Haunted Silences in Hardy's Works: Voice from beyond the grave

Gadoin Isabelle

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Isabelle Gadoin

***Isabelle GADOIN** est MCF HDR à l'université de Paris 3-Sorbonne Nouvelle, où elle enseigne la littérature, l'art anglais et la traduction. Elle est l'auteur d'une thèse sur les « Structures spatiales dans les romans de 'caractère et d'environnement' de Thomas Hardy : espace représenté et espace représentant », soutenue à l'université de Paris 3 – Sorbonne Nouvelle. Sa recherche porte sur la question de l'espace, des structures visuelles et des processus de la perception dans l'œuvre de Thomas Hardy, et plus largement sur les problématiques liées aux relations entre texte et image dans les œuvres littéraires. Elle a publié de nombreux articles sur Thomas Hardy, ainsi que le livre « Far from the Madding Crowd : Thomas Hardy entre convention et subversion », Paris : CMED/PUF, 2010.*

L'article s'attache au thème, central dans l'œuvre poétique de Thomas Hardy, de la méditation sur la tombe—qui s'inscrit dans la lignée de la fameuse « Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard » de Thomas Gray, d'où Hardy tira le titre de son roman Far from the Madding Crowd. A partir d'une lecture rapprochée de l'élégie de Gray, l'article tente de dégager les lignes de continuité entre les deux poètes, pour montrer comment les positions agnostiques et désabusées de Hardy l'éloignent en fait de la tradition élégiaque, et de la croyance consolatrice en une possible immortalité, conférée par le processus mémoriel et poétique. Dans ses poèmes, l'inscription sur la pierre tombale se voit répétitivement effacée ou occultée ; et dans ses romans, le repos dans la tombe, de même que l'épitaphe louangeur, semblent refusés aux héros tragiques, qui disparaissent sans laisser ni trace ni postérité. L'une des rares exceptions à cette règle est Fanny Robin, dont le cas est étudié ici en détail. Pourtant, seul capable de lutter contre l'inéluctable effacement des êtres par le temps, le poète sait communier silencieusement avec les disparus, et perpétuer leur voix, et leurs appels, qui résonnent à ses oreilles attentives par delà la tombe.

In one of the entries of his notebooks dated 1917 Hardy recalled his capacity to register striking scenes or events, and store them safely away in his imagination for later use: "I have a faculty (possibly not uncommon) for burying an emotion in my heart or brain for forty years, and exhuming it at the end of that time as fresh as when interred". The quotation is very well-known, and has often been used by critics, such as Ian Ousby in his article on 'Past and Present in Hardy's 'Poems of Pilgrimage'', to underline the poet's "habit of meditation on the past" (Hardy quoted by Ousby, 51). Yet what is most striking in Hardy's metaphor is that the past is not gone and lost, but may be brought back to some actuality by the poet's talent for freezing emotions into arrested and arresting images,

and bringing them back to life after a while. The sentence is also unexpected in that this work of active recovery of impressions is not defined as a visual one, as might well have been expected, nor one linked to the movement of memory. It is expressed in a sentence insistently playing on the theme of the *grave*. In Hardy's words, vivid impressions are "buried", or "interred", only to be "exhumed" again at the end of some time, which implies a strange understanding of the mind as a grave, or of the heart as a tomb – but a tomb which is far from empty: it is filled with emotions, tense with meanings, and ready to yield again the secret of things seen and felt, resurrected as "fresh" as ever…

For all its surprising imagery, the sentence might help us interpret so many moments of Hardy's novels and poems which present themselves as meditations on a tomb. But in these texts the tomb or the churchyard is not the place for a 'dead' silence. On the contrary it seems to ring with the voices of the deceased, whose call is both faint, impalpable, ghostly, and at the same time irresistible – probably all the more irresistible as it will take no answer. One of Hardy's best-known poems, appositely entitled 'The Voice', expresses the paradox of this call of the dead (*Complete Poems*, hereafter *CP*, 346). The piece was written after the death of his first wife Emma, from whom the poet has been estranged for a long while. Her disembodied voice ringing from beyond the tomb is insubstantial, ethereal, and literally goes with the wind, as suggested by the 's' and 'w' sounds, which seem to hush that voice and make it nothing more than a breath, or a breeze:

> Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness,
> Travelling across the wet mead to me here,
> You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,
> Heard no more again far or near?

This voice which sounds as hardly more than a whisper is nonetheless also absolutely compelling, and comes as a haunting repetition that frames the poem from line one ("how you call to me, call to me") to the very final words ("and the woman calling").

