

This is an uncorrected version of the piece published as: Tim Armstrong, 'Thomas Hardy: *Poems of 1912-13*'. *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Neil Roberts (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 359-68.

Thomas Hardy's 'Poems of 1912-13'

The 'Poems of 1912-13' are a sequence of elegies which Thomas Hardy wrote after the sudden death of his first wife Emma on the morning of 27 November 1912. They describe her death, Hardy's reaction, and his visit to the scenes of their courtship in Cornwall the following March. The original sequence, published with other groups of poems in the first edition of *Satires of Circumstance* (1914), comprised 18 poems. Five years later, in the Wessex Edition and *Collected Poems* (1919) Hardy altered the sequence, placing three poems which had previously been outside it at its end, as well as making a number of other small revisions cumulatively suggestive of a greater distance from the material. If *Satires of Circumstance* is arguably not, overall, Hardy's strongest volume of poems – most critics would award that prize to *Moments of Vision*, which followed in 1917 – the 21-poem arrangement which crystallized as the 'Poems of 1912-13' remains one of the greatest and most personal elegiac sequences written in English, offering a substantial revision of the elegiac tradition for the twentieth century, as well as a uniquely honest image of the poet struggling with his own grief and remorse.

Love's Ashes

Emma Hardy died suddenly, though given how little he and his wife seemed to have had to do with each other by 1912, Thomas Hardy may well have been inattentive to signs of just how serious the illness arising from her gall-bladder complaint was. And that is one of the problems that the sequence addresses: Emma's death forced Hardy to confront not just death, but the extent to which, over the course of a long marriage, the passionate early love celebrated in his romance novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1872) had itself cooled. In the 1890s, in particular, the couple had drifted apart, Emma becoming increasingly religious and scandalized by his iconoclastic late novels, and Hardy enjoying flirtations with other women (at the point of Emma's

death he had a clandestine connection with Florence Dugdale, who was to become the second Mrs Hardy in early 1914). Emma's death thus represented a double challenge and a double grief, confronting Hardy with the truth of his marriage. This is reflected in the structure of the sequence (discussed below), in Hardy's use of both Emma's autobiographical writings (later published as *Some Recollections*) and *A Pair of Blue Eyes* to recall the sites of his courtship, and in the richly suggestive Virginian context which Hardy evokes in the sequence's epigraph, *Veteris vestigia flammae*.

Veteris vestigia flammae are the words spoken by Dido, Queen of Carthage, in Book IV of Virgil's *Aeneid*, describing how the capacity to love which had died with her husband Sychaeus is reawakened by the visiting Trojan hero Aeneas – who is, of course, shortly to abandon her, prompting her suicide. Her words have been variously translated: 'the sparkles of my former flame' (Dryden); 'the signs of the old flame' (Mandelbaum); but perhaps also 'the traces of an old fire', since *flammae* can mean either fire or ashes, and *vestigia* can signify a mark, trace, even the track of a footstep. Hardy's epigraph itself asks questions about the status of remembered passion. The words position Hardy as Dido, falling in love again. But they also imply an accusation in which he stands in the place of Aeneas, standing before Dido's mute accusing shade during his visit to the underworld in Book VI. The underworld motif suggests another mythic subtext, more explicitly alluded to in a later poem 'The Shadow on the Stone': the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, of the singer who must attempt to rescue his beloved from death. This in turn suggests one of the greatest mysteries of these poems: the question of just *why* Hardy feels such passion for the dead? – a question which seems to refer us to his individual psychopathology, the unique mixture of 'distance and desire' described by J. Hillis Miller, but which also surely relates to the fact that he had already written the story of his romance into *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, and given it there a tragic ending, and was now confronted by his own plotting.

As Donald Davie brilliantly pointed out, the Virgilian context is also evoked by the 'purples' which 'prink' the main in 'Beeny Cliff', the poem in the sequence in which Hardy most explicitly returns to the scenes of courtship (it is subtitled 'March 1870—March 1913'):

A little cloud then cloaked us, and there flew an irised rain,
And the Atlantic dyed its levels with a dull misfeatured stain,
And then the sun burst out again, and purples prinked the main.

