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Hardy and James

Carl J. Weber

AMONG the three-score Thomas Hardy letters now in the Harvard library there are three that deal with Henry James. Two mention him and one is addressed to him. None of the three has, so far as I know, been previously published. The writing of these three letters was dispersed over a period of thirty years, but, taken together, they mark a significant chapter in literary history.

I

The first of these letters was written in 1886, soon after Hardy had finished the composition of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and about the time when he became involved with the writing of *The Woodlanders*. This letter was written to Robert Louis Stevenson, then living in Bournemouth. From this "fashionable watering-place. . . . a Mediterranean lounging-place on the English Channel" (as Hardy came to call it a few years later in Chapter 55 of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*), Stevenson had on 24 August 1885 written to Hardy to propose a call on the Wessex novelist soon after he had moved into his new home, Max Gate, on the outskirts of Dorchester. R.L.S. accordingly called on Hardy on 26 August and then went on to Exeter, where an illness that lasted for some months rendered his earlier return to Bournemouth a physical impossibility. Stevenson eventually managed to get back to the Bournemouth house where he had written *A Child's Garden of Verses*, and there he read the new Hardy novel when it appeared on 10 May 1886.

As soon as Stevenson had finished reading the book, he dashed off a letter to tell Hardy that he had "read *The Mayor of Casterbridge* with sincere admiration," and then asked: "Do you think you would let me try to dramatize it?" Stevenson's inquiry was delayed in reaching the novelist, for just at this time Hardy had left Max Gate and had gone up to London to attend the annual dinner of the Rabelais

Club. Stevenson's letter eventually reached him at the Savile Club. The Savile was not, like the Rabelais Club, merely a dining club, meeting once a year, but a writers' club with a house at 107 Piccadilly. Hardy had been elected to membership in this club in 1878 and to it he usually had his mail forwarded from Dorset. Kipling, in *Something of Myself* (1937), gives us a glimpse of the attractions of this club: "To my great pride I was elected a Member of the Savile [where] . . . I remember much kindness and toleration. There was Gosse, of course, sensitive as a cat . . . Hardy's grave and bitter humour, Andrew Lang . . . detached . . . as a cloud, and . . . scores of other good men. . . ." From this club-house Hardy replied to Stevenson:¹

Savile Club, 107, Piccadilly, W.

7.6.86 [i.e., 7 June 1886].

My dear Stevenson,

I feel several inches taller at the idea of your thinking of dramatizing the *Mayor*. Yes, [do so,] by all means. The story to my surprise, has met with approval from competent critics. The *Saturday [Review]* has thrown cold water on it but then the *Saturday* man into whose hands my books are put has always been saying that my stories are dull. We are up here for a time, and are both so very glad to hear that you are better. Curiously enough your name was on my tongue a good many times last night, at the Rabelais [Club] dinner. Henry James sat next me on one side, and on the other Cotter Morri-son and George Meredith. We were talking of your immense imaginative powers — and wished you could have been there. O. Wendell Holmes was the guest [of honour]. He is not quite used up yet, though I wonder how he stands so much. I have some writing to do whilst in town, and *can't* touch it: it is becoming quite a nightmare. I wish you would write something on the art of criticism. Meredith says somebody who has produced creative work ought to do it — so that the critics may get some rudimentary knowledge of the trade they profess.

Believe me, with kind regards

Yours sincerely

Thomas Hardy.

Several details in this letter invite explanatory comment. The Rabelais Club had been founded in 1879 by Walter Besant "as a declaration for virility in literature." When Robert Browning was invited to join, he was informed (in a letter now in the Browning

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Library of Baylor University, Waco, Texas) that among the "names already inscribed of original members" were Thomas Hardy and Henry James. The first dinner of the club was held in December 1879. The fact that Henry James "sat next" to Hardy marked a habit that began early and continued long. James had, in fact, metaphorically speaking, been sitting next to Hardy for a good many years. Both men had made their literary debuts as anonymous contributors to magazines in 1865. When Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* was published in 1874, James wrote an unsigned review of the novel for the *New York Nation* (24 December 1874). After Hardy was elected a member of the Athenaeum Club in April 1891, he often met James there. On 12 October 1892 the two writers both attended Tennyson's funeral in Westminster Abbey. On 14 July 1908, when Edmund Gosse's son Philip was married to Gertrude Hay in St. Mary Abbots, Kensington, "Henry James sat next me in the church," so Hardy wrote to his wife (see *Dearest Emmie*, London, 1963, p. 72).

As for "Cotter Morrison" (Hardy mis-spelled his name), he was James Cotter Morison (1832-1888), author of *Gibbon* (1878) in the English Men of Letters Series, and of *Macaulay* (1883) in the same series. When we read about Stevenson's "immense imaginative powers" we must remember that R.L.S. had just published *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Oliver Wendell Holmes, visiting in London at the time Hardy wrote, was in his seventy-seventh year. He survived this London visit and lived until 1894.

