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Wordsworth, Hardy, Locker-Lampson, and Quirky Minds

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JOHN WAIN, in the Introduction to his selection of poems by Thomas Hardy, writes suggestively of a Wordsworthian influence on Hardy:

Much has been made of Hardy's affinities with Browning, but it seems to me that if he owes anything to any previous poet that poet is Wordsworth, and in particular the Wordsworth of the "Lucy" and "Matthew" poems, where he is interested in presenting, without comment or analysis, the odd quirks of the human mind under the pressure of life; so that poems like "The Two April Mornings" or "Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known" lead directly to the Hardy of "In Her Precincts" or "The Self-Unseeing." Already in 1868 Hardy was writing in his notebook, "Perhaps I can do a volume of poems consisting of the other side of common emotions." To view everyday experience from an unusual angle and give the unexpected insight — this was his aim as it was Wordsworth's. They are both poets of normality. But they both understand that normality is not the simple thing it was once supposed.¹

Wain has other points to make and not much space to make them in, and so he does not provide illustrative details from the poems he mentions. I propose to fill in some of the specifics in order to support and elucidate Wain's thinking. Hardy's two poems do resemble "The Two April Mornings" and "Strange Fits" both in the kind of mental processes explored and in mode of expression. The resemblances offer strong if indirect evidence that Hardy had read Wordsworth's "Lucy" and "Matthew" poems discerningly. That he knew and admired at least one of them, "The Two April Mornings," is directly proved, as I shall show, in a letter to Frederick Locker-Lampson.

One similarity between the two poems by Wordsworth and the two by Hardy is that each is narrated by a man who is looking back on what is almost certainly a distant, rather than recent, past² and who was directly

² It might be argued that "In Her Precincts" presents no internal evidence that the experience recounted was distant in time, except that Hardy, by labeling the poem "Kingston-Maurward Park," seems to locate the poem in his own distant past. J. O. Bailey writes: "Kingston-Maurward House was the home of Mrs. Julia Augusta Martin, the lady of the manor of Stinsford from 1845 to 1853. A sentimental romance grew up in young Tommy Hardy's feeling for Mrs. Martin. . . . In Her Precincts' seems to picture Hardy as a boy of about thirteen haunting Kingston-Maurward Park, love-sick for Mrs. Martin's caresses, dismayed that she had felt he had deserted her, and the[ne] distressed when he found the 'gloom of severance' his alone.

"Purdy, briefly considering Mrs. Martin, suggests that the poem is concerned 'more probably with one of the daughters of James Fellowes, who bought the estate in 1853.' I have seen no evidence to relate the poem to a Miss Fellowes," The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1970), pp. 375-76. In either case, Hardy is writing as an adult about a boyhood event.
or, as confidant, indirectly a youthful party to the events narrated. Each poem plays off the narrator's unawareness or mistaken perception in the earlier time against his growth in awareness, then or later. 3 In "The Two April Mornings" 4 the narrator recalls being puzzled when his much older friend, the usually blithe schoolmaster Matthew, unexpectedly experienced sad thoughts while on a morning walk. Matthew explained that he was reminded of a similar April morning thirty years earlier when he turned from a visit to the grave of his nine-year-old daughter to meet, by chance, "A blooming Girl." The narrator quotes Matthew's curious recollection of his response to that meeting:

"There came from me a sigh of pain
Which I could ill confine;
I looked at her, and looked again:
And did not wish her mine!"

Over the years since, the narrator has evidently brooded over this enigmatic revelation of human grief:

Matthew is in his grave, yet now,
Methinks, I see him stand,
As at that moment, with a bough
Of wilding in his hand.

The speaker in "Strange Fits of Passion" 5 remembers his change in mood from happy expectation as he approached his beloved's home to foreboding as the descending moon which he had been watching suddenly dropped behind Lucy's cottage:

"O mercy!" to myself I cried,
"If Lucy should be dead!"

He refers to the foreboding now as "fond and wayward thoughts." Hardy's poet-narrator, in the first stanza of "In Her Precincts," 6 talks of the modicum of comfort he had received when the woman of Kingston-Maurward House, from whom he had been separated, seemed as gloomy as he at the separation. But in the second and last stanza, he comes to realize that she has forgotten him: "There was glee within," and he finds "The gloom of severance mine alone." He has moved from a false awareness of shared gloom to an awareness that it is unshared. Finally, "The Self-Unseeing" 7 recounts the narrator's look back in time to a day when his mother sat smiling while his father played the violin and he danced:

Blessings emblazoned that day;
Everything glowed with a gleam.