In the 1895 Preface *A Pair of Blue Eyes* the same 'bloom of dark purple cast' is described, and in chapter 4 (in quotation marks) Hardy writes of 'the purple light' which surrounds its protagonists, referring, Davie argues, to the *purpureus* of Virgil's underworld. Later commentators have argued that this is more directly the 'purple light of love' of Thomas Gray's ode 'The Progress of Poesy'. But Virgil lies behind that reference as well, and Davie is right to stress that the Virgilian context pervades the novel and the sequence, and that the epigraph echoes across Western tradition. Virgil's words are translated by Dante at the climactic moment of the *Purgatorio* in which Beatrice replaces Virgil as Dante's guide: recognising her, Dante says *conosco i segni dell' antica fiamma*. Hardy as Dido driven wild by passion; Hardy as the Aeneas who betrays; Hardy as Aeneas/Orpheus in the underworld; Emma as the lamentable ghost of Dido/Eurydice or as the redemptive guide Beatrice leading him through the topography of the past – all these positions are called up and interrogated. When Hardy writes 'Through the years, through the dead scenes I have tracked you; / What have you now found to say of our past – / Scanned across the dark space wherein I have lacked you?' ('After a Journey') he evokes the *vestigia* (tracks) of the epigraph, Aeneas's confrontation with the unanswering ghost of Dido, and Dante's passage through Hell and Purgatory .

The most important question raised by the epigraph, for Davie, is whether the space which the epigraph opens for us is metaphysical or psychological. For Davie the three poems added at the end of the sequence in 1919 represent a betrayal of the powerful affirmative vision of 'At Castle Boterel', turning metaphysical insights into mere moments in the psychology of grief. Other commentators on the sequence have seen this process as inevitable, as necessitated by the rhythms of mourning. But Davie's own scheme also implies a counter to the visionary Platonism he sees in Hardy: the *vestigia* of the epigraph are worked into the formal closure of 'Where the Picnic Was', when Hardy returns to the Ridgeway above Portland and stands in the circle of charred embers – the ashes from an old fire – and sees the devastation for what it is. Moreover Hardy's eros is imbued with death, its 'dark space' recalling the tormented topography of Dante's hell – the purple and black air which Dante calls *perso*, and the sleety rain of Canto 6 (which Hardy marked in his *Inferno*) – as well as the Elysian Fields of classical epic.

Hardy and the Elegiac Tradition

Davie's claims about the 'Poems of 1912-13' hinge on two issues: on the question of what elegy is *for*; and on the valency attached to particular moments in the sequence rather than on its total shape. Recent criticism on the elegy has focussed on the way in which it completes what Freud terms 'the work of mourning', that is a complex process in which the experience of death, initially overwhelming, is worked-through to a point of resolution and achieved distance. That process is typically seen as involving a repeated confrontation of loss; anger and perhaps denial; a recapitulation of the relationship with the dead; the creation of a satisfactory internal image of the dead; and a giving up of the dead to the larger forces of nature – with each of these moments of mourning having formal or topical equivalents in the elegy. The point of a poetic sequence, rather than a single elegy, is that it 'freezes' moments in the mourning process, allowing them to be explored.

This psychological reading – which Davie rejects, as we have seen – is exemplified by Peter Sacks in *The English Elegy*. Sacks represents the 'Poems of 1912-13' as marking a break with the traditions of the genre, refusing of at least substantially deferring the consolation it offers: 'In few other elegies', he writes, 'has the poet gone so far to undermine his own identity or had to fight so desperately for his own survival' (p.244). Sacks points out that the difficulty is partly the ground on which memory must be recovered: in fictionalizing Emma in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, Hardy had in a sense already displaced her – and indeed his two protagonists see her dead at the end of the novel, mourned by her husband. Moreover if the elegist must do battle with Time, which takes away the dead, Hardy's own typical poetic stance is uncomfortably close to Time's. How can he seek 'That time's renewal' ('The Going') if he depicts himself as simply an isolated observer of 'Time's derision' ('After a Journey'), and as an atheist without even Tennyson's attenuated hope of an audience with the dead?

Another problem is simply the difficulty of Emma's legacy. When she died, Hardy found a vituperative diary reportedly called 'What I Think of My Husband'. He burnt it. What of *these* ashes? We might see them as haunting the second poem of the sequence, which ends 'Yet abides the fact, indeed, the same, – / You are past love, praise, indifference, blame.' The halting penultimate line stutters into a truncated series: if 'indifference' is the middle term and 'praise' and 'blame' are conventionally balanced, then the occluded final term of the series is 'hate'. If he refuses the word here, there is nevertheless a great deal of aggression in some of

the poems: in the projected anger of the opening complaint, 'Why did you give no hint that night ...?'; in the depiction of Emma 'shut' and 'powerless' in her grave in 'Lament'; in the bitter irony of a fashion circular addressed to one 'costumed in a shroud' in 'A Circular' (though in this poem the irony also rebounds on the author sending his letters to the dead); even in the trampling of the sticks of the fire in the closing poem. Those we mourn for take themselves violently from us, and one response for the elegist is the exercise of power over the dead or over a portion of the self attached to them. The bitter shift in tone at the conclusion of 'St. Launce's Revisited' – 'Why waste thought, / When I know them vanished / Under earth; yea, banished / Ever into nought!' – represents this impulse, and the negatives here are echoed throughout the sequence (the words 'not', 'nought', 'nobody', 'never', 'none' constantly return).

