‘VOICES FROM THINGS GROWING IN A CHURCHYARD’: HARDY’S VERSE ON BOTH SIDES OF THE GRAVE

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The scenery of Hardy’s verse is one of moors, lonely houses, roads, and churchyards – places that usually bear a strong personal implication for the poet. They are places of the past, spots in mythical Wessex that need revisiting, a set of stumbling stones for the gaze to rest on, and for memory to open. Yet as such, they also stand as places of emptiness: they mark for the poet the absence of the loved ones from his current life, from the present time. The series of poems to his dead wife Emma, *Poems of 1912-13*, reveals this idea that death empties places, both emotionally and physically. Thus the acute pain of the dead woman’s absence is directly imparted to the places husband and wife used to share.

In ‘The Going’ (*CP* 277) the poet is drawn outside by the memory of his wife:

> Why do you make me leave the house
> And think for a breath it is you I see
> At the end of the alley of bending boughs
> Where so often at dusk you used to be;
>
> Till in darkening dankness
> The yawning blankness
> Of the perspective sickens me!

The hounding alliterative insistence speaks out for the violence of the meeting with the void of absence, which could also evoke the mere black emptiness of the grave (‘darkening dankness’) and the obliteration of the fall into the unknown that is death (‘yawning blankness’). The sickness the poet feels is that of dizziness, of literal vertigo when facing the depths of absence. In ‘The Walk’ (*CP* 279) the poet returns from his usual solitary walk, and feels that it is the very rooms of the house that have changed quality since Emma died:

> I walked up there to-day
> Just in the former way;
> Surveyed around
> The familiar ground
> By myself again:
> What difference then?
> Only that underlying sense
>
> Of the look of a room on returning thence.

The quality of that change is not explained, the actual aspect of that room and the poet’s feelings when entering remain implicit. Yet the language makes it clear that the change is both imperceptible and powerful – ‘underlying’: the meaning is to be found in poetic expression, in the brooding, ominous length of these last two lines, and the weight

of the syntax as the repeated 'of' seems to echo in the empty room. Dennis Taylor, in *Hardy's Metres and Victorian Prosody* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), also considers that the form of the poem itself speaks for the woman's absence:

> The second stanza repeats the form of the first stanza [...] but with an added self-consciousness, the difference of surveying the familiar ground, that is, seeing the familiar form as a remnant impression. Thus the stanza form is like the familiar room to which Hardy returns [...]. The stanza-formed language is itself the 'difference' between the experiences recorded in the first and second stanzas. The stanza wears the sense of being looked up, for a sign of what remains. (pp.176-7)

As the loved ones disappear, houses empty, but churchyards become populated: it is beside graves that the poet will try to fill in the gaps of absence, re-enacting the journey of the loved ones from house to churchyard, and thus transferring the quality of home onto the grave. In 'Rain on a Grave' (*CP* 280), instead of merely wishing his wife were alive, the poet considers the possibility of exchanging places with her: 'Would that I lay there/ And she were housed here!' The equivocal references of the adverbs *here* and *there* help to create a mirror effect between the two locations, as if true comfort lay solely in the grave.

The same ambiguity rules the ironic poem, 'Paying Calls' (*CP* 454):

I went by footpath and by stile
    Beyond where bustle ends,
    Strayed here a mile and there a mile
    And called upon some friends.

On certain ones I had not seen
    For years past did I call,
And then on others who had been
    The oldest friends of all.

It was the time of midsummer
    When they had used to roam;
But now, though tempting was the air,

    I found them all at home.

I spoke to one and other of them
    By mounds and stone and tree
Of things we had done ere days were dim,

    But they spoke not to me.

J.O. Bailey suggests that '[t]he ballad-like meter of 'Paying Calls' helps to domesticate death' (*The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), p.400). Indeed, the mere synecdoche 'mounds

and stone and tree' is enough to confirm that the friends are in fact 'at home' in their graves. The poet as visitor of churchyards is also in turn 'visited' by the memories of the lost ones, as the poem 'His Visitor' (*CP* 286), namely Emma, shows. Haunted by ghosts (Emma is also 'The Haunter', *CP* 284), the poet himself becomes a haunter of churchyards and of moors, *haunting* being a recurrent synonym for *wandering* in Hardy's poetry.