5. Selected Poems and Prefaces, ed. Stillinger, p. 113.
But at the time no one paid attention to the radiance. Now, years too late, the narrator is aware of what they missed.

The four poems present sad but fairly commonplace situations: an old man’s grief and a young man’s incomprehension of its suddenness; a lover’s irrational dread that his loved one has died; a boy’s disillusioning discovery of his first love’s feebleness; a recollection of youthful domestic well-being. All concern commonplace folk (except for the rank of the mistress of Kingston-Maurward). But all of them have unexpected touches that yield uncommon results. The old man’s grief is prompted by the beauty of the day, a day when Matthew, even after a first momentary recollection of his daughter’s death, is described as “As blithe a man as you could see” and as traveling “merrily.” We puzzle over his not wanting the blooming girl. Was it fear that she too would die? Was it that, despite her happiness and freedom and loveliness, she never could take the place of his Emma? There, at any rate, is a quirky mind for you. The narrator, too, shows a certain quirkiness in remembering the odd particular of that ambiguous bough of wilding in Matthew’s hand. What, we wonder, does the wilding—a plant, or its fruit, growing wild or having escaped from cultivation—suggest: bitter fruit, as Geoffrey Durrant reasons? Then there are the complexities of time:

Four levels of time (and two sets of emotions recollected in tranquility) are brought together in the poem: the present, in which the poet speaks and Matthew is dead; the more recent of the two April mornings, when “We walked along,” etc.; the earlier April morning, thirty years before, when Matthew met the “blooming Girl”; and a period still more remote, when his daughter Emma was alive.

In the second poem of Wordsworth, we sense that the lover’s strange fit of passion may be more than a mental aberration, that he may indeed have penetrated to the truth. Lucy may be dead as horse and lover approach; or she may be soon to die. Certainly she is dead in the other “Lucy” poems:

But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!
(“She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways”)

She died, and left to me
This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;
The memory of what has been,
And never more will be.
(“Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower”)

Readers who refuse to interpret one poem in the light of other poems may still suspect irony when the lover refers to his anxiety for Lucy as “fond

and wayward thoughts,” especially as he has just described losing that strange race—

With quickening pace my horse drew nigh
Those paths so dear to me—

to the descending moon.\(^{12}\) His, too, is a mind whose odd functioning in the circumstances absorbs our interest.

Turning to Hardy, we find comparably unremarkable situations used with similarly compelling effect, though Hardy’s poems are a good deal briefer than Wordsworth’s. Light and darkness play significant parts in “In Her Precincts” as they had when the moon suddenly disappeared in “Strange Fits.” Fog and the “dull black blur” of the windows at Kingston-Maurward yield, as evening falls, to lamplight and “glee”; the narrator, at first deceived, in the dark as we might say, is enlightened by his bitter new awareness. As he becomes aware of her conviviality, she reveals her unawareness of him. This simple ironic circumstance renders the boy’s pain sharply. That the poet remembers the experience so vividly in later life suggests that the pain did not go away. Light in the form of a gleam is important in “The Self-Unseeing,” too. The poet-narrator is apparently revisiting his childhood home; unremarkably his thoughts return to a happy evening spent right there. But beyond the conventional nostalgia (“She sat here in her chair”), Hardy visualizes the scene with his adult self as a kind of fourth party to it, able to see what the others, including himself as a boy, could not see, yet helpless to do anything about it:

Blessings emblazoned that day;
Everything glowed with a gleam;
Yet we were looking away!

This odd mental process discloses the domestic three, father, mother, son, “looking away” from the glow, from their blessings, their felicity, long since lost. That they were looking away, which is more active than simply not noticing, makes for greater poignance. Time seems even crueler than usual when the happy moment is not seized.

All four poems, then, involve a looking back, with a consequent play of unawareness against awareness; and all four, in good part through their presentation of quirky mental processes, render commonplace situations uncommon. Three of the poems relate light, or its absence, to those mental activities. All four, furthermore, deal with human helplessness against the changes wrought by time, and all show how painful change can be to the sensitive person, and, because of memory, how painful it can continue to be. The poems remind us, “without comment or analysis,” of the unexpected depths of feeling that the normal mind is capable of reaching “under the pressure of life.” That sort of insight into mental complex-

ity afforded by each poem seems to be Wain’s principal point. But Wain may also be thinking of stylistic similarities and verbal echoes. All the poems, for example, achieve their effects with relatively commonplace diction and imagery:

