

Dialect, Adaptation and Assimilation in the Poetry of William Barnes and Thomas Hardy

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The Dorset poets William Barnes and Thomas Hardy lived during a period of great social and economic change in nineteenth-century Britain, change triggered by enclosure and the gradual mechanisation of farming. This caused the rapid disappearance of rural culture, something of which Barnes and Hardy would have been acutely aware, as both of their families occupied an ambiguous class position; though elevated from the majority of the labouring class by their employment and education, they were not wealthy enough to join the middle class. A close reading of Barnes's poem 'Woak Were Good Enough Woonce' and Hardy's poem 'Silences' illustrates the poets' contrasting approaches to dialect in poetry, and reveals their different responses to the effects of the increased urbanisation of rural culture. In particular, an examination of the use of dialect in these poems offers interesting insights into the processes of cultural adaptation and assimilation which were brought about by such changes.

The enclosure of land in the early 1800s and the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 forced many small tenant farmers out of business, and led to an increase in rural unemployment and a subsequent migration of labourers to urban centres. This influx of workers indicated the ability of the rural labourer to adapt to social and economic change.¹ However, the rural labourer, or 'Hodge' as he was dubbed by social commentators of the period, was typically presented in contemporary literature as slow, awkward, lacking in social ambition and only able to converse in an unintelligible language. For example, in the essay, 'John Smith's Shanty' (1874), Richard Jefferies asserts that despite his physical strength, the rural labourer possessed 'nothing of the Hercules about him.' He continues:

The grace of strength was found wanting, the curved lines were lacking; all was gaunt and square... It was strength without beauty; a mechanical kind of power, like that of an engine, working through straight lines and sharp angles.²

Jefferies's labourer assumes bovine characteristics, sitting down for his meagre lunch of bread and cheese. Jefferies reports:

He ate slowly, thoughtfully, deliberately; weighing each mouthful, chewing the cud as it were. All the man's motions were heavy and slow, deadened as if clogged with a great load. There was no 'life' in him.³

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¹ Norman McCord, *British History 1815-1906* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 213.

² Richard Jefferies, *Landscape and Labour* (Bradford-upon-Avon: Moonraker Press, 1979), 148-67.

³ Jefferies, 'John Smith's Shanty,' 149.

Barnes chose to write his poetry in a dialect which would reflect the kind of unintelligible, animal-like being described by Jefferies. Barnes was a native speaker of the Dorset dialect and his parents actively encouraged its use.⁴ In adulthood, however, Barnes was required to use standard English in his positions as clerk, schoolmaster and clergyman. His ability to speak and write in both dialects suggests that he was adept at code-switching, or alternating between languages, an ability which had been exacerbated by his ambivalent class status.

The conflict between dialect and a growing, standardised English language became apparent as early as the sixteenth century, in the wake of attempts to create a unified language that reflected the identity of the emerging British Empire. This standardised language subsequently marginalised peripheral dialects, particularly in southern and south-western areas of England.⁵ By the mid to late nineteenth century the use of dialect was increasingly discouraged in schools, a position that was heightened by the introduction of compulsory education for primary school-aged children. Hardy highlighted the effects of education upon dialect in his essay 'The Dorset Labourer', first published in *Longman's Magazine* in 1883. He asserted:

Having attended the National School they [the children] would mix the printed tongue as taught therein with the unwritten, dying, Wessex English they had learnt of their parents, the result of this transitional state of affairs being a composite language without rule or harmony.⁶

It is notable that in this quotation Hardy draws attention to the oral nature of the Dorset dialect. In contrast to standard English, this dialect is an unwritten, oral language, perhaps not subject to grammatical conventions. However, Barnes ably outlines the grammatical complexity of the Dorset dialect in his 'Dissertation', which was included in his first book of poems, *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect* (1844). In the 'Dissertation', Barnes sets out the grammar of the dialect, drawing comparisons between the dialect and standard English. Barnes notes that those who consider dialect to be a corruption of written speech:

may not be prepared to hear that it is not only a separate offering from the Anglo-Saxon tongue but purer and more regular than the dialect which is chosen as the National speech, purer inasmuch as it uses many words of Saxon origin for which the English substitutes others of Latin, Greek or French derivation, and more regular inasmuch as it inflects regularly many words which in the National language are irregular.⁷

The complexity of the Dorset dialect is evident in Barnes's poetry. It can be argued that Barnes uses his poetry to resist the urbanisation of the rural periphery and to demonstrate the equal value of the dialect and of standard English. Barnes's use of dialect further constitutes an attempt to record a rapidly disappearing rural culture amidst such urbanisation. The poet had personal reasons for preferring to write in dialect. In the

⁴ Alan Chedzoy, *William Barnes: The People's Poet* (Stroud: History Press, 2010), 17-20.