Hardy's "nightmare" is explained by the fact that *Macmillan's Magazine* had already published the first installment of a new novel, *The Woodlanders*, and Hardy was trying desperately to meet the editor's demand for "copy" for the next installment. Hardy eventually succeeded in getting the work methodically under way, and when a year later Stevenson left England for the last time, *The Woodlanders* was the only book he showed any interest in carrying away with him. He read the novel as he crossed the Atlantic.

The wish that R.L.S. "would write something on the art of criticism" shows us that Hardy was unacquainted with Stevenson's recent essay "On Some Technical Elements of Style" which had appeared in the *Contemporary Review* (April 1885). The reason for Hardy's unawareness is doubtless understandable: he had just then been supervising the finishing touches being put to his new house, Max Gate, and

was at the same time trying to write the last pages of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

Shortly after Stevenson's receipt of this letter from Hardy, the two writers met briefly in the British Museum, but nothing ever came of Stevenson's proposal to dramatize *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

II

In February 1897, just after Hardy had made himself notorious by the publication of *Jude the Obscure*, he was approached by a young painter and sketcher named Will Rothenstein for permission to sketch his portrait. Hardy agreed to sit, saying (in a letter now at Harvard dated 28 February 1897) "I suppose one sitting will be enough?" Hardy thus became acquainted with William Rothenstein (1872-1945). In later years Rothenstein attained distinction as a lithographer, teacher, and author. For fifteen years (1920-1935) he was Principal of the Royal College of Art, and for a part of this time (1917-1926) he was also Professor of Civic Art at Sheffield University. In 1931 he was knighted. Fourteen of Hardy's letters to Sir William Rothenstein are now in the Harvard Library, together with three letters which Hardy wrote to the future Lady Rothenstein. We are here concerned with only one of these seventeen letters.

A year after Rothenstein had made his first sketch of Hardy, he wrote to the novelist to ask his help in finding some lines that would be appropriate to accompany a sketch of George Gissing. Rothenstein had learned from Hardy that he had known Gissing in the early 1880's and that Gissing had visited him at Max Gate shortly after Stevenson's call there in 1885. In soliciting Hardy's help, Rothenstein emphasized his lack of "requisite knowledge" of Gissing's work. Hardy replied:

Max Gate, Dorchester.

24.2.98 [24 February 1898].

Dear Mr Rothenstein:

Strange as it may seem, I have not the requisite knowledge either. But I think I can help you to some one who could supply the lines. I send herewith an excellent little "appreciation" of Mr Gissing's work by Henry James, and I think if you were to ask him he would shape some of the passages into what you require: or allow you to do it yourself. He could do it in a few minutes if he were willing: and certainly nobody else could do it so well.

If he should refuse, I think Mr Clement G. Shorter of the *Illustrated London News* could do something. He knows Gissing very well.

Believe me

Yours truly

Thomas Hardy.

P.S. H. J.'s address is De Vere Gardens; I cannot remember the number.

T. H.

James's "excellent little 'appreciation' of Mr Gissing's work" was "The English Novel and the Work of George Gissing" which had appeared in *Harper's Weekly* 31 July 1897 (XLI, 754). The number of James's house in De Vere Gardens, London, was 34. As early as 13 July 1889 James had invited Hardy to come to this house to dinner — "a modest cutlet," as James put it.

Allen & Unwin of London eventually published (in 1920) *Twenty-four Portraits* by William Rothenstein, in which sketches of Hardy filled pages 68 to 71. Rothenstein sent Hardy a copy of this book; it was item 48 in the 1938 sale of Hardy's library. At present, however, our chief interest in the thirty-year association of the writer and the artist lies in the fact that in 1898 Hardy thought James's "appreciation" of Gissing "excellent" and believed that "nobody else could do so well" a piece of critical writing of that sort.

III

Years passed. In May 1909, when George Meredith died, Hardy was asked to succeed him as President of the Society of Authors. Hardy felt "compelled to decline the honour" (*Later Years*, p. 137), but his objections were in time overruled, and by 1915, when Henry James was appointed to the Order of Merit, Hardy was comfortably installed as President of the Society. It therefore fell to him to send James the official congratulations of his fellow-authors. James eventually received the following letter, now in the Harvard library:

1, Central Buildings, Tothill Street,
Westminster, S. W.

January 10th. 1916.

Henry James Esq., O. M.

Dear Henry James,

I have been asked by the Committee of Management of the Society of Authors, Playwrights & Composers, to convey to you their sincere felicitations on your appointment to the Order of Merit. It is my pleasure, as well as my

duty, at one and the same time, to welcome a new citizen who elected to join our Commonwealth at a season when sympathy and support were eminently grateful, and to acclaim the great and appropriate Honour that has been bestowed upon him. The Society over which I preside is concerned with the prosaic interests of authors rather than with their intimate aspirations, but we are all members of a noble craft; and I venture to say that there is not one among the two thousand five hundred members of this Society who does not feel that he is honoured in yourself, an old and faithful Member of the Society, — and an Englishman by choice.