“No fountain from its rocky cave
E’er tripped with foot so free;
She seemed as happy as a wave
That dances on the sea.” (“Two April Mornings”)

And now we reached the orchard-plot;
And, as we climbed the hill,
The sinking moon to Lucy’s cot
Came near, and nearer still. (“Strange Fits”)

Yes, her gloom within at the lack of me
Seemed matching mine at the lack of her. (“In Her Precincts”)

Here is the ancient floor,
Footworn and hollowed and thin,
Here was the former door
Where the dead feet walked in. (“The Self-Unseeing”)

The “simple” Wordsworth of Byronic jape is there in the first two of these out-of-context quotations; in context, it could be argued, the passages are successful examples of the Wordsworthian challenge to the restrictive neo-classic view of the language appropriate to serious poetry. When Hardy uses one of his rough-hewn phrases, such as “The gloom of severance” in the last stanza of “In Her Precincts,” it would be hard to claim a Wordsworthian influence, but in the prosaic, or nearly prosaic, language of the last two of the above passages, he does seem to reveal an affinity with Wordsworth.

What about echoes of Wordsworth in Hardy? There’s the “glee” of “In Her Precincts”: “There was glee within.” This is a favorite word of Wordsworth’s; it shows up, for instance, in another of the “Matthew” poems, “The Fountain,” which speaks of Matthew as “The grey-haired man of glee.” Or there’s the faithless lover’s house of “In Her Precincts” that “looked cold from the foggy lea.” The somewhat “poetic” word “lea” appears in “Strange Fits”:

Upon the moon I fixed my eye,
All over the wide lea.

“The Self-Unseeing” offers another possible echo when the narrator says that “Everything glowed with a gleam.” Readers of Wordsworth recognize that most Wordsworthian of emanations from nature, the gleam. 14

There are evident affinities, then, between the two poems by Hardy and

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the “Matthew” and “Lucy” poems of Wordsworth. Moreover, as Hardy was a close student of the major English poets, it is quite likely that he had carefully read works as near the center of Wordsworth’s achievement as the “Matthew” and “Lucy” poems. Hardy’s “glee” and “lea” and “gleam” reveal more than a love of the long e sound; they echo—no doubt unconsciously—favorite words of the older poet that he had used in “Strange Fits” and “The Fountain” as well as in numerous other poems. And beneath the surface similarities are indications that Hardy had caught something of Wordsworth’s vision of “everyday experience from an unusual angle” that yields “the unexpected insight.”

Now as it happens Hardy expressed high regard for “The Two April Mornings” in a letter of February 1, 1880, to the poet Frederick Locker-Lampson, then only Locker.\(^15\) Apparently Hardy had regard for the letter, too, as a copy, with minor changes, appears, presumably with his blessing, in The Life of Thomas Hardy. I quote its central paragraphs, which comment on two of Locker-Lampson’s poems:

In enjoying your poems over again I felt—will you mind my saying it?—quite ill-used to find that you had altered two of my favourite lines which I have been in the habit of muttering to myself for some years past. I mean

“They never do so now, because
I’m not so handsome as I was.”

I shall stick to the old reading, as much the nicest, whatever you may choose to do in new editions.

One other remark, of quite a different sort—I unhesitatingly affirm that nothing more beautiful or powerful for its length than “The Old Stonemason” has been done by any modern poet. The only poem which has ever affected me in at all the same way is Wordsworth’s “Two April Mornings,” but this, being less condensed than yours, does not strike through one with such sudden power as yours, in the last verse.\(^16\)

Frederick Locker-Lampson (1821–1895) was a literary acquaintance of Hardy’s, an anthologist and versifier, most of whose work is to be found in his London Lyrics.\(^17\) In his day he seems to have known everyone in the Anglo-American literary world. Frederick Locker-Lampson: A Character Sketch, “Composed and Edited by His Son-in-Law,” Augustine Birrell, includes a selection of letters addressed to Locker-Lampson from Leigh Hunt, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Tennyson, Browning, Thackeray, Ruskin, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, Dickens, D. G. Rossetti, Swinburne, Leslie Stephen, Whitman, and others—including

\(^{15}\) In 1885 he took the name of his second wife, Hannah Jane Lampson.