The 'Poems of 1912-13' also incorporate and trope on elements of elegiac tradition. The subgenre of the 'domestic elegy' has origins in the seventeenth century, but it is only in the nineteenth century that it loses its theological frame and takes on a personal specificity and a psychological realism. Hardy's immediate precursor is Coventry Patmore in *To the Unknown Eros* (1877), a sequence addressed to a dead wife (his opening poem directly borrows from Patmore's 'Departure'). Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is also, clearly, a model, with its sense of mourning as extended struggle. But Hardy's elegies are harsher than most of his models, as Sacks points out. Where he uses the traditional elements of elegy, for example references to the cycle of the seasons, flowers on a grave, and Emma as a child in 'Rain on a Grave' and 'I Found Her Out There' (all recalling Wordsworth's 'Lucy' poems), these references are followed by the stilted and almost parodic formality of 'Without Ceremony', with its bland suggestion that Emma's sudden death was simply a form of bad manners. Where he finds memories of Emma written into in the landscape of some of the central poems of the sequence, he also registers the Cornish landscape's indifference in 'A Death-Day Recalled' and points out that Emma's ghost will itself have to 'creep underground' from Dorset to Cornwall. The gaps which the elegist must close are always on display in Hardy, and most strikingly of all, it is only very late in the sequence, with its thirteenth poem 'After a Journey', that he moves unequivocally beyond the depressive position of the man who mourns without hope.

One other way in which Hardy shifts the emphasis of elegy is in his use of a hugely varied metrical and technical repertoire, in contrast to the measured and

solemn stanzas of Gray and Tennyson. The metres of the 'Poems of 1912-13' range from the labouring fourteeners of 'Beeny Cliff's' rhyming triplets, seeming to imitate the waves of 'that wandering western sea', to the tripping pitter-patter of the irregular two-beat lines of 'Rain on a Grave', littered with feminine endings and double-rhymes. 'The Voice' is a brilliant exploration of carefully adjusted (and revised) sonic effects, from its echoing triple-rhymes ('call to me / all to me') to the broken metre of the final stanza, marking the poem's collapse into solipsism and doubt. 'After a Journey' is, Dennis Taylor suggests, 'perhaps his most metrically interesting poem', with its ambiguous scansion and its complex rhyme-scheme (*Hardy's Metres*, p.82). To expend such poetic labours on the dead is not a matter of tribute or self-display; rather it implies a sense of form close to that of modernist poetry, in which that which is described or expressed dictates the mode of expression. The poet's restless dealings with loss and landscape and his sense of the inadequacy of all formal consolation are both reflected in the variations in form, even within individual poems.

The Structure of the Sequence: Time and Place; Voice and Vision

The other important issue in Hardy's sequence is its overall shape. The sequence is structured around a series of geographical, temporal and perspectival 'contrasts' (the harsh word used in 'His Visitor'). Those include the contrast between Dorset ('here') and Cornwall ('there'), with Plymouth, the setting of 'Places', as a point of mediation; and the corresponding contrast between present or recent past (in Dorset and then the trip to Cornwall) and the distant past (in Cornwall). There is a contrast between old-Emma and young-Emma in their respective places, and (less marked) between Hardy and his younger self. Finally, in terms of perspective the poems in Hardy's voice are occasionally replaced by those in which he ventriloquizes Emma's – though in a ventriloquy which never moves from soliloquy to dialogue. These contrasts are not static: the sequence develops *through* them, moving from Dorset to Cornwall and back, from present to past and back, and shifts its emphasis in other ways: from collapse and stasis to distance and movement; from voice (or the absence of voice) to vision and the memorialized image of the beloved.

