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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS' "PASTORAL" AND THOMAS HARDY'S "THE DARKLING THRUSH"*

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Abstract

This study examines the two poems "The Darkling Thrush" and "Pastoral" by Thomas Hardy and W. C. Williams, and names some similarities and differences. As imagist poets the two share the power to see exactly, and create images to give their poems emotional intensity. Hardy juxtaposes modernity with tradition in order to explore loss and loneliness while Williams tries to retain a separate look that is a kind of awareness. The nostalgia for the past is what makes Hardy's bleak view of life and failure to perceive beauty in ugliness. Accordingly Williams shows his power at finding a new and extraordinary vision in the ordinary. Although both share sharp vision and awareness, Williams is more an observer of beauty and Hardy an observer of real life or a broken world symbolized by the aging thrush. Williams participates in the sparrows' joy and hopes the discovery of which astonishes him beyond words. In sharp contrast with Hardy, Williams cuts himself off from the past and future in order to explore human behavior in the present. Hardy's poem is more an interaction between the past and present since he needs to recreate the past in his poems.

Keywords: Modern poetry, Thomas Hardy, "The Darkling Thrush", W. C. Williams, "Pastoral".

Modern English and American poetry both convey the need to express and explore identity and independence. An English poet like Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) can enjoy Renaissance, Romantic and Victorian models as cultural background to his writings however, this is not the case with William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) as an American poet lacking such models or the so-called canon. Modernity is a way of experiencing life that is associated with urbanization, change, war, novelty, political-cultural independence and secularization. Draper defines modernism as the "anxiety and the desire for orderly structures" (1999: 7). Childs believes that modernist writing "plunges the reader into a confusing and different mental landscape which cannot be immediately understood" (2000: 4). Hardy juxtaposes modernity with tradition in order to explore loss however; Williams' look is a kind of awareness that helps him look at the world from a different vantage point. Hardy's poems are dramatic with the voices they contain but, Williams creates a sense of self in his poems that are largely personal expressions.

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According to Nelson what distinguishes American poetry is its “continuing obsession with American identity” as well as its “ongoing engagement with American history” (2006: 99). Williams is known as one of the pivotal representatives of American consciousness. Based on Gray’s assertion that poetry “makes a supreme version of [the] world” (1990: 25), Williams with the power of imagination that affirms and ennobles reality, shows America to be “a land of possibilities” in sharp contrast with “the established rules and routine of Europe” (Draper, 1999: 21). An important fact that makes Hardy similar to Williams is the reason Hardy turned to poetry according to Paul Zietlow (1974): “to have greater freedom for self-revelation and for the recording of intense moments of experience” (Harvey, 2003: 194). Paulin confirms the same idea by stating that “there are times when [Hardy] breaks out of Hume’s imaginative universe and achieves a visionary freedom (1975: 211).

Part of Hardy’s bleak view of life, in contrast with Williams, stems from nostalgia for the past or rural Anglicanism. This gives Hardy a kind of uneasiness that causes his experience of isolation. Hardy’s search into the past results in feeling the loneliness of the modern man. He sees the decline and death of faith(s) of his time, and abounds his poems with such themes as time, loss, aging, futility, senselessness, and a fractured society that has fallen apart in the Yeatsian sense of the term. The modern element of uncertainty seems to be an undistinguishable part of his poems. For sure the Great War and Darwin’s ideas were influential: “centuries of comforting tradition, now shattered by scientific rationalism and the barbarity of the new century’s first great war” (King, 1925: 107). This is precisely why Hardy fails to perceive beauty in ugliness, or, like Williams, find a new and extraordinary vision in the ordinary. According to Brooks and Warren (1966), Hardy was concerned with the “persistence of evil in human life” (191). It is Williams’ distinguishing feature that he can find a new vision, and admire the glory in seemingly ugly and unattractive material.

