

A Rejection of the Urban Centre? Dialect in the Poetry of William Barnes and Thomas Hardy.

Heather Hawkins

Poetry, when written rural in dialect, seemingly rejects the standard language of the urban centre in favour of rural peripheral culture.¹ Such rejection however, is not automatically subversive towards the colonizing centre, and sometimes maintains the position of the centre as the absolute, dominant culture and the periphery as its inferior other.² This essay discusses the uses of dialect in the poetry of William Barnes and Thomas Hardy. It examines one poem by each poet, namely Barnes' *Vellen the Tree* (1844) and Hardy's *Throwing A Tree* (1928), to establish whether dialect in their poetry rejects or supports the position of the urban centre as the absolute during the nineteenth century.³

Both poets were Dorset born and lived much of their lives in the Dorchester area. They shared a concern for the plight of the rural poor and also sought to record a rapidly diminishing rural culture in the face of increased industrialisation, migration and compulsory education. William Barnes was born in 1801 to parents who rented a small patch of land at Bagber near Sturminster Newton, Dorset. His mother, Grace, came from an impoverished background. His father's family was more prosperous. Barnes's grandfather previously owned a farm near Sturminster, which was lost due to mismanagement following his death.

¹ For the purposes of this essay 'dialect' refers to the non-standard speech of the rural periphery, rather than other non-standard urban dialects, the examination of which reside beyond the scope of this essay.

² For a full examination of the terms 'absolute' and 'other', see Said (1978).

³ First published respectively in *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect with a Dissertation and Glossary* (London: John Russell Smith, 1844); and *Winter Words: In Various Moods and Metres* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1928).

Consequently, Barnes's father lived a tentative lifestyle - well aware of the small economic gap between himself as a tenant farmer and the labourer (Chedzoy 2010:16-17). Although illiterate herself, Barnes's mother actively encouraged a love of literature and art in her son. Both parents spoke the Dorset dialect in the home, although Barnes used standard English in his everyday adult speech as a schoolmaster and clergyman (Chedzoy 2010:17-20). Barnes was also an accomplished philologist and wrote numerous works such as *Tiw: or A View of the Roots and Stems of English as a Teutonic Tongue* (1862), which sought to establish the origins of the English language.

Hardy was born in 1840, the son of a self-employed builder, Thomas Hardy Sr. The Hardy family lived at Lower Bockhampton, Dorset, and belonged to the artisan sub-class of the working class. They were 'liviers', or those who held life tenancies. Upon the death of the previous generation, the lifehold automatically passed onto the next, usually for the duration of three generations. The Hardy family also provided local employment. The business grew and, by 1871, Hardy's father employed eight men and a boy. Like Grace Barnes, Hardy's mother Jemima had experienced extreme poverty during her childhood, and her widowed mother was reliant upon parish relief (Millgate 2004:14-18). Jemima also actively encouraged Hardy's literary interests, buying him copies of Johnson's *Rasselas* and Dryden's *Virgil* (Millgate 2004: 42-44).

In contrast to Barnes' parents, Jemima Hardy discouraged the use of dialect in the home, although the young Hardy had ample opportunity to hear it at the village school which he attended. Hardy's father spoke the Dorset dialect as did the 'work-folk' he employed (Millgate 2004: 30-31). Thus the Barnes and Hardy families occupied an ambivalent class position. Not entirely of the working class, their fortunes and education did not elevate them sufficiently into the middle class, a position which is reflected in the ability of both poets to code switch between standard English and the Dorset dialect in their speech and in their

poetry. Barnes wrote the majority of his poetry in dialect. Although his decision to do so may have been influenced by his philological study, a post-colonial reading of his work is possible and enhances our understanding of dialect's function in his verse. Barnes' overt expression of dialect and his rejection of standard English in his poetry is subversive. Barnes experimented with one collection of verse in standard English, *Poems of Rural Life in Common English* (1868), but in contrast to his volumes of dialect verse, the volume was never reprinted (Chedzoy 2010: 168-69). In his Preface to his 1862 volume, *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect*, Barnes considers dialect to be his natural form of expression: 'To write in what some may deem a fast-wearing speech form, may seem as idle as the writing of ones name in the snow of a spring day. I cannot help it. It is my mother's tongue, and to my mind, the only true speech of the life that I draw' (Barnes 1862: iii-iv). Clearly, Barnes felt most comfortable when writing in dialect, although his later revisions of his verse indicate an increase in Barnes's use of the conventions of standard English over time.⁴