In the early poems, Emma's death and its aftermath is treated, and the poems represent the frozen and fractured states of grief. Death is alternately

denied, internalized ('I seem but a dead man held on end'); the self alternately vacated or wounded and defended. The poems restlessly move between the recent past and the present, seeking to trace clues of Emma's death. When Hardy does move on, it is in the conventionalities of 'Rain on a Grave' (the only poem in the sequence with no negative terms), followed by 'I Found Her Out There', in which the possibility of a shift in focus to Cornwall is broached for the first time. But that move is delayed as Hardy returns to poems dealing with the aftermath Emma's death, including for the first time poems in which her voice is imagined. 'The Haunter' represents a ghost whom the poet cannot see, who must beg the reader to act as intermediary: 'Tell him a faithful one is doing / All that love can do'. 'All that love can do' is a line from Swinburne's cynical 'Félise', which Hardy knew very well indeed. Swinburne writes: 'Though love do all that love can do, / My heart will never ache or break / For your heart's sake.' The old Emma appears, then, deflecting the possibility of a harsher voice, insisting on love's endurance. But hers is a voice which, as the next poem demonstrates, is uncertain in status, too close to the fluttering sounds of the wind. 'The Voice' contrasts a dubious sound ('Can it be you that I hear?') with a desired image of an earlier self ('Let me view you, then'). The Emma it wishes to recover is described in a temporally convoluted phrase as 'Saying that now you are not as you were / When you had changed from the one who was all to me'. But the voice of an earlier self is not easily imagined, and seems to dissolve into the poems windy sound effects, leaving the poet 'faltering forward' in the halting final stanza. It is unsurprising that the next poem, 'His Visitor', returns to the everyday voice of the older Emma making a final visit to Max Gate: with her departure to join the 'mute' voices of the dead, Hardy is finally free to imagine a move to Cornwall in 'A Dream or No'.

He arrives there in 'After a Journey', the fulcrum-point of the sequence, and surely in itself one of the greatest elegies of the twentieth-century. The poem as we have it begins with an abandoning of voice. 'Hereto I come to interview a ghost', he wrote in early versions, before crossing out this opening line and substituting 'Hereto I come to view a voiceless ghost', reducing even the possibility of interchange. Voice here bound up with image and landscape:

Yes: I have re-entered your olden haunts at last;

Through the years, though the dead scenes I have tracked you;

What have you now found to say of our past –

Scanned across the dark space wherein I have lacked you?

A voice which must be 'scanned' is a textualized voice; and Hardy was reading *Some Recollections* and *A Pair of Blue Eyes* as he wrote. But 'scanned' also suggests scansion, and as Matthew Campbell argues, the poem's heavy rhymes suggest a poet who must recognise a non-responsiveness in the dead, and move on (p.230). 'After a Journey' is a poem which admits the loss and damage which comprises the 'dark space' of experience; indeed that loss is carried in its cruel rhymes ('tracked you / lacked you'; 'division / derision'). But grief can be mastered, partly because what he seeks is two ghosts, not just one: the young Emma, and the ghost of his own earlier self in 'the spots we knew when we haunted here together'. After the uncertainty of the first stanzas, Emma becomes his guide, and the ashes of love are rekindled as he hears the cave

with a voice still so hollow
That it seems to call out to me from forty years ago,
When you were all aglow,
And not the thin ghost that I now frailly follow.

This is to admit that both he and the ghost are frail, transient; and even to admit that what he seems is a willed illusion (what is this but another version of Plato's parable of the cave?). But movement has finally replaced stasis, and a negotiation of past and present has replaced their frozen opposition. In the opening poem Hardy had asked why they did not revisit Cornwall when Emma was still alive, 'And ere your vanishing strive to seek / That time's renewal?' There he had declared 'All's past amend / Unchangeable'. Here, he says 'Soon you will have, Dear, to vanish from me', restaging her departure and declaring that he is willing to experience this encounter again, that in this place he is 'the same' as he once was, and can carry that continuity within himself.

The extent to which this vision is tied to place is underscored by both 'Beeny Cliff' and 'At Castle Boterel', the latter Hardy's most impassioned recollection of the young Emma and himself on his early visits to St. Juliot. Here he can assert the absolute significance of what he remembers:

It filled but a minute. But was there ever

A time of such quality, since or before,
In that hill's story? To one mind never,
Thought it has been climbed, foot-swift, foot-sore,
By thousands more.

The next stanza inscribes that memory, as if into the fossil record, in the 'primaeval rocks' which border the road. As Sacks notes, he has again forgone voice (what we talked of / Matters not much') for a memorial sign, 'recorded' in the stone like the memorial which Hardy later had erected in the church at St. Juliot. The poem acknowledges that the rocks have seen much of 'the transitory', but Hardy is nonetheless willing to assert the *quality* of what he experienced, and what he now records. The vision of Emma here his last: it is Orphic, over the shoulder ('I look behind at the fading byway'), finally leaving Emma's image amidst the rainy gloom of what seems close to an underworld.