⁵ Paula Blank, *Broken English – Dialect and the Politics of Language in Renaissance Writing* (London: Routledge, 1966), 8.

⁶ Thomas Hardy, 'The Dorsetshire Labourer,' The essay was originally printed in *Longman's Magazine* in July 1883. It is reproduced in *Thomas Hardy's Public Voice: The Essays, Speeches and Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 37-57.

⁷ William Barnes, *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect with a Dissertation and Glossary* (London: J. R. Smith, 1844), 40.

preface to the 1862 edition of his poetry, *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect*, Barnes asserts, 'It is my mother tongue and it is to my mind the only true speech of the life that I know.'⁸

Barnes clearly considers dialect to be the most suitable mode of expression for the rural society he portrays. In his poetry, Barnes does not just record dialect words, but also attempts to replicate the sounds of dialect through phonetic spelling. For example, his poem 'Woak Were Good Enough Woonce' begins:

Ees; now mahogany's the goo,
An' good wold English woak won't do.
I wish vo'k always mid auvord
Hot meals upon a woakèn bboard
As good as think that took my cup
An' trencher all my growèn up.
(stanza 1, lines 1-6).⁹

To a non-dialect speaker Barnes's poetry is difficult to read and recite, especially due to the 'w' prefix in front of vowels such as 'wold' for old and 'woak' for oak. Similarly, the 'èn' suffix on verbs and adjectives such as 'woakèn' and 'growèn' sounds cumbersome. There can have been few standard English readers with the time and patience to decipher the dialect, even with the inclusion of dialect glossaries in the volumes of Barnes's verse.

As a native speaker of the Dorset dialect, Hardy was well-positioned to understand Barnes's verse. Of Barnes's use of dialect, he noted:

The veil of dialect, through which in a few cases readers have to discern whatever of real poetry there may be in William Barnes, is disconcerting to many... As long as the spelling of standard English is other than phonetic it is not obvious why the old Wessex language should be phonetic except in a pronouncing dictionary.¹⁰

Scotsman and publisher Alexander Macmillan shared Barnes's enthusiasm for dialect but, like Hardy, he cautioned against its excessive use. In a letter to Barnes he wrote:

I can always make a good shot at what words mean, having Scotch characters in them. But it does not fall to the lot of the whole British public to have the blessing of a Scotch birth. For the sake of the more unfortunate can't you do something?¹¹

Macmillan's criticism indicates that Barnes's decision to write in dialect restricted his audience to dialect speakers who could understand it without having to consult dialect glossaries. By preferring to write in dialect, Barnes destined himself to remain a regionalist poet, as confirmed by early reviews of his poetry. For example, the

⁸ William Barnes, 'Preface,' in *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect* (London: J.R. Smith, 1862), 3-4 (3-4).

⁹ Barnes, *Poems*, 206-7.

¹⁰ Thomas Hardy, 'William Barnes,' in *The English Poets: Selections with Critical Introductions*, ed. Thomas Humphrey Ward, 5 vols (London: Macmillan, 1918), V: 174-6.

¹¹ Alexander Macmillan, *Letters to William Barnes*, 21 October 1864, cited in Chedzoy, *People's Poet*, 166.

