breaking of established but unspoken linguistic conventions serves to energize Hardy’s style. The clashing of dissonant lexical planes, like the doomsday collision depicted in “The Convergence of the Twain,” constitutes what is most deliberately outrageous about Hardy’s poetic style.

This book comprises a virtually encyclopedic study of Hardy’s literary language, largely eclipsing Ralph Elliott, Thomas Hardy’s English (Oxford, 1984), though Elliott’s book remains more accessible to the nonspecialist. Thanks to the recent publication of the OED on computer disk, Taylor is able to provide a synoptic account of Hardy citations in the original OED and its various supplements, indicating how he engaged in word-making dialogue with the OED editors during his entire career. Indeed, Hardy clearly emerges from this study as one of the great word coiners of the nineteenth century, comparable only to
Coleridge in the scope and fecundity of his word-making powers. Taylor is especially incisive in his account of the OED’s handling of the perplexing vocabulary of Lewis Carroll, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and James Joyce, and he provides an engaging, comprehensive, and much-needed history of late Victorian philology, with particular attention to the linguistic speculations of Richard Trench, Max Müller, and William Whitney.

Although this book discusses Hardy’s use of dialect words in meticulous detail, it does not fully address the extent to which archaism and dialect overlap in Hardy’s literary language. In many cases, nineteenth-century Dorset dialect perpetuates an archaism which constitutes a kind of fossil poetry, waiting to be brought into renewed usage by Hardy’s pen. To be sure, Hardy is not a dialect poet, but he does use a sizable admixture of dialect throughout his novels and poetry, and this overlapping of archaic and provincial usage constitutes perhaps the most compelling instance of the conjunction of synchronic and diachronic planes in Hardy’s language. More sustained analysis of such lexical multivalence will be the task of future philologists.

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In his diary for June 15, 1927, Manuel Azaña asked a disquieting question: “En el fondo, ¿quién sabe lo que piensa Valle acerca de nadie ni de nada? Le he oído sostener, siempre con brillantez y muchísima gracia, las opiniones más contradictorias” (Obras completas, 4 vols. [Mexico City, 1966–68], 3:889). If Azaña, who knew Valle-Inclán well, was baffled, those who study his works almost seventy years later might well ask themselves what contradictions lie not just in Valle-Inclán’s writing but in the criticism it has spawned as well. Critical debate is inevitable, of course, and may be the surest sign of an author’s vitality. Yet the contradictions found in this volume are unusually acute, perhaps because the feminist ideology promoted by many of the contributors at times seems less a way to see something new in Valle-Inclán’s works than a means to ratify that way of seeing in the academy.

The collection brings together eleven essays (eight of which appear for the first time), a selected bibliography of Valle-Inclán’s works