Barnes's poem, *Vellen the Tree* was included in his first collection of poems, *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect* (1844: 58). The poem reads:

Ees, the girt elem treeout in little huome groun'
Wer a-stannen this marnen, an' now's a-cut down.
Aye, the girt elem tree so big roun' an' so high,
Wher the mowers did goo to ther drink, an' did lie
A-yeazen ther lims, var a zultery hour.
When the zun did strick down wi' his girtest o' pow'r.
Wher the hâymaikers put up their picks an' ther riakes,
An' did squot down to snabble ther cheese an' kiakes,
An' did vill vrom ther flaggons ther cups wi' ther yale,
An' did miake therzelves merry wi' joke an' wi' tiale.

Ees, we took up a rope an' we tied en al roun',

⁴ For a fuller discussion of the increased standardization of dialect in Barnes's work, see Burton (2007).

At the top ð'n wi' oon end a-hangen to groun',
An' when we'd a-za'd his girt stem a'most drough,
We gie'd the wold chap about oon tug ar two,
An' 'e swây'd âl his lims, an' 'e nodded his head,
Till 'e vell away down lik' a girt lump o' lead:
An' as we rinn'd away vrom 'en clouse at our backs,
Oh! his boughs come a-whizzen an' gie-èn sich cracks;
An' his top veer so lofty that now's a-vell down
The stem ð'n da reach a'most auver the groun'.
Zoo the girt elem tree out in little huome groun'
Wer a-stannen this marnen, an' now's a-cut down.

The rhyme scheme follows a simple AABBCC pattern of four beat lines of triple feet throughout. Written entirely in dialect, Barnes attempts to replicate the speech patterns of native dialect speakers via a combination of phonetic spellings and employment of the grammatical conventions of the Dorset dialect. For example, Barnes replicates the sibilant 's' sound in initial and medial sounds in certain words with a 'z', such as 'zun' for sun and 'therzelves' for themselves. Other consonants are similarly substituted, such as 'v' for 'f' as in 'ov' for of, and 'vell' for fell, and 'dr' for 'thr' in 'drough (through). Vowel sounds are also subject to similar substitution of standard English for their Dorset counterparts. For example, 'riakes' for rakes, 'clouse' for close, 'sich' for such, and so on. The verb endings in the poem confirm the dialect convention of adding the 'en' suffix, such as 'a-stunnen', 'a-hangen'.⁵

The tone of the poem is one of harmony with an emphasis upon a sense of community among the working class Barnes depicts. Prior to its fall, the tree shaded the mowers and haymakers whilst they enjoyed their lunch. The rural working class is depicted as contented with their lot, and enjoying a sense of fellowship as they relax over lunch. Interestingly, none of the workers are given any individuality; they are presented as representative of their class

⁵ For more examples of Dorset dialect grammar, see Barnes' *Dissertation* (1844:1-37).

as a whole. In contrast, the tree does not only provide shelter for workers, but is also intrinsic to the proceedings. The tree is personified using the third person pronoun. The workers relax in the shade of the tree, thereby fusing both the rural workforce with the tree and the landscape. The poem constitutes a celebration of the unity between man and nature. However Barnes avoids any sentimentality in his presentation of the actual felling of the tree. During the fall the tree is still described in the third person. Despite the cohesion between rural landscape and the rural workers the language is Matter- of-fact in tone, and most definitely not elegiac. Rather, the tree and the workers are part of a community which is presented as vibrant and thriving.