Gentleman's Magazine noted that Barnes's use of language in the 1844 volume of poetry was:

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 there is nothing discordant or unsuitable.¹²

This regionalism was exacerbated by Barnes's choice of subject matter. In his poem 'Woak Were Good Enough Woonce', the poet-speaker laments the decline in popularity of traditional oak for home furnishings in favour of mahogany. Oak wood is synonymous with the English countryside; so, for Barnes, its decline mirrors that of rural culture and indicates an increasing urbanisation of the periphery. Prompted by his observation that the fashionable 'mahogany's the goo', the poet speaker embarks upon a nostalgic reminiscence of rural life fifty or sixty years earlier. One of his first memories is of his 'woakèn bboard' upon which his slice of bread or 'trencher' was placed. The poet-speaker elaborates, giving a detailed account of rural mealtimes:

Ah! I do mind en in the hall,
A-reachèn all along the wall,
Wi' us at father's end, while tother
Did teäke the maidens wi' their mother;
An' while the risen steam did spread
In curlèn clouds up over head
Our mouths did wag, an' tongues did run,
To meäke the maidens laugh o' fun.
(stanza, 1, lines 7-14).¹³

A sense of community prevails in this stanza over any preoccupation of rural poverty, or of the bovine table manners of the labourers described by Jefferies.

In stanza two the poet-speaker describes his Tudor oak bedstead. It is very dark 'black an' bright', with a pair of figures on the head board. His clothes are stored in 'cwoffers', or large chests, handed down from generations or 'kinsv'ok dead an' out o' mind' (stanza 2, line 12). The oak, which symbolises the continuity of rural life, is again emphasised. In the final stanza, however, the poet-speaker acknowledges that times have changed. He makes no attempt to reconcile the traditional with the modern, or to acknowledge that all cultures evolve. Instead he simply states:

Along the dell, vrom tree to tree,
Vrom Woodcomb all the way to Lea;
An' woak wer all vo'k did auvword,
Avore his time vor bed or bboard.
(stanza 2, lines 19-22).¹⁴

There is a poignant sense of regret in these lines that the days of oak will never return. Paradoxically, in emphasising this regret Barnes suggests that rural culture is old-fashioned and decayed, and confirms the middle-class stereotype of the rural labourer who is resistant to change. In creating a modern versus tradition antithesis in his poem, Barnes

¹² 'Review,' *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1844.

¹³ Barnes, *Poems*, 206-7.

¹⁴ Barnes, *Poems*, 206-7.

resists the assimilation of traditional rural life with urban culture. Barnes's stance can be viewed as Darwinian. In a 'survival of the fittest' scenario, the newer, faster culture is bound to win, yet Darwin asserted that such change occurred only very gradually. He wrote:

I look at the geological record as a history of the whole imperfectly kept, and written in a changing dialect; of this history we possess the last volume alone, relating only to two or three countries. Of this volume, only here and there a short chapter has been preserved; and of each page, only here and there a few lines. Each word of the slowly-changing language, in which the history is supposed to be written... may represent the apparently abruptly changed forms of life, entombed in our consecutive, but widely separated formations.¹⁵

Darwin used the metaphor of the gradual development of language to discuss the process by which evolution occurred over time. This idea of gradual adaption and assimilation suggests a fusion of the old and new; in the context of poetry, such adaptation would facilitate new modes of expression that do not automatically disregard old cultural forms. It is the possibility of merging the traditionally rural with modern urbanism which Hardy expresses in his poetry and which enables him to experiment with language. Hardy fuses dialect and standard English to create a hybrid language that reflects the transitional phase between tradition and modernism, meaning that his language is characteristic of nineteenth-century culture.

In contrast to Barnes, Hardy's mother did not permit him to speak dialect in the home. Hardy frequently heard dialect, however, when his father addressed his employees and at the village school which he attended.¹⁶ Hardy also contributed dialect words to Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* and to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Like Barnes, Hardy had an immense interest in language and in the philological theories of the time.¹⁷ His ability to code-switch between languages is indicated in his poetry, where he employs dialect and standard words together, often within the same phrase or line. This linguistic fusion suggests a self-conscious understanding of language, which perhaps arose from his ambivalent class position.

In his poem 'Silences', included in the volume *Winter Words in Various Moods and Metres* (1928), Hardy recalls the past rural culture. The first stanza reads:

There is a silence of a copse or croft
When the wind sinks dumb,
And of a belfry-loft
When the tenor after tolling stops its hum.
(stanza 1, lines 1-4).¹⁸

Where a sense of community pervades Barnes's poem, Hardy's is characterised by an immense emptiness. A death-like stillness pervades the poem; there is silence in the copse

¹⁵ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 229.

¹⁶ Millgate, *Biography*, 30-1.

¹⁷ See Dennis Taylor, *Hardy's Literary Language and Victorian Philology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 96-172.