It is worth mentioning that it is not appropriate to conclude that Williams did not respond to the technological advances or other changes of the modern era. By defamiliarizing the ordinary, Williams can even celebrate the power of technology since, according to Moore, “struggle [...] is a main force in Williams” (1966: 44). Williams’ struggle is his attempt at favoring all of life and living without forcing a goal. This is an ideal in which Williams may find himself alone.

While Hardy sees no purpose in life, Williams finds purpose in the thing itself with the help of the imaginative power. Beach says that for Williams, imagination is “a means of discovering a new notion of reality” (2003: 99). Shklovsky’s argument regarding the aim of art seems related: “to recover the sensation of life.” Art “exists to enable us to feel things [...] The purpose of art is to give a sensation of the object as something seen, not something recognized. The technique of art is to make things unfamiliar” (1925: 12).

Childs is right to mention that “Imagism arguably marks the inception of English and American Modernism” (2000: 98). Williams compares the poet with the eye: the poet must “fix the particular with the universality of his own personality” (Williams, 1966: 17). Hardy’s imagism also manifests itself in both the visual imagery and uniting the universal and the particular with this slight difference that Williams does not insist on extracting some large meaning or abstract ideas from details. This implies that while Hardy struggles to find joy out of truth, Williams’ purpose is to identify and associate with the thing itself which he knows as the source of joy. As a matter of fact, Williams has the power to capture the vitality of everyday objects. The two poets share the power to see exactly, and create images which gives their poems the necessary emotional intensity. This means that as imagist poems, Williams’ and Hardy’ poems are about the ways of seeing that makes objects come into life. It is the poet who makes things meaningful, and this implies that the two poets shared the Kantian belief that the mind was the organizer of experience. Meaning is made out of the poet’s position in relation to objects and events.

Miller believes that in Williams' poetry "there is no description of private inner experience." He adds that there is also "no description of objects which are external to the poet's mind. Nothing is external to his mind. His mind overlaps with things; things overlap with his mind" (1966: 7). This implies that Williams' visual sensibility is his emphasis on the object and the actual rather than concept and abstract. Williams provides his readers with perceptions and does not give them mere description since he knows that things express themselves. Donoghue beautifully states that Williams' delight rests in "the plenitude of things, their value in being as they are" (1966: 122). Accordingly the reader may be reminded of the line from Book one of 1946 version of the poem *Paterson* or Williams' coined term: "no ideas but in things." Williams was fascinated with the physical world and his subject matter seemed "banal, insignificant" (Curtis, 1990: 14). Accordingly, Draper says that "nothing is banal in itself, but only as it is seen with or without awareness of its unique, independent existence" (1999: 22). Based on Williams' tendency to take words without distortion, Gray says that in Williams "the object does not stand for anything; it is not a symbol, nor is there even a great deal of figurative language [...] we are asked to attend to the thing in itself" (1990: 82). Markos quotes Williams on the power of imagination: "that power which discovers in things those inimitable particles of dissimilarity to all other which are the peculiar perfections of the thing in question" (1987: 30). Beach's words are also related: imagination "is not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situation It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore, since reality needs no personal support but exists free from human action ... it creates a new object" (2003: 98).

Draper also refers to "the concrete immediacy of [Hardy's] imagination and the incising of that quality in his language in a way that links him [...] with the Imagists" (1999: 40) as one of the modern elements in Hardy's poems. The bitter and gloomy tone, the bleak diction and simple language (used by both Hardy and Williams), the Darwinian jungle, and unsentimental frankness in Hardy's poems make him share with Williams the search for experimentation or change in form and language (a language in line with the nature of modernism). According to Thorne, Hardy "followed Wordsworth in his desire to write in a language that mirrored the patterns of speech, but experimented with rhythms and stress" (2006: 247). Although both share sharp vision and awareness, Williams is more an observer of beauty, and Hardy an observer of real life out of which he desires to bring something big and general to be told to the reader while Williams shows the readers that there is something to be explored by themselves.

