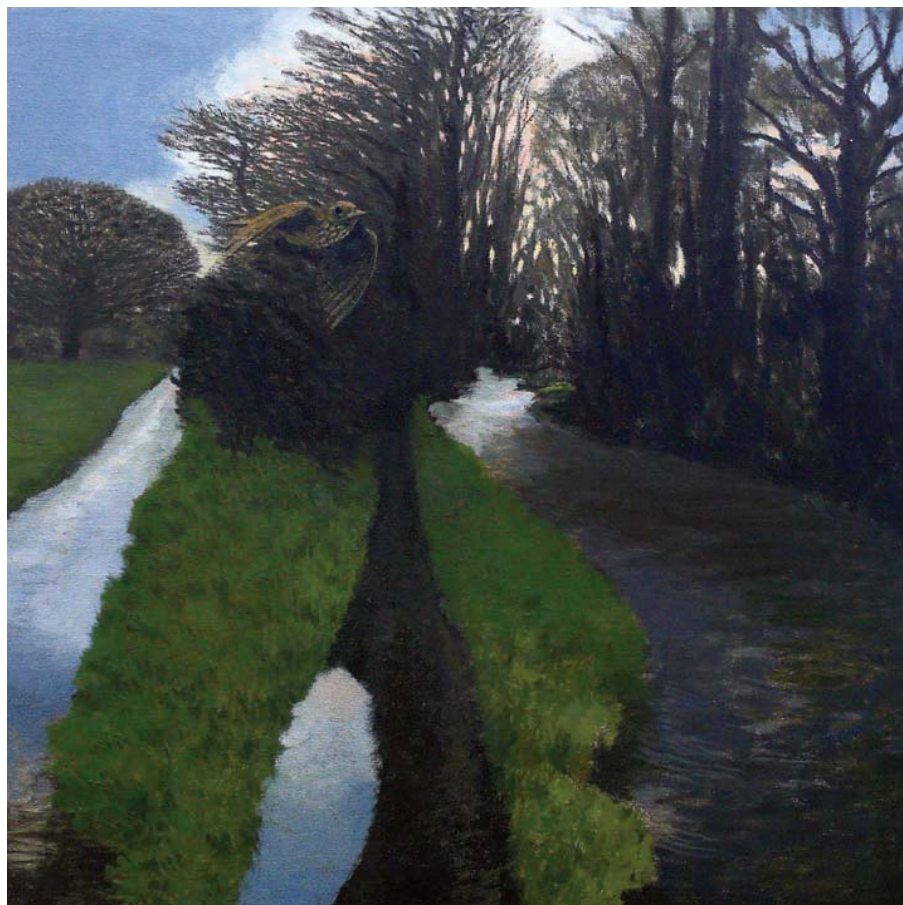


The Hardy Society Journal Summer 2008

WHAT THOMAS HARDY MEANS TO ME by DAVID INSHAW



‘THE DARKLING THRUSH’ by DAVID INSHAW

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I first read Hardy at the age of 24, and along with other events in my life at the time, he set me in the direction as a painter that I have followed ever since. In 1967 I fell madly in love with Christina Butler, who was reading English at Reading University. She had given me *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* to read, and because Christina wore very short gingham dresses and had very long blond hair and was extremely beautiful, the book had an enormous impact! It’s an extraordinary story, of course, but it was Hardy’s use of nature and landscape as a metaphor for human emotion that struck a deep chord, and gave me an insight into how I could develop my own work. He also used a phrase that has meant a great deal to me ever since: ‘that the beauty of association is far superior to that of aspect.’

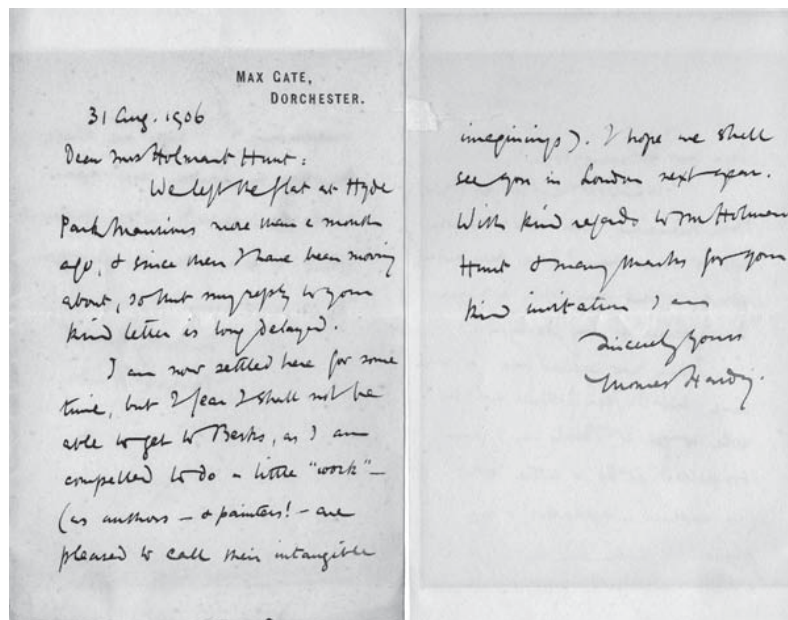
I had my first solo exhibition in 1969 at the Arnolfini gallery in Bristol, and by chance Furse Swann was sent to interview me about the exhibition for a magazine. His very perceptive article mentioned Hardy's poem 'At Castle Boterel'. This introduced me to Hardy's poetry, which gave me a deeper insight into the use of symbolism and metaphor in art. It made me realise that I should aim to create pictures that were on more than one level and that would contain a whole range of implications that would continue to resonate.

Two significant but seemingly unconnected things happened at about this time – I had learned to drive and had become friends with the painter, Alfred Stockham, who like me had been searching for a direction in his work. Most weekends we would drive to Dorset from Bristol, where we were teaching at the art school, to discover Hardy landscapes and in a way, and through familiarity, to make them our own.

From Bristol I moved to Devizes in Wiltshire, where the Wessex landscape began to take an even stronger hold on my imagination, as experiences and memories began to develop. Hardy has remained a constant influence since I first read *Tess* all those years ago.

About 10 years later, I met Richard Gilbertson, a poet and second-hand bookdealer from Launceston in Cornwall, who found a letter by Elgar for a friend. I asked him to find me a letter by Hardy, and the letter reproduced below arrived in the post the following week! The fact that it is from Hardy to Mrs Holman Hunt is interesting enough, but that it contains the phrase 'intangible imaginings' made it special as it's what I do most of the time.

After all these years, I'm still in touch with Christina Butler, who in my mind will always be the elusive Tess.



Letter from Hardy to Mrs Holman Hunt, 31 August 1906, reproduced by kind permission of David Inshaw

Transcript:

Max Gate, Dorchester,

31 Aug. 1906

Dear Mrs Holman Hunt:

We left the flat at Hyde Park Mansions more than a month ago, & since then I have been moving about, so that my reply to your kind letter is long delayed.

I am now settled here for some time, but I fear I shall not be able to get to Berks, as I am compelled to do a little "work" – (as authors - & painters! – are pleased to call their intangible imaginings). I hope we shall see you in London next year. With kind regards to Mr Holman Hunt & many thanks for your kind invitation I am

Sincerely yours

Thomas Hardy.