¹⁸ Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001), 865-6.

or croft, and, in stanzas two and three, silence surrounds a desolate pond and the deserted house. The poet-speaker returns to his family home and attempts to assimilate once more with his past culture, but the human inhabitants have been silenced. An eerie quiet surrounds the pond in stanza two, ‘where a man was once drowned’, and the ‘music strains’ of the inhabitants of the house in stanza three are now inaudible to the poet speaker. The rural past is presented as a lost culture, which is entombed and irrecoverable to the modern world: or so it seems, until a closer look at the language of the poem reveals an alternative perspective. Hardy’s poem is not a dialect poem in the overt sense. Instead, it contains dialect words, sparingly used, which indicate Hardy’s affinity with his rural labouring-class origins. For example, ‘There is a silence of copse and croft’ in stanza one instantly places the poem in the rural periphery. Both ‘copse’ and ‘croft’ originate in Old English, and indicate the longevity of rural culture. Similarly, in stanza three the poet speaker asserts:

But the rapt silence of an empty house
Where oneself was born,
Dwelt, held carouse
With friends, is of all silences most forlorn!
(stanza 3, lines 3-4).¹⁹

Here ‘dwell’ and ‘carouse’ indicate the varied history of English. ‘Dwell’ is derived from Old Norse *dwellen* and ‘carouse’ from Middle French *carouser*. These words, which were imported to Britain following the Viking and Norman invasions, remained entrenched within the Dorset dialect. It is not just the poet-speaker who returns to his origins in the poem; the language Hardy employs similarly returns to some of the earliest recoverable roots of the English language.

Hardy’s approach did not find favour with critics. For example, the literary critic William Archer proclaimed that:

Mr Hardy seems to lose all sense of local and historical perspective in language, serving all the 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.²⁰

Mainstream literary critics were unable to accept literature that combined peripheral language with standard language. It seems to have been felt that, in order to assimilate fully with the urban centre, the regionalist poet needed to disregard his native dialect in favour of the standard language of the dominant culture. This might result in a loss of self-identity. Hardy’s assimilation of both languages asserts the equal validity of dialect and standard English, and is dramatised by the poet-speaker in his poem. He assimilates rural and urban culture in two ways: with the culture he has migrated to and through his assimilation back into his native culture. The silence of rural culture in the poem may seem to suggest that he has failed to assimilate and adapt to either. Yet this silence can be understood from the opposite perspective. The voice of the rural periphery lies underneath the silence in a layered presentation of history that contributes to an ongoing present. The postcolonial critic Stuart Hall summarises the process of adaptation and assimilation:

¹⁹ Hardy, *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, 865-6.

²⁰ William Archer, *Daily Chronicle*, 21 December 1898.

Cultural identities come from everywhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in an essentialised past they are subject to the constant ‘play’ of history culture and power.²¹

It is not the separation of the past from the present that constitutes identity, but a combination of elements from past and present. In Hardy’s poem the poet-speaker’s renewed assimilation with his native culture produces a silence waiting to be filled with new cultural remembrances. A similar silence is evident when the migrant attempts to assimilate with, and adapt to, the culture he had migrated to. When speaking of his experiences as a migrant in London, Hardy recalled that the priority was to ‘obliterate his local colour and merge with the type of Londoner as quickly as possible.’²² This personal assimilation enabled Hardy to successfully portray rural culture to an urban audience.

The examination of dialect in the work of both poets demonstrates the process of adaptation and assimilation by individuals and societies, particularly during periods of cultural change. Old identities are retained whilst new identities simultaneously evolve. More research is necessary to establish the extent to which dialect in poetry reflects cultural change. Barnes’s presentation of rural culture attempts to perfect and record every detail of his rural culture. By presenting such a detailed image, Barnes increases the alienation of the periphery from the urban centre. In contrast, Hardy’s linguistic approach, alongside his thematic concern with silence, acknowledges that the rural culture of his childhood has virtually disappeared. Hardy, however, draws an outline sketch of rural life in which the reader is invited to create his own perception of the periphery. This use of silence enables the reader to fill the gaps created by silence, and to produce evolving histories of his or her own.

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²¹ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora,’ in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Harlow: Longman, 1994), 394.

²² Thomas Hardy, ‘Dorset in London,’ in *Thomas Hardy’s Public Voice*, 276-83.

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