Williams' poetry is more self-contained (more about art) and Hardy's poetry is more representational (more about reality). As works of art the two poems that will be discussed deal with human experiences that are both complex and ambiguous. "The Darkling Thrush" was written on 31 December 1900 as a lament for the death of nature and meadows that were once full of natural beauty and desire. In this poem Hardy is an observer of an empty, broken and fragmented world (of certainty) symbolized by the bird, and the poet "portrays man as isolated in a vast hostile world where it is impossible to know 'truth' absolutely" (Thorne, 2006: 248). He seems to be after some large meaning in life. This is the reason that the forlorn bird also symbolizes hope, joy and optimism. The darkling thrush is not an extraordinary bird (it is anti-Romantic) and represents lament for some large meaning lost or the disappearance of such Lyotardian narratives as God or nature. According to Cox and Dyson "the old romantic certainties, with their glorification of man, have no meaning in the twentieth century" (1963: 39).

"The Darkling Thrush"
I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-gray,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky

Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted night
Had sought their household fires.
The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervorless as I.
At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimitable;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small
In blast-battered plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.
So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

The bird can be looked at as a reflection of the poet's consciousness or poetic sterility. The "broken lyre," "winter's dregs," and the "weakening eye of day" symbolize poetic passivity and the death of imagination. The coldness of the poem and "an aged thrush" are not pathetic fallacy since they do not associate with human grief. Where Hardy feels himself an exile from the past, Williams celebrates separateness of things and humans. In "The Darkling Thrush" Hardy seems to have reached the end of everything however, Williams has the power to start from where Hardy has left off by celebrating and glorifying everything. In sharp contrast with Hardy's aging bird, Williams can enjoy the color of aging and the rural aged landscape. Hardy seems unable to share the joy and the imaginative vision of the bird while Williams can participate in the sparrows' joy and hoping since many of his poems refer to nature in order to explore human behavior and human life. The old man of his poems can "astonish [him] beyond words" while the speaker of "The Darkling Thrush" remains "unaware" signifying the poet's skepticism and alienation.

"Pastoral"
The little sparrows
hop ingenuously
about the pavement
quarreling
with sharp voices
over those things
that interest them.
But we who are wiser
shut ourselves in
on either hand
and no one knows
whether we think good
or evil.

Meanwhile,
the old man who goes about
gathering dog-lime
walks in the gutter
without looking up
and his tread
is more majestic than
that of the Episcopal minister
approaching the pulpit
of a Sunday.
These things
astonish me beyond words.

In "Pastoral" (1916), the poet begins by describing some sparrows in a specified time. The description is important, for it is "no symbolism, no depth, no reference to a world beyond the world." There is "no pattern of imagery, no interaction of subject and object—just description" (Miller, 1966: 5). The discovery of sparrows surprises the poet himself since it is a discovery of the sparrows' sense of existence made by the poet. Pearce beautifully refers to the poet's subject: "that aspect of the human condition so fascinating to the poet [...]: the separateness of men from one another and from the things of their world" (1966: 96). Pearce refers to Williams' "fascination with the "anti-poetic" that "derives from a compulsion to define separateness (or alienation) in terms of the insignificant (or "anti-poetic")" as his "naturalism" (1966: 96). It is noteworthy that Williams wanted to separate himself from many poets of his time and did so by depending himself on things—because so much depends upon a wheelbarrow—and felt himself into them. As an observer of things he admires even poverty and deprivation. Moore says Williams "contemplate[s] with new eyes, old things, shabby things" (1966: 43).