Permit me to hope that your health which by recent reports has been seriously endangered is now restored. That it may be completely established will be the wish of all our Society.

I remain, with all good wishes,

Most truly Yours,

Thomas Hardy.

The "hope" expressed in the next-to-the-last paragraph of this letter proved vain. Henry James died just seven weeks after the date of the letter, and one of James's biographers has expressed to the present reporter his belief that James was never able to read the "sincere felicitations" of his fellow authors.

The original letter is typed, signed by Hardy on page 2. Anyone familiar with Hardy's usual epistolary style will at once find it difficult to avoid the suspicion that this letter was not really composed by him. Such phrases as "my pleasure as well as my duty," and "at one and the same time," and this "great and appropriate Honour" — none of this sounds like Thomas Hardy, even though the paper bears his unmistakable autograph signature. A visit to the Dorset County Museum in Dorchester, England, where Hardy's correspondence files are now housed, makes it possible to translate suspicion into certainty. One learns that G. Herbert Thring of the Society of Authors wrote to Hardy early in October 1915 to ask him to draft a letter of congratulation to be sent to Henry James, but that on 6 October 1915 Hardy replied that he "could not do it so appropriately . . . as some [other] members of the Society . . . would be able to do. I therefore propose that they draw it up and send it down to me to sign."

Three months passed. Eventually (on 6 January 1916) Thring wrote to Hardy to report that "our Chairman [of Management of the Society of Authors, Stanley Leathes, C.B.] has drafted the enclosed letter" of felicitation to Henry James. Hardy accordingly signed the letter and returned it to London for mailing. The novelist's part in the

letter now in the Harvard library is therefore seen to be confined to the signature.

We are, however, left with the baffling question as to *why* Hardy felt that he could not "appropriately" draft a letter of congratulation to the man who had so often sat next to him. We get a clue when we discover the note that Hardy made — it turned up some years later on page 8 of *Later Years* — in which he referred to James and Stevenson as "the Polonius and the Osric of [English] novelists." Within a few weeks of James's death, Hardy was speaking of him as "a writer who has no grain of poetry, or humour, or spontaneity in his productions," and was preparing to record his memory of James's "ponderously warm manner of saying nothing in infinite sentences."

When the *Letters of Henry James* were published in 1920, the whole world was able to read what Hardy had apparently got wind of at an earlier date — namely, the fact that in 1892 and 1893 Robert Louis Stevenson and Henry James had discussed *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* behind Hardy's back and had agreed that *Tess* was "vile." On 19 March 1892 James had written to Stevenson that *Tess* "is chock-full of faults and falsity." After Stevenson, basking in his haven in the Pacific, had replied in the same tone of condemnation, James wrote again (17 February 1893): "I grant you Hardy with all my heart. . . . But oh yes, dear Louis, she is vile. The pretense of 'sexuality' is only equaled by the absence of it, and the abomination of the language by the author's reputation for style."

Hardy was not one to forget or to overlook words like those. He reacted in what may seem a petty and childish way, but those who knew Hardy well recognized it as a marked characteristic of the man. On 1 May 1892 Andrew Lang, who knew Hardy at the Savile Club, wrote to Edward Clodd: "I am sorry Hardy takes criticism so much to heart. My word, we should cultivate a little stoicism."

But Hardy was no stoic. When, shortly after the publication of the *Letters of Henry James*, he sat down to compose his autobiographical *Early Life* (which when published in 1928 masqueraded as the work of his wife), he wrote (pp. 172–173 in the printed volume) about "the inaugural dinner of the Rabclais Club" in December 1879. Hardy had, we are told, been "pressed to join as being the most virile writer . . . then in London; while, it may be added, Henry James . . . was rejected for the lack of that quality, though he was afterwards invited as a guest."

However, when James attended the Rabelais meetings, he was *not* there "as a guest" but as a regular member. What is more, he was a charter-member. In the publications of the Club he was named in each volume as a member, and in the first volume his name was distinguished by an asterisk to mark him as a charter-member. Hardy had a set of these books in his library at Max Gate; when that library was sold at auction in London on 26 May 1938, Lot No. 23 included the three volumes of the *Recreations of the Rabelais Club* (1880-1888). The charitable reader will try to believe that, when Hardy came to write his autobiography, he remembered James's disapproval of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* but forgot all about his having been a charter-member of the Rabelais Club.

By one of the little ironies of life for which Hardy always had an alert eye, he left in his correspondence files upon his death in 1928 the last letter he had received from Henry James. In this letter, dated 10 August 1915, James spoke of "your so fine stanzas" in the poem "Cry of the Homeless" which Hardy had (at James's request) contributed to Mrs. Wharton's war-relief fund-raising *Book of the Homeless* — stanzas which, said James, "make me so dreadfully aware of *my* mere flapping voluminous verbiage."

Colby College

Professor Carl J. Weber died on 18 December 1966, shortly after this article had been accepted for publication. At 72 he was still a productive scholar, and it is evident that his interest in Hardy was undiminished.