So how does Barnes's presentation of rural life accord with the reality of working conditions for the rural working class during the early to mid- nineteenth century? Barnes witnessed a period of great agricultural change during his childhood and early adulthood. During the 1800's the enclosure of land increased due to cheap imports of grain following the Napoleonic wars. The accompanying rent increases forced many small tenant farmers out of business, unable to compete against larger land-owners (Williamson 2002). Barnes's uncle, Charles Rabbets, was one of the tenant farmers who suffered after enclosure, becoming insolvent during this time, which had a profound effect upon Barnes: 'everything that was dear from familiarity was taken away, and my uncle as he looked on the fields he held, cultivated with hope, and of which he had taken the produce in grateful joy, sighed and dropped a tear' (as quoted in Chedzoy 2010: 16-17).

Later in 1846, the removal of levy on imported grain following the repeal of the Corn Laws severely battered rural economics such as Dorchester once more (Wordie 2008). The fortunes of Barnes's school in Dorchester changed accordingly since his parents were unable to afford school fees. An economic change and his failure to win the headship of Dorchester Grammar School, prompted Barnes to consider a change of career. In 1847

Barnes was ordained and became rector of Whitcombe Church in Dorset (Chedzoy 2010: 86,103-11). Despite his concerns about rural poverty, expressed in his treatise *Humilis Domus*, Barnes continued to draw a nostalgic picture of rural life in Dorset in his poetry reminiscent of the period before enclosure and prior to the standardization of English (Barnes 1849). Barnes's persistent use of dialect in his poetry and his portrayal of a contented workforce suggests his ultimate reluctance to overtly criticize the governing classes in the urban centre. The fall of the tree in *Vellen the Tree* can be read as metaphor for a dying rural culture, subsumed by the urban centre. Conversely, as Forsyth (1963: 326) notes, Barnes's idyllic portrayal of rural culture can be considered a 'conscious criticism', unwaveringly aimed at raising issues affecting the countryside at that time. It is noticeable that the tree is felled only after Barnes has painstakingly presented rural society in the poem as a vibrant, thriving cultural entity. Barnes's refusal to portray the fall of the tree as an elegy for rural culture indicates that he considers rural culture to be robust enough to survive the dominant impulses of the absolute urban centre. This position is supported by an examination of contemporary reviews of Barnes's poetry. For example, in 1844 the *Sherbourne and Yeovil Mercury* (1844) highlighted Barnes's use of language: 'since the days of Burns we believe that no provincial dialect has been honoured by becoming the vehicle of true poetry in any degree this, and we have every reason to hope that Mr Barnes' simple old-fashioned lays will embalm the good old language of Dorsetshire, and secure it a memorial as long as the Doric and Scotch shall be forgotten' (as quoted in Chedzoy, 2010: 98).

Barnes was clearly lauded as a regionalist poet by local publishers, a position which is reiterated in 1844 the London based *Gentleman's Magazine*, which said of the same volume that 'the poet's heart is at home – his scenery is all domestic – his circle of description of home-growth confined to his own fields and boundaries [...] His language is not brought from a distance to decorate or adorn the native complexion of pastoral life; it is twin-born with the

subject, and between the thought and expression is nothing discordant or unsuitable'(as quoted in Chedzoy, 2010: 564). Barnes also regarded himself as a regionalist poet and gave readings of his poetry to local people at Dorchester Town Hall (Chedzoy 2010:150). He also had misgivings about his use of standard English in his collection *Poems of Rural Life in Common English*, commenting in his preface to the volume: 'I have written a few of a like kind in common English; not however without misgiving that what I have done for a wider range of readers may win the opinions of a fewer' (Barnes 1868).