Brooks and Warren believe that it is a must that we "focus our attention upon words, and details" (1966: 173). Williams' imagination organizes the experience of simple things and fills each with energy and vitality. It is feeling that is important to Williams who celebrates separateness of things with no insistence on relating them into some large meaning or unit. Williams creates, instead, something poetic and significant out of the insignificant or the anti-poetic. Hardy associates pastoral landscape with youthful vigor in contrast with the rural landscape that is aged and decayed. Williams' preference for tradition, life without luxury and old beliefs shows him in harmony with nature while Hardy is more concerned about a shattered nature which shows the depth of his pessimism. Williams enjoys a greater power and capacity, comparing him with Hardy, to make him keep his solidarity with nature in special moments. In almost all Williams' poems nature has and shows a sense of sympathy with man. Williams escapes from pessimism and accepts the flux of life more easily. This means that Williams is not as pessimist and cynic as Hardy who explores death, unfaithfulness, alienation, and self against nature in his poems. Hardy's pessimism or modern cynicism is "the only view of life in which you can never be disappointed" (Harvey, 2003: 42).

Hardy's pessimism seems to be under the influence of Darwin and scientific rationalism. Cox and Dyson believe that this was because Hardy "was disturbed by the breakdown of traditional Christian beliefs" (1963: 38). Houghton and Stange believe that Hardy lost "an earlier state of secure belief and joy" and felt "disillusioned maturity, of the doubt and despair of the Victorian age" (1959: 783). Of course there are critics who believe in Hardy's optimism. John Lucas (1986) is one example who refers to music and laughter in Hardy's poems suggesting an optimistic view of life.

Davie sees Hardy as "a poet of loss, of plangent regret for the passing of time, a poet who dwells on human mortality, an elegiac and philosophical poet, and a poet of rural nostalgia"

(Harvey, 2003: 191). Hynes states that Hardy is “unable to embody a complete philosophical statement” (Harvey, 2003: 190). Hardy himself insisted that he did not produce philosophical poems; however his look at nature seems highly philosophical. Thorne’s statement proves this: Hardy’s themes “reflected both his love of the natural world and his awareness of man’s struggle to survive in an indifferent world” (2006: 247). Hardy, in contrast with Williams, “subordinat[es] the natural world [...] to the human” (Draper, 1999: 40). Hardy turned away from a Wordsworthian view of nature in order to address its defects as the basis of a new aesthetic of “hitherto unperceived beauty” (Millgate, 1984: 118). Hardy rejected the Wordsworthian view of the natural world: “Nature’s defects must be looked in the face and transcribed” (Harvey, 2003: 120).

Hardy is cut off from other human beings, for his distrust of the visionary imagination reduces vision to illusion. Yes, illusion is the key world in Hardy, and vision the key word in Williams who can perceive the majesty of the ordinary “old man who goes about / gathering dog-lime” who “walks in the gutter / without looking up” and whose “tread / is more majestic than / that of the Episcopal minister.” Hardy becomes Wordsworthian when he decides to escape, through the imagination, to some transcendent thing and make life glorious by thinking about some truth beyond surface appearances. For Williams, “poetic imagination gives the individual the power to face death bravely” (High, 1989: 137). Williams cuts himself off from the past and future in order to live in the present and admire even poverty and harsh life, and not surprisingly, Hardy’s poem becomes an “interaction between the past and the present” (Draper, 1999: 38), for Hardy likes to recreate the past in his poems and keep his regretful look back. Williams does not see a wasteland or does not insist on seeing one, and does not identify the modern era of technology with plight and illusion, and tries to see and perceive a new world instead.

Williams had always a memory of his youthful ambition and wanted to do something important. His poetry is the fulfillment of his ambition; it is a kind of contribution to “our experiences of the world and our understanding of human behavior” (Curtis, 1990: 17). That is why his images are rarely symbols of some large idea. This does not mean that Williams is not philosophical. Williams, beautifully, sums up his philosophical view of life in his last volume of poetry, *Pictures from Brueghel* (1963): “Only the imagination is real! / I have declared it / time without end. / If a man die / it is because death / has first / possessed his imagination ...” The thrush sings its song of joy at a new beginning however, it is set in a winter landscape that is both bleak and haunted “spectre-grey,” while Williams’ sparrows seem wiser than human beings who believe themselves to be wiser.

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