The original sequence ended with 'The Phantom Horsewoman', which offers an externalized description of Hardy which some readers mistakenly see as being in Emma's voice. But that voice, as we have seen, has vanished from the sequence (even if it returns in the distanced allegory of one of the three added poems, 'The Spell of the Rose'), and what we are offered in 'The Phantom Horsewoman' is a distanced view of Hardy himself. The vision of Emma here is more psychologically located ('in his brain'), but the poem's main function is to complete the turning away initiated by 'At Castle Boterel': Hardy 'turns to go' in the opening stanza, carrying his vision with him 'far from this shore'; Emma, at the end, 'Draws rein and sings to the swing of the tide'. The poem is replete with closure and reversal: in its final reference to a stabilized and portable image of Emma; in its top and tailed form; but also in its reversal of figures seen earlier in the sequence. In the opening poem he had recalled that she 'reining nigh me / Would muse and eye me'; here it is she who is seen 'as when first eyed'. In 'After a Journey' he insisted that he remained 'the same'; now we read 'He withers daily / Time touches her not / But she still rides gaily / In his rapt thought'.

These reversals suggest an important truth about the poems: that the closest that they can get to interchange is the rhetoric of chiasmus, of crossing and reversal. As David Gewanter has pointed out, Hardy often had to settle for the dead letter of Emma's notebook were he would have wished for a live voice ('Places', the poem between the visionary pairing of 'At Castle Boterel' and 'The

Phantom Horsewoman', is quite directly worked up from *Some Recollections*; 'Beeny Cliff' borrows most of its details and descriptive adjectives – purples, rain-showers, bulking cliff, nether sky – from chapter 21 of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*). Moreover the 'frail ghost' he follows is contaminated with old-Emma, with lost time. 'Calling for the girl by means of the woman,' a compromised voice entwines itself through his discourse. Radically, Gewanter suggests it is the encounter with old-Emma rather than the wispy ghost which provides the real energy of the sequence. It is perhaps for this reason that the first poem added in the sequence in 1919, 'The Spell of the Rose', is in the voice of the mature Emma, using the figure of the memorial rose to call for a posthumous understanding and reconciliation in a way which is reminiscent of the artful ghosts and oppositional rhetoric of Christina Rossetti. This version of Emma seems to understand at least as much as the poet does.

The final two poems reinforce the sense of closure, 'St Launce's Revisited' admits a previously suppressed negative moment into the original pilgrimage to the Cornish coast. Finally, 'Where the Picnic Was' returns to the winter scene in Dorset and, as we have seen, surveys the burnt stick-ends, ritually closing the eyes of the dead. Hardy describes himself as 'last relic of the band / Who came that day', making himself one of the *vestigia*, a carrier of traces (and a 'band' is also a circle, like the 'burnt circle' of fire). The cycle of experience represented in the sequence is closed in a final act of reading, completed with a wintry stoicism.

Within Hardy's corpus, it is Emma's death which is the event which makes him as a poet, which is at the core of what Dennis Taylor calls his 'apocalypse', including as well the Great War – an apocalypse in which the pattern of his loss is preinscribed and fulfilled in a pattern of belated recognition. Some of the issues raised in the sequence are only resolved in later poems, notably the great wind-and-water series of *Moments of Vision*. The late Hardy achieves a freer relation to memory and the dead. But it is the intensity and immediacy of the 'Poems of 1912-13' which give them their power, as well as the honesty with which Hardy faces up to his own evasions. He may dissemble in saying that he had no hint that Emma was unwell, he may efface his own duplicities in his marriage, but that dissembling is presented to us for judgement; like the 'look of a room on returning thence' described in 'The Walk', the empty spaces and negations of the poems speak to us.

The final significance of 'Poems of 1912-13' is in its legacy. Hardy engages in a dialogue with the elegiac tradition, but in such a way that the limitations of its formulae are exposed, its redemptive baggage cast aside. In the elegiacs of the poets

who follow – in Owen, Auden, Berryman, Lowell, Sexton, Heaney, Douglas Dunn, Tom Gunn, Amy Clampitt, Sharon Olds and many others – the elegy is more more varied in form and tone, whether ironic, confessional, reticent, or gothic; whether addressing the dead or the reader. The Victorian spectacle of Tennyson reading the rolling, consoling stanzas of *In Memoriam* to his monarch is banished, and death's rituals are rendered a more personal, and more problematic quest.

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