It is evident from the above reviews that Barnes has been perceived as a harmless regionalist poet who, despite his persistent use of dialect, neither threatens mainstream literature of the urban centre nor its social norms. Barnes's labourers are content in their fields and accepting of their social status. The price Barnes pays paid for his insistent use of dialect is reflected in the evidence of the sales of his poetic volumes which indicates that his work was not widely circulated. Barnes admitted to rarely receiving any more than £5 for sales of his poetry (Chedzoy 2010:169). It can be argued that Barnes's use of dialect suggests a denial of the presence of standard English by him Barnes, and, in a post-colonial reading, indicates the first stage in the seizure and replacement of language of the centre by the periphery, as identified by Ashcroft in *The Empire Writes Back* (1994: 38). Such a denial rejects metropolitan power over the dominant means of communication and involves an increased awareness by both the colonizer and colonized of pre-colonial culture, along with a reversion to the pre-colonial dialect of the periphery. Paradoxically this act of cultural reclamation relegates once more the subjugated periphery to the marginal and local status designated to it by the colonizer. Dialect restricts Barnes' readership and destines him to remain a regionalist poet. It would be a laborious task for non-dialect speakers to translate the dialect poems into standard English, which may have deterred prospective readers from purchasing a copy of Barnes' volume. Furthermore, the contented workforce portrayed would have done little to upset the urban middle class perception of itself as the absolute

and the periphery as its inferior other. Thus Barnes' poetry bypasses, rather than confronts, the cultural dominance of the urban centre. His vibrant portrayal of rural society does suggest a culture which is capable of resisting cultural subjugation, but as *Vellen the Tree* illustrates, nostalgia expressed through a persistent dialectal articulation of rural culture is an insufficient means by which to redress the effects of colonization. The fallen tree is representative of a culture in decline, but the voice Barnes gives to it is not strident enough to be heard.

Despite having a similar lifelong interest in philology, like his friend and mentor Barnes, Hardy is not an overtly dialectal poet.⁶ In contrast to *Vellen the Tree*, Hardy's poem, *Throwing A Tree* (1928: 45-46) is negative in tone. The poem reads:

The two executioners stalk along over the knolls,
Bearing two axes with heavy heads shining and wide
And a long limp two-handled saw toothed saw for cutting great boles,
And so they approach the proud tree that bears the death-mark on its side.
Jackets doffed they swing axes and chop away just above ground,
And the chips fly about and lie white on the moss and fallen leaves;
Till a broad deep gash in the bark is hewn all the way round,
And one of them tries to hook upward a rope, which at last he achieves.

The saw then begins, till the top of the tall giant shivers:
The shivers are seen to grow greater each cut than before:
They edge out the saw, tug the rope; but the tree only quivers,
And kneeling and sawing again, they step back to try pulling once more.

Then, lastly, the living mast sways, further sways: with a shout
Job and Ike rush aside. Reached the end of its long staying powers
The tree crashes downward: it shakes all its neighbours throughout
And two-hundred year's steady growth has been ended in less than two hours.

⁶ For a detailed account of Hardy's philological interests. see Taylor (1993).

The use of dialect in the first two stanzas of the poem suggests that the two protagonists are from the rural periphery. They are unacknowledged as individuals at the poem's onset, but are dubbed 'executioners' who 'stalk' through the forest towards the condemned tree. As in Barnes' poem, the tree is metaphor for declining rural culture. Although the tree is not personified, Hardy describes it as a sentient being. It is a proud tall giant which 'shivers.' The final stanza describes the moment the tree crashes down. Yet, in contrast to Barnes' poem, there is no final sound from the tree as it falls. Hardy's tree only manages a feeble quiver, which coupled with his use of enjambment in the final stanza, emphasises the brutality of the felling and recalls the image of the executioners in the first stanza.

The protagonists are now given names: Job and Ike. Their new found identities coincide with shifts in dialect in the poem. The four dialect words in the poem, 'knolls', 'boles', 'doffed' and 'hewn', occur in the first two stanzas when the tree is still standing. These dialect words are very noticeable amongst the standard English words in the poems, indicating, as Pite (2002: 175) asserts, that Hardy's use of dialect is 'prescribed rather in the same way as Wessex is mapped – something distinctive stands amidst the received and standard.' The absence of dialect in the last two stanzas indicates that the metaphoric felling of rural culture involves the subjugation of dialect by standard English. The new found identities of Job and Ike are acquired at a cost. The sudden, brutal death of the tree is emphasised in the poem, and indicates that the face of the rural landscape is changing and disappearing. The two rural protagonists have caused the tree to fall, implying that the periphery is complicit in its subjugation by the rural centre.