I would like to try and suggest that the silence of the tomb, or of the churchyard, far from preventing any type of communication, may actually be the conductive medium that allows the communion between the living and the dead. For, as the poet puts it in 'Nature's Questioning': "Life and Death are neighbours nigh" (*CP*, 67). I shall start with an investigation into one of the possible sources for this strange interest in the voices of the dead, that is Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', to then go on with a very brief look at the treatment of the tomb in Hardy's novels and poems; and from there I will try and show that the silent communion with the dead in Hardy's work, while probably owing a lot to Gray and the 'Churchyard Poets', widely differs in both tone and intention.

It is well-known that the title of *Far from the Madding Crowd* was suggested by a line of stanza nineteen in Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (published in 1751)

> Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
> Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
> Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
> They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

That silence should be mentioned in the same stanza as Gray's ideal of a retreat away from the madness of urban and modern life (with the "noiseless tenor" of the dead men's ways), should not mislead us. For the poem actually begins with a vivid evocation of all the natural sounds of rural life at sunset, starting with the famous curfew that "tolls the knell of parting day" (line 1). The first three stanzas go on listing all the last muffled sounds of a world preparing to go to rest, and those of the animals, birds and insects belonging to the realm of night: "The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea" (l.2), "The beetle wheels his droning flight, / And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds" (stanza 2, ll.7-8), "The moping owl does to the moon complain" (stanza 3, l.10). These waning sounds serve to usher in the world of darkness and repose and, paradoxically, to underline by way of contrast its complete silence: "And all the air a solemn stillness holds" (stanza 2, l.6).

The poem then goes on as a meditation on the humble villagers buried in this country churchyard. These, the poet muses, may have had heroic qualities and may have harboured in their minds and hearts thoughts and feelings as noble as the greatest of this world. But they were prevented from showing their finer metal by the vicissitudes of their lives. The poet ponders on the cruel continuity of their destiny, which keeps them just as obscure in their death as they were in their lives. Indeed their tombs are silent, being devoid of any sculpture and ornament, and bearing but a few words apart from their name and short biblical lines. Stanza 20 evokes their "frail memorial[s]", only decked with "uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture" (stanza 20, l. 78-79). Thus no one will

remember or praise those dead, whose fate is to remain forever unspoken and unknown, or in the poet's words, "to dumb forgetfulness a prey" (stanza 22, l.85). To these silent tombs, the poet opposes those of the wealthier, with their grandiose funeral monuments and their pompous epitaphs, the use of which he immediately questions. Such grandiloquence is useless since all men, rich and poor, will equally end as mere dust: "Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust, / Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of death" (stanza 11, l.45). This line might already stand as the morality of the tale: over all men, whatever their condition, silence will finally triumph.

But this is the point when the poet introduces a twist in his meditation. It seems that he cannot resist the "dumb" call of those unknown dead, whose fate is so unfair and gripping that it becomes almost vocal in its speechlessness: to the passer-by, their "frail memorial" seems to "*implore* the passing tribute of a sigh" (stanza 20, l.84, emphasis mine). As the poet speculates on this state of neglect and erasure, the silence of the humble tombs progressively appears as fraught with meaning: it betrays the force of indifference or of repression that has wiped out the story of these lives… and of these deaths. It is this unspoken message which is intuitively caught by the sentient poet: "E'ven from the tomb the voice of Nature cries" (stanza 23, l.91). Responding to this silent "voice of Nature", the poet is going to supply the praise those humble dead were denied; and the Elegy ends on three stanzas explicitly entitled "epitaph". These concluding stanzas offer a strangely anti-heroic tribute, first written on the negative mode, in honour of an anonymous youth whose virtues and merits were *not* disclosed or rewarded. He remained "to Fortune and to Fame *un*known", and "Fair Science frowned *not*" on his birth (emphasis added). But the last lines of this "epitaph" do offer a comforting promise. For God will recognise as his children these inglorious and neglected beings; and some day will come when they find themselves reunited with the Divine Creator.

That Hardy had an intimate knowledge of Gray's 'Elegy' is made obvious not only by the title of his 1873 novel, but also by an indirect reference in his text to the line "E'en in our ashes live their wonted fires". More generally, Hardy is interested in the same type of obscure, unacknowledged heroes as Thomas Gray – common rural folk in whom is suddenly revealed "a gem of purest ray serene" ('Elegy', stanza 14, l.53). When reading his novels, one may be struck by the fact that most of his protagonists are denied a memorial worth the name. The tomb is either absent or illegible, and the tragic heroes tend to simply disappear from the stage, like Giles Winterborne who dies away from the eyes of all in the woods of Hintock, and is only mourned by Marty South. The process of silent erasure is even more blatant in Tess's case, since her death is only signalled by the black flag that is slowly hoisted at the top of the prison's ugly square tower, under the eyes of Angel and Liza-Lu, then described as "speechless gazers" (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles,* 420). The materiality of the tomb is replaced by the symbolic sign waving in the wind, as if to abstract rather than assert a presence – be it that of death. Contrary to her noble ancestors sleeping on in their ornamented tombs beneath sculpted vaults, with their proud inscription reproduced in Gothic lettering in the text "*Ostium sepulchri antiquae familiae D'Urberville*" (*Tess,* 384, italics mine), Tess will *not* be given a proper burial place. In truth, this confiscation had been ironically foreseen with the death of her child, Sorrow, who was not allowed anything better than a stealthy burial in a distant corner of the village churchyard with a makeshift cross made up of two branches, and a few flowers in a jar bearing the inscription "Keelwell's Marmalade" (*Tess,* 110). It is difficult to believe there is no sarcasm in this parody of a funeral inscription that seems to point indirectly at a society and a religion that "kill well"…

