Hardy and the Limits of Culturalism

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What are the relations between the mechanical and the natural in Hardy? My question perhaps seems unpromising, possibly even redundant. For if an earlier generation of Hardy scholars recognized in the machine/nature dyad the emblematic expression of one of his great ‘themes’—the depredations of industrialism in a traditional rural culture attuned to the natural rhythms of the land—critics have, by and large, long ceased to discern any such stark dichotomy in his work, tending to dismiss readings which appeal to it as a reductive misapprehension of Hardy’s understanding of the shift into modernity. Raymond Williams’s revisionist reading of Hardy, formulated in the 1970s, has been particularly instrumental in effecting this alteration in critical perspective. For Williams’s Hardy, the modernization of Wessex does not mean the ‘crude and sentimental...rape of the country by the town’ (208). Modernization was, rather, brought about by a complex combination of ‘internal’ as well as ‘external’ factors: by the vicissitudes of economic and social life in the country as well as the pressures of industrial capitalism. Williams argues that the sophistication of Hardy’s social analysis (his careful attention to labour, education, and class mobility in particular) is obscured in any naïvely technologically determinist emphasis on the machine’s part in historical change, or in any ‘discussion of Hardy’s attachment to country life, which would run together the “timeless” heaths or woods and the men working on them’ (203). If Hardy exhibited occasional tendencies towards the latter representation, Williams argues, ultimately he ‘is never very comfortable with it’, always returning in his novels to the interrelations of the land and its inhabitants to ‘mak[e] more precise identifications’ (203).

The authority of Williams’s reading of Hardy has been upheld by the subsequent ‘culturalist’ turn in literary studies—a development for which Williams’s work more generally is, of course, of key importance. Culturalism, arguably the dominant analytical paradigm in contemporary literary studies, holds that texts are constructed by and help to construct—but also often to subvert—their cultural context. Anti-humanist in character, culturalist criticism is dedicated to ideological demystification, seeking in texts both
correspondences with, and resistances to, dominant discourses about class, gender, race, sexuality, and so on: discourses which are culturally and historically contingent, but which assume or insist upon their own self-evidence, their 'naturalness'. The aim of such a criticism is to recognize and point up these contingencies; so that, of course, 'nature' is automatically, permanently under suspicion as a ruse of culture. The entrenched culturalism of Anglophone literary criticism has perhaps precluded much detailed attention to the ways in which, even as they carry out the complex representations which Williams describes, Hardy's texts also often do collapse or at least closely align nature with tradition, and often do posit mechanical modernity as invasive of tradition/nature. Faced with these apparently unsubtle aspects of Hardy's writing, present-day scholarship tends either to pass over them, to locate them as in fact more complicated engagements with cultural phenomena, or to convict Hardy himself of ideological distortion.

In what follows I want to suggest that there is some value in reconsidering Hardy's representation of relations between 'the country and the city', and between the associated binarisms of nature and culture, and body and machine, not in order to attempt the restoration of an old-fashioned organicist reading, but as a way into rethinking Hardy's account of, and relation to, modernity, and the significance of these for our postmodern literary and cultural criticism. Close attention to the way in which Hardy's texts simultaneously insist upon and undermine the binarisms I have mentioned, might, I suggest, encourage us to reappraise the critical purchase of by-now somewhat predictable anti-essentialist and anti-naturalist manoeuvres in readings of Hardy and in literary studies more generally—manoeuvres which, I will contend, are founded on these very binarisms.

For a recent example of these manoeuvres, we might turn to an essay by Jules Law on 'political bodies' in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Like a lot of contemporary criticism, this chapter is organized around a recognizable, almost routine, set of anti-essentialist and anti-naturalist assumptions, according to which the efficacy of any political reading and the diagnosis of any given text's 'genuine' political meanings lie in the location of cultural and historical 'construction'. Law argues that in Hardy's fiction the body is 'an iterative mechanism, constantly reproducing prior meanings through ostensible acts of repetition', acts of repetition that 'both pry open and shut down any space for a genuinely political reflection on social arrangements' (Law 1997, 246). In particular, Hardy tends to refer all manner of 'anomalous social arrangements' to 'Nature', a move which 'threatens to collapse the two sides of the nature/culture distinction' (245). For Law such an impulse can only be regressive: 'genuine political reflection' is found solely in Hardy's representations of a body on which social need is inscribed, a body which 'since it bespeaks its own social construction endlessly,...can ask only for social reconstruction' (268). Nature is excluded from any participation in the urgent negotiations with the social which Law detects in Hardy's novels.