Thus, the boundary between the living and the dead is gradually diminished as the poet's gaze comes closer to the tombstone. Developing Michel Collot's ideas on the '*structure of horizon*', it seems that what attracts the eye and the mind most intensely in the landscape is its dark side, its hidden spots, what can neither be seen nor grasped in it: 'The modern experience of landscape tends to dwell on some unfathomable depth that cannot be the object of any true perception. What attracts in the horizon is not what it brings to the eye, but the fact that it opens up space boundlessly onto the invisible.'[1] It is thus not surprising that Hardy's poetry should dwell in churchyards: by focusing on the power of graves as embodiments, as tangible traces of the lost ones, the poet reveals their essential ambiguity, their position in-between the visible and the invisible, pointing at the porosity between life and death, presence and absence: 'That "core of absence" lodges deep at the heart of every presence; the invisible is inscribed in the very texture of the visible, inseparably so, like both sides of the same thing.'[2]

Across the threshold of the grave, the dead in Hardy's poetry mark their presence mostly by making themselves heard: their *voice* is precisely what juts out from the other side of the picture onto the *décor* of the living, leaking out through the porous tombstone. A textual and therefore disembodied voice is indeed a paradox in itself. This is what Pierre Iselin describes: 'as a sign *in absentia*, the voice is a fiction of presence, the sign of a body which has been, and which is coming back. [...] It is an instrument of mediation, and therefore works primarily as passage, interface, boundary between the spheres of the inner and the outer, expression and communication, and is defined contrastively.'[3]

The poetic voice is indeed a sign of that 'in-betweenness', because in Hardy's impressive collection of almost a thousand poems, that voice is never fixed on one identity, never stable. Bringing the dead into the realm of the living, as a form of death in life, voices rise out of silence mostly through the numerous *personae* that populate Hardy's verse – men or women, animal or vegetal, animate or inanimate
(e.g. the musings of a *sundial* in 'The Sundial on a Wet Day', *CP* 788), and of course living or dead.

Emma, the mourned wife, is heard constantly throughout Hardy's poetic work; she is indeed not only the 'Visitor' and 'Haunter', but she presents herself to the poet most powerfully as 'The Voice' (*CP* 285), to whom the speaker asks: 'Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me', 'Can it be you that I hear?' And, indeed, several poems have Emma for a speaker, addressing her husband, though he does not always hear her, as we shall see. Other dead speakers offer a much more unexpected type of voice. Such is the case in the explicitly titled 'Dead Wessex the Dog to the Household' (*CP* 907), in which Hardy's dog addresses his masters after his death: 'Do you think of me at all,/ Wistful ones?' The subjective contrast between the third-person title and the homo-diegetic voice of the dog in the body of the poem, points at the poet's emotional involvement, but also at his artistic and metapoetic awareness. In addition to the porosity of the grave, this poem thus signals the fundamental quality of poetry as a porous

threshold of voices, where identities necessarily weave through one another.

Another favourite device of Hardy's, that echoes the voices of the dead, is the use of epitaphs and funerary inscriptions. These indeed seem to be speaking the dead's voices directly from beyond the grave, and they constitute a physical, tangible mark of the porosity between life and death. However, epitaphs in Hardy's verse are of a kind which would definitely not match Wordsworth's 'notion of a perfect Epitaph', such as he gives in his essay on the subject, 'Essay Upon Epitaphs' (in *Poetry and Prose* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1967), p.616). Where Wordsworth pleads for simplicity of text and author, Hardy offers subjective and ontological ambiguity. Indeed, his work shows that the case of funerary inscriptions is itself uncertain, for they participate both in the instillation of death into life and of life into death. Are they voices of the dead speaking in the realm of the living – the tombstone thus literally speaking the beloved's presence – or voices of the living trying to experience death beforehand? Such is precisely the unfortunate case of the woman who has her name engraved on the brass of her deceased husband's tombstone in 'The Inscription' (*CP* 642) – an impulsive gesture that will only bring regret and cause her to lose her sanity: 'For she bonded her name with his own on the brazen page/ As if dead and interred there with him, and cold, and numb.' The description of the plaque as a '*page*' clearly echoes the poet's own attempt to tame death by writing himself dead while still alive in the short poem 'Epitaph' (*CP* 659):

> I never cared for Life: Life cared for me,
> And hence I owed it some fidelity.
> It now says, 'Cease; at length thou hast learned to grind
> Sufficient toll for an unwilling mind,
> And I dismiss thee – not without regard
> That thou didst ask no ill-advised reward,
> Nor sought in me much more than thou couldst find.'

... *continued in the journal.*