An examination of Hardy's combined use of dialect and standard English helps us to understand this thematic concern further. Hardy's use of dialect and standard English illustrates his ability to code switch between languages. Such code switching or linguistic hybridity, indicates the second phase of cultural reclamation identified by Ashcroft. He

argues that the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre involves the process of abrogation, in which a refusal of imperial culture and language occurs in order to bring about social change (Ashcroft 1994: 38-39). Thus post-colonial literature arises from the tension between the abrogation of the standard English of the urban centre and the vernacular of the periphery and produces a literature which is hybrid in nature. Hardy's linguistic hybridity especially reflects this process. A cultural shift occurs in which the identities of both colonizer and colonized are reevaluated. However, a paradox occurs as neither the colonized or the colonizer can remain untouched by colonialism or post-colonialism and fully regain their pre-colonial identities. This position was exacerbated during the nineteenth century as there is no identifiable moment of colonization of the periphery by the urban centre from which to reclaim peripheral culture.

The increase in literacy following the introduction of compulsory education in the 1870's lead to a decrease in the use of dialect and the imposition of standard English upon schoolchildren. Hardy laments the loss of rural cultural and linguistic identity in his essay *The Dorsetshire Labourer* (1883). He blames this loss not just upon compulsory education but also upon the increase in rural migration to the urban centre due to rural poverty and the industrialisation of farming. This can be seen, for instance, when he asserts that 'having attended the National School they would mix the printed tongue with the unwritten dying Wessex English that they had learnt of their parents, the result being a composite language without rule or harmony' (Hardy 1886:254).

Despite the negative tone of Hardy's observation, he suggests the possibility of an emerging culture, hybrid in nature, with the potential for balancing out class inequality. The emerging linguistic continuum merges overlapping forms of dialect in the development of a local variety of English. The migration of the rural work force to the periphery from the urban centre exacerbated this merging of conflicting dialects. Hardy had first-hand experience of

the effects of migration. He left Dorchester for London in 1862 to further his architectural and literary career. The capital offered greater opportunity than Dorchester for Hardy to gain promotion within architecture and also gave him easier access to literary culture (Millgate 2004: 73-96). Hardy's migration to the capital had linguistic consequences as well. He later recalled that the priority of each rural migrant regardless of their class was to 'obliterate his local colour, and merge in the type of Londoner as quickly as possible' (Millgate 2009: 278).

Although there is a decrease in dialect throughout Hardy's *Throwing A Tree*, his use of standard English to articulate the subjugation of rural culture indicates the abrogation of standard English by the periphery in an attempt to reclaim pre-colonial rural identity from the dominant urban centre. Therefore Hardy neither bypasses nor directly confronts the cultural norms of the urban centre. Rather, his abrogation of standard English proposes new cultural identities which destabilize the perceptions of non-mutable identities based upon the absolute and other defined by the colonizer. Unfortunately, the rural native who has migrated from the periphery can never regain his pre-migratory position.

As Fannon (1994: 41) asserts 'the native intellectual who comes back to his people by way of cultural achievements behaves in fact like a foreigner. Sometimes he has no hesitation in using dialect in order to show his will to be as near as possible to the people; but the ideas he expresses and the preoccupations he is taken up with have no common yardstick to measure the rural situation which the men and women of his country know.' Contemporary reviews of Hardy's poetry appear perplexed by his linguistic hybridity. For example, William Archer in the *Daily Chronicle* observed: 'Mr Hardy seems to lose all sense of local and historical perspective in language, seeing all words in the dictionary on one plane so to speak and regarding them all as equally available and appropriate for any and every literary response' as quoted in (as quoted in Taylor 1993: 42). An unsigned review in the *Academy* similarly highlights Hardy's use of dialect for particular criticism 'technical inexpertness [...] is

chiefly in evidence; and the effect is intensified somehow, by the dialect – which always needs a crafty hand to make it palatable in poetry’ (as quoted in Cox 1970:324).

