

The Hardy Society Journal

Spring 2008

LETTER FROM ITALY
BY ILARIA MALLOZZI

Writing an article on the reception of Thomas Hardy's work in Italy is a difficult task, as the complexity and famous idiosyncrasy of the English author is entirely mirrored in the Italian literary personalities who have dedicated essays and translations to him. In the hope of circumventing this problem, I have chosen to limit my article to an academic bibliography, a choice that finds justification in Michalina Pawlikowska's statement in 'Letter from Poland' (*HSJ* vol.2 no.2, Summer 2006) that nowadays 'studying Hardy is more of a scholarly affair, restricted to the English departments of our universities'.

This statement is true in Italy's case as well; furthermore, even the universities neglect to include Thomas Hardy's poetry in their exams or seminars – his prose is preferred for its accessibility and unquestionable value in the field of Victorian studies. It is an unfortunate omission because Hardy's verses marked the modernity of, and at the same time continuity in, the English elegiac tradition, and he is an essential presence in the study of Anglo-American poetry.

Italian interest in Anglo-American literature is mainly a phenomenon of the difficult interwar period, when intellectuals opposed to Fascism, and who felt the exigency of opposing Mussolini's dictatorship, seized on the subtle device of English translations. Cesare Pavese, Elio Vittorini and others left us an invaluable heritage of translations of American and English classics; it is in this context that we must consider the reception of Hardy's work in Italy.

Chronologically, the first Hardy translation appeared in 1894, with *Una donna pura: Tess dei d'Urberville* ((unknown translator), Milano, Sonzogno, 1894), followed in 1904 by *Giuda l'oscuro* ((translated by N. De Sanctis), Coop. Usher ed., Roma, 1904). In 1944 *Il Sindaco di Casterbridge* was published ((translated by M. Lombardi), Torino, Einaudi, 1944), and in 1948, *Ritorno al paese [The Return of the Native]* ((translated by L. Jervis Rochat), Milano, Ist. Edit. Italiano, 1948). A little over ten years later, in 1955, came *Via dalla Pazza Folla [Far from the Madding Crowd]* ((translated by P. Jahier and M. L. Rissler Stoneman), Milano, Garzanti, 1955).

In comparison with his prose, Hardy's poetry has certainly received lesser consideration. Lyrical translations are few, and they are often condensed fragments or excerpts included in some miscellany. The famous Italian scholar, Mario Praz, wrote a critical essay on *The Dynasts* which, though old-fashioned, is still a significant homage, very original and inspired.¹ It is thanks to Carlo Izzo that we to have the first Italian translations of Hardy's poems, *Poesia inglese contemporanea da Thomas Hardy agli apocalittici*, published in 1950 (Parma, Guanda, 1950). In 1992 Maria Stella translated and included eighty poems in her book on Hardy's poetry.²

The real turning-point was in 1968, when Eugenio Montale, winner of the Nobel Prize, dedicated an article to Hardy in *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's leading newspaper. Montale, who subsequently collaborated on translations of some of Hardy's poems himself (*Poesie*, G. Singh e Montale eds, Parma, Guanda, 1969), evaluated the English poet in unexpectedly flattering terms, considering Montale's tendency not to think too much of his fellow writers, even the buried ones:

Hardy's case is quite rare. We don't have any other example of a writer-writer who, in another register, was so poet-poet. [...] Hardy's poetry is more poetic when it is more prosy in its language and themes. [...]

The poems he wrote in 1912-13 in memory of his first wife, have to be considered on the edge of modern poetry, and not assigned to Victorian poetry, as we might be tempted to do for poems whose writer was already at work in 1870. [...]

Hardy's archaisms are numerous; I refer to those terms for which the Oxford Dictionary provides a date of birth and death. However, he uses many neologisms, too, words that make even the common lexicon rich and strange. The naturalistic, georgic intonation predominates, the botanist's and collector's attention to small detail.