\(^{17}\) “In 1857 he published, with Chapman & Hall, his first collection of verse, ‘London Lyrics,’ a small volume of ninety pages, and the germ of all his subsequent work. Extended or rearranged in successive editions, the last of which is dated 1893, this constitutes his poetical legacy.” Austin Dobson, “Locker-Lampson, Frederick (1821–1895),” The Dictionary of National Biography, 1921–22 ed. Dobson also writes, “As a poet he belonged to the school of Prior, Praed, and Hood, and he greatly admired the metrical dexterity of Barham.”
the Hardy letter.\textsuperscript{18} The verses in \textit{London Lyrics} have not passed the test of time, however. "Rotten Row," the one whose altered last couplet leads Hardy to mild complaint in the letter, is perhaps typical. The aging gentleman-ass of a narrator surveys the passing social scene in Hyde Park and reminisces about past glories. The two favorite lines Hardy misses had read

\begin{quote}
Perhaps they say, what I'll allow,
That I'm not quite so handsome now.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Neither version of the couplet has achieved immortality, nor has their creator. Aside from the occasional satirical portrait: of selfishness among the well-off, for example, in "Beggars" or of London high life in general in "St. James's Street," Locker-Lampson can seldom for long resist being cutely clever, as in such poems as "My Mistress's Boots," "An Old Muff," or "Reply to a Letter Enclosing a Lock of Hair." Here is a stanza of "An Old Muff":

\begin{quote}
Uncle was then a lad
Gay, but, I grieve to add,
Sinful, if smoking bad
\textit{Baccy}'s a vice:
Glossy was then this mink
Muff, lined with pretty pink
Satin, which maidens think
"Awfully nice!"\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

It is no great injustice of literary history that Locker-Lampson is now forgotten.

Are Hardy's remarks about Locker-Lampson therefore forgettable? Not entirely, I think. It is true that both writers had published work in the \textit{Cornhill Magazine} and were thus, as it were, business associates. And it is also true that Hardy was responding to a letter from Locker-Lampson that contained "expression of pleasure" over \textit{Far from the Madding Crowd},\textsuperscript{21} so that Hardy's expression of enjoyment of the other's poems may be seen as a gesture, the returning of a courtesy. His choice of "The Old Stonemason" for special consideration, however, is another matter, even after we allow for the pull of sentiment. Hardy was, after all, the descendant of stonemasons. Wain, with no thought of Locker-Lampson, or Locker-Lampson's poem, mentions that Robert Frost wrote a friend in 1913 about Hardy: "They say he looks like a little old stone-mason."\textsuperscript{22}

Yet more than sentimental attachment to the occupation drew Hardy to "The Old Stonemason," a poem bearing some resemblance in method to the poems we have been examining. The poem follows:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{18} Frederick Locker-Lampson (London: Constable, 1920), pp. 89–145.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{London Lyrics}, introd. and notes Austin Dobson (London: Macmillan, 1904), p. 54.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{London Lyrics}, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{21} See Purdy and Millgate, p. 69n. \textit{Far from the Madding Crowd} was first published serially in \textit{Cornhill's}.
\textsuperscript{22} Selected Shorter Poems of Thomas Hardy, p. xii.
\end{quote}
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THE OLD STONEMASON

A showery day in early spring,
An Old Man and a Child
Are seated near a scaffolding,
Where marble blocks are piled.

His clothes are stain'd by age and soil,
As hers by rain and sun;
He looks as if his days of toil
Were very nearly done.

To eat his dinner he had sought
A staircase proud and vast,
And here the duteous Child had brought
His scanty noon repast.

A worn-out Workman needing aid:
A blooming Child of Light;
The stately palace steps; — all made
A most pathetic sight.

We had sought shelter from the storm,
And saw this lowly Pair,—
But none could see a Shining Form
That watch'd beside them there. 23

Hardy correctly stresses the crucial importance of that last stanza. Whoever the “Shining Form” is—a Guardian Angel? Jesus Christ?—the last four lines provide an otherwise ordinary poem with the unexpected touch, the quirky observation that Wain finds in “The Two April Morn­ings” and the other poems he mentions. Locker-Lampson’s poem is about humble folk, and between lines seven and eight, oddly in mid-sentence, it switches tenses from present to past, so I suppose the narrator is looking back to an occurrence distant in time. But this narrator’s remembrance is not evidently painful to him. Nor are the lowly pair without help—no tragic subjection to time here—what with that “Shining Form” watching them. The poem has its symbolic illumination in that “Shining” and the “Light” of the child. The author avoids intrusive comment and analysis; instead, not unlike Wordsworth and Hardy, Locker-Lampson presents the little episode from the unusual angle that is perhaps not often found in poetry about “most pathetic” sights. Hardy, a non-believer who wished he could believe and who had a penchant for writing about ghosts, recognizes, in the poem’s sudden mystical moment, its power.