Hardy’s poetry enjoyed greater circulation than Barnes’s in the urban centre, but both reviews suggest that the urban centre was ill-equipped to evaluate Hardy’s linguistic hybridity. Rather, they are only able to offer a critique from the perspective of the cultural norms of the urban centre. Any language or poetic technique which is alien to mainstream literature is considered inept and inappropriate. As Hardy contends in *The Papers of the Manchester Literary Club* (1881), ‘it must of course be a matter of regret that in order to be understood, writers should be obliged thus slightly to treat branches of English which are intrinsically as genuine, grammatical and worthy of the royal title as the all prevailing competitor which bears it; whose only fault was that they happened not to be central, in the struggle for existence when a uniform language became a necessity among the advanced classes of the population’ (as quoted in Millgate 2009: 28-29)

As has been seen, dialect in the poetry of Barnes and Hardy reflects the evolving evaluation of class identities throughout the nineteenth century. Although Barnes is subversive in his use of dialect, his poetry upholds the cultural and linguistic disparity between urban and rural literature, thereby reinforcing the *status quo* decreed by the colonizing urban middle class. In contrast, linguistic hybridity in Hardy’s work, prompted by even greater social rupture from the 1870’s onwards, embraces both rural and urban cultures to produce a subversive literature which asserts the validity of all languages and literatures. In doing so, Hardy acts as precursor to the modern.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Texts

Barnes William, *Vellen the Tree*, in *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect with a Dissertation and Glossary*, (London: John Russell Smith, 1844).

Hardy Thomas, *Throwing a Tree*, in *Winter Words: In Various Moods and Metres*, (London: Macmillan and Co, 1928).

Secondary Texts

Ashcroft Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Empire Writes Back Theory and Practice in Post- Colonial Literature*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Barnes William, *Humilis Domus: Some Thoughts on the Abodes Life and Social Condition of the Poor especially in Dorsetshire*, in *Poole and Dorset Herald* (1849).

Barnes William, *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect*, (London: John Russell Smith, 1862).

Barnes William, *Tiw or A View of the Roots and Stems of the English Language as a Teutonic Tongue*, (London: John Russell Smith, 1862).

Barnes William. *Poems of Rural Life in Common English*, (London: Macmillan, 1868).

Burton T.L., 'What William Barnes Done Dilution of the Dialect in Later Versions of *The Poems of Rural Life*.' *Review of English Studies* 58 (2007): 338-363.

Chedzoy Alan, *The People's Poet: William Barnes of Dorset*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2010).

Cox R.G., *Thomas Hardy The Critical Heritage*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

Forsyth R.A., The Conserving Myth of William Barnes, in *Victorian Studies*, vol. 6, (1963), 325-354.

Hardy Thomas, The Dorsetshire Labourer, in *Longman's Magazine*, July, (1886), 252-269.

Millgate Michael (ed.), Papers of the Manchester Literary Club, in *Thomas Hardy's Public Voice The Essays, Speeches and Miscellaneous Prose*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009).

Millgate Michael, *Thomas Hardy A Biography Revisited*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Pite Ralph, *Hardy's Geography Wessex and the Regional Novel*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

Said Edward, *Orientalism*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

Taylor Dennis, *Hardy's Literary Language and Victorian Philology*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

Fannon Frantz, On National Culture, in Williams Patrick and Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory A Reader*, (New York: Longman, 1994).

Williamson Tom, 'Grassing Down the Shires,' in *The Transformation of Rural England Farming and the Landscape 1700 – 1870*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002).

Wordie, J.R., *Perceptions and Reality: Effects of the Corn Laws and their Repeal in England 1815-1906*, in *Agriculture and Politics in England 1815 – 1939*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000).