In this article, Montale, in masterly fashion, condenses Hardyan lyrical qualities and magnetism. Moreover, speaking of Hardy's language, we realise that the Italian poet deals with his artistic features as well.

The Italian Nobel Prize winner also loved using old words, to wrest their meaning from time and fashion, just as he loved creating contemplative poems that, like Hardy's poetic meditations, suggest a psychological movement and an innovative and unexpected view on human life. It is perhaps because Hardy and Montale lived in a complex historical period, full of hopes and disillusion, that the two poets very often share a kind of noble detachment and a sort of aesthetic *mépris* for literary pathos.

Between Montale and Hardy there are subtle but tenacious similarities; above all in Montale's *Mottetti* (1939). In this lyrical work, the Italian poet closely replicates the settings of Hardy's countryside poems, where the landscape has a particular influence on human relationships and feelings, or more generally on mankind. There is a strong correspondence in Montale's meaningful places and in the melancholic tone he uses in their regard, a peculiarity of his *Mottetti*, with Hardy's characteristic reconstruction of a lost and distant past, in poems such as 'At the Entering of the New Year', 'A Church Romance', and 'The Oxen'.

It is not fortuitous, in my opinion, that the Italian writers and poets openly opposed to dictatorship, and warmly relating to the lower classes (to whom they dedicated valuable literary works), were also attracted to Thomas Hardy's oeuvre. This was the case with Carlo Cassola, who edited a precious collection of Hardy's novels (*Romanzi*, Milano, Meridiani Mondadori, 1973). When he chose the title of his own book, *Il taglio nel bosco*, he said that he was thinking of Hardy.

In his introduction to one of the best editions of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Pietro Citati, an Italian writer and scholar, describes Hardy's charisma, and above all Tess's magnetism, in her rare moments of ecstatic trances: 'In these moments, [...] Hardy reveals us a subtle restraint, a delicate wisdom hidden in his wrinkles, like a mountain in its own bowels, his burning visual inspiration.

As I said previously, studying Hardy is more and more an academic pursuit; Hardy has found a major advocate in the University of Pescara's Francesco Marroni. Marroni's monograph *La Poesia di Thomas Hardy* (Bari: Adriatica, 1997)⁵ should be considered the most harmonious and comprehensive Italian attempt to study Hardy's poetry to date. Together with Norman Page, Francesco Marroni also edited a remarkable and concise collection of essays written not only by Italian Hardyans but a range of international scholars (Marroni and Page (eds.), *Thomas Hardy*, Pescara: Tracce, 1995). A text which I personally admire for its many fascinating observations and reflections is Enrica Villari's *Il Vizio Moderno dell'Irrequietezza. Saggio sui romanzi di Thomas Hardy* (Bari: Adriatica, 1990). Villari examines various aesthetic-moral declinations in Hardy's novels, and she very often analyses his plots using 'architectonic' criteria. Villari's monograph also addresses Hardy's perception of the new bourgeois decadence, which led the author to passionately and urgently explore young lives in his novels, to capture the anxiety and ruin caused by 'the ache of modernism'. I would argue that the curse of anxiety and dispersion is even more elaborated in Hardy's lyrical images, especially in that representation of the 'bereaved Humanity' ('At the Entering of the New Year'). 'Everything was made for man', the poet says in 'Drinking Song', but this world has been imprisoned in 'some Vast Imbecility', ('Nature Questioning') and mankind abandoned to the incautious hands of chance. Hardy seems to suggest that religious and social morality has manipulated man toward the fruitless contemplation of the end, rather than giving him a scientific and mystical morality able to create a world – and this is consistent with his novels' plots – in which man is free to praise his own individuality. The complex problem of individuality is at the centre of Hardy's works, and from this angle he directly confronts modernity. Francesco Marroni also addresses the question of how Hardy likes scrutinising mortal existence, which very often seems to obstruct the poet's view in escaping from an omnipresent suffering. However, Hardy's ecstatic regard shows Hardy's stature, his capacity for comprehending and dissolving the bitterness of the human condition, through the acceptance of our unavoidably finite earthly passage:

The poet tries to overcome the aporia of his thought, trusting his own observation. However, if from a scientific point of view [...] observation is supposed to be the instrument for reaching an incontrovertible truth, in Hardy, what he called 'exploration of reality' was not so wholly fulfilled.