What Hardy probably also recognizes is the closeness in style of “The Old Stonemason” to the Wordsworth of the “Matthew” and “Lucy” poems, a closeness that his own poetry sometimes manifests. Take the following two passages from Locker-Lampson:

23. London Lyrics, p. 110. It should be noted that “The Old Stonemason” was first printed on page 229 of the Cornhill Magazine of Feb. 1876. Chapters 35–38 of Hardy’s serialized The Hand of Ethelberta begin on page 230. Hardy thus probably first read “The Old Stonemason” in a receptive frame of mind, i.e., while engaged in the pleasant business of looking up his own newly-printed work.
A showery day in early spring,
An Old Man and a Child
Are seated near a scaffolding,
Where marble blocks are piled.

or

The stately palace steps; — all made
A most pathetic sight.

Either passage could have come from the pages of Wordsworth. Each is reminiscent of the deliberate simplicities cultivated by Wordsworth and, in his own way, by Hardy. Even more reminiscent of Wordsworth is Locker-Lampson’s “blooming Child of Light” recalling the “blooming Girl” Matthew had seen at his daughter’s gravesite in “The Two April Mornings.” One wonders if Hardy heard this curious echo. Indeed, “The Old Stonemason” may have echoed in Hardy’s memory when he came to write “The Self-Unseeing.”

Locker-Lampson’s “none could see a Shining Form” (except, apparently, the narrator as in looking back he becomes aware of it) perhaps anticipates the three unseeing selves observed by the poet-narrator of Hardy’s poem.

It could be, then, that Hardy owed a small debt to his friend. Almost certainly Hardy and Locker-Lampson owed a debt to Wordsworth, at least in the poems under discussion. The great difference between Hardy and Locker-Lampson as stylistic debtors of Wordsworth is that Hardy, despite the Wordsworthian influence, retains his own poetic identity. For one thing, Hardy’s poems have their own rhythm; he eschews the ballad measure of Wordsworth’s two poems.

I find the same number of stressed and unstressed syllables in each of these lines from “The Self-Unseeing,” but they do not form a symmetrical pattern. I suspect that the pattern will still be irregular even to a reader who scans the lines differently. Yet the rhythmical roughness of the lines or the odd inversions of subject and predicate in “Where showed no stir” (from “In Her Precincts”) or the curious combination of words in “gloom of severance” (also from “In Her Precincts”) are examples of Hardy’s distinctive style. Locker-Lampson, on the other hand, has no style of his own in “The Old Stonemason.” He sticks to the ballad rhythm undeviatingly, and his diction and imagery seem transparently imitative of Wordsworth. Furthermore, “The Old Stonemason” teeters on the edge of mawkishness, saved from falling only by that last stanza. The poem is more condensed than “The Two April Mornings,” but Hardy may claim too much for its last stanza in asserting that it “strike[s] through one” with

24. Hardy probably wrote “The Self-Unseeing” after 1892, the year his father died. It was published in Poems of the Past and the Present in 1901.
more “sudden power” than anything in Wordsworth’s poem. Hardy’s letter puffs up Locker-Lampson’s overall achievement far beyond its merits: the first paragraph speaks of “the perfect literary taste that is shown in all your own writings.” And Hardy is surely out of critical control in writing “that nothing more beautiful or powerful for its length than ‘The Old Stonemason’ has been done by any modern poet.” Nonetheless, “The Old Stonemason” has a vitality that elevates it above its imitative and sentimental qualities. Hardy shows discernment both in singling out “The Old Stonemason” from among its neighbors in London Lyrics and in recognizing its ancestral descent from “The Two April Mornings.”

That recognition and his own poetic practice in “In Her Precincts” and “The Self-Unseeing” suggest that Hardy derived from Wordsworth a way of seeming to be simple—the immediate and obvious appeal of nostalgia, the low-key events, the unheightened language—while achieving complexity by representing, from the perspective of a later time, some of the oddities of the mind under stress. Whether Hardy was consciously imitating Wordsworth or had unconsciously absorbed something of the older poet’s method probably cannot be determined. Hardy may well not have realized that he owed a debt to Wordsworth. Both were poets of normality, as Wain reminds us, and the overall influence of the older poet on Hardy may well have been a matter of reinforcing Hardy’s own propensities. But Wordsworth does seem to have provided Hardy with one method of getting at that “other side of common emotions,” of getting to the abnormality hidden from less watchful eyes by normality. While Hardy was his own man as a poet, with his characteristic concerns and style, he did learn from another poet besides Browning.