(Marroni, *La Poesia di Thomas Hardy*, pp.29-30)

'The exploration of reality' is a risk, and in fact, in his poems risk and chance go together. In reading Hardy's poems we can perceive how the risk of exploring reality can bring us to appreciate our fellow men, to accept and comprehend that 'the world is only a psychological phenomenon'.

The challenge of translating poetry is well known, but Hardy's poems can present the translator with even greater difficulty, especially in comparison with his novels. His poetry, as his point of view requires, is a strange mix of abstractness and accuracy, juxtapositions of images on visions. This is how the poet continually creates an elusive totality, typical of his sense of life.

I would like to thank a professor of mine at the University of Roma Tre, an Italian poet himself, Gilberto Sacerdoti, in whose course in 1999 I became acquainted with, and interested in, Thomas Hardy's poetry, and curious about Hardy more generally. Though I turned towards Hardy's novels for a while, I soon went back to his poetry, which in Sacerdoti's words presents an 'overturned modernism': 'in Hardy irony is painted on the face of the cosmos as it observes a human reality of which the poet is a part'.

1 M. Praz, 'I *Dynasts* di Thomas Hardy' in *Cronache letterarie anglosassoni*, I, Roma, 1950.

2 M. Stella, *Momenti di Visione: identità poetica e forme della poesia in Thomas Hardy*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1992.

3 E. Montale, 'Thomas Hardy', *Corriere della Sera*, 10 agosto 1968 (author's translation).

4 P. Citati, Introduction to *Tess dei d'Urberville* (translated by Giuliana Aldi Pompili), Milano, Rizzoli, 1993, p.8.

5 Francesco Marroni has also dealt with Hardy's works in *Disarmonie Vittoriane*, Roma: Carocci Editore, 2002. Moreover, Hardy has been his interest in many articles: 'Il testo poetico e le sue trame. Una lettura di *The Convergence of the Twain* di Thomas Hardy', *Merope*, IV (giugno 1991), 7-34; 'Thomas Hardy e l'«esplorazione della realtà»: una lettura di *The Darkling Thrush*', *Strumenti critici*, 8, 1 (gennaio 1993), 87-111; 'An August Midnight: Thomas Hardy e la scena darwiniana della scrittura', *Rivista di Studi Vittoriani*, 1, 1 (Gennaio 1996), 5-30; 'Thomas Hardy e i segni del volto. Una lettura fisiognomica di *The Return of the Native*', *Merope*, 25 (Settembre 1998), 5-28; 'Meeting the Grand Old Man of English Literature at Max Gate: Thomas Hardy under a Multifaceted and Multifocal Lens', *Rivista di Studi Vittoriani*, 4, 11 (Gennaio 2001), 127-131; 'The Paradigm of Negativity in *Anna of the Five Towns*', *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens*, 41 (avril 1995) 99-120; 'The Three Strangers and the Verbal Representation of Wessex', *The Thomas Hardy Journal*, 7, 2 (May 1992), 26-39; 'The negation of Eros in *Barbara of the House of Grebe*', *The Thomas Hardy Journal*, 10, 1 (February 1994), 33-41; 'The Poetry of Ornithology in John Keats, Leopardi and Hardy: A Dialogic Analysis', *The Thomas Hardy Journal*, 14, 2 (May 1998), 35-44.

6 G. Sacerdoti, 'Thomas Hardy e la Poesia del Novecento', in *Storia della civiltà letteraria inglese*, edited by Franco Marenco, Torino: UTET, 1996, p.279.