The best example of this silent disappearance though is provided by Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, who explicitly asks for his person to vanish without a trace, for his name to be forgotten and, in real tragic fashion, that the rest be silence (*Mayor,* 409)... His will orders:

> […] that I be not bury'd in consecrated ground
> & that no sexton be asked to toll the bell.
> & that nobody is wished to see my dead body.
> & that no mourners walk behind me at my funeral.
> & that no flours be planted on my grave.
> & that no man remember me.
> To this I put my name.
> Michael Henchard

Jude too dies alone, away from any comfort, and is returned to the obscurity he had tried to combat; but in his case, one might say that he has spoken his own epitaph himself, by reciting from the book of Job: "*Let that day be darkness; let no God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it. Lo, let that night be solitary, let no joyful voice come therein […] Why died I not from the*

womb? […] Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, ad life unto the bitter in soul?" (*Jude the Obscure*, chapter XI, 484-491, italics Hardy's).

Even when the tomb is well and truly present, and offers a site for a "meditative reverie" on the finitude of life and glory (Taylor 1973, 263), as is so often the case in Hardy's poems, it is hardly ever scrutinised in detail or read clearly. Rather, the tomb stands as a silent witness to the thousand aggressions of a cruel weather and an indifferent Nature. Under the effect of wind, rain, snow, frost and the numberless other forms of attack of natural forces, the stone itself is slowly eaten away, as if no more able to withstand the passing the time than mortal human flesh. In 'Rain on a Grave' (from the well-named collection 'Satires of Circumstances'), as well as in 'During Wind and Rain' (from the later 'Moments of Vision'), the poet takes up the image, also used in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, of the water whose "continual dropping will wear away a stone—nay, a diamond" (*Tess,* 385). The affront is not only to the silent stone, but more cruelly to the woman lying within, whose sensibility and daintiness are now ignored and symbolically injured:

> Clouds spout upon her
> Their waters amain
> In ruthless disdain,—
> Her who but lately
> Had shivered with pain
> As at touch of dishonour
> If there had lit on her
> So coldly, so straightly
> Such arrows of rain (*CP,* 341)

The tomb is thus no protection, nor comfort. It is submitted to the same process of erasure as men themselves, as clearly dramatised in 'The Obliterate Tomb', which is doomed to disappear within the works of restoration of the old church where it lies, and be trodden upon by "unknowing" strangers: "it stood still / Wasting in no man's care. / And so the tomb remained / Untouched, untended, crumbling, weather-stained" (*CP*, 386-87).

More significantly still, what will disappear when the stone starts wearing away is the *name* carved upon it. The inscriptions on tombstones are either made indecipherable by interposed veils of frost, mists or raindrops, as in 'During Wind and Rain': "Down the carved names the rain-drop ploughs" (*CP* 496). Or they are purely and simply wiped away by the passing years, as in 'The Obliterate Tomb':

> By these late years their names,
> Their virtues, their hereditary claims,
> May be as near defacement at their grave place
> As are their fames.
> […]
> Their names can scarce be read;
> Depend on't, all who care for them are dead (CP, 384, 387)

The irony is that the more material part of a human being – that is, old bones – will remain, while ruthless time will obliterate the more personal part – his or her proper name, thus putting an end to any possible salvation in the memories of the living.

Far from the Madding Crowd seems to bring a stark refutation to this demonstration however. It is one of the very few examples in which the reader is allowed to read in full the inscription on a tomb, while Bathsheba meditates on her husband's headstone (*FFMC,* 297):

> ERECTED BY FRANCIS TROY
> IN BELOVED MEMORY OF
> FANNY ROBIN,
> WHO DIED OCTOBER 9, 18—,
> AGED 20 YEARS
> […]
> IN THE SAME GRAVE LIE
> THE REMAINS OF THE AFORESAID
> FRANCIS TROY,
> WHO DIED DECEMBER 24TH, 18—,
> AGED 26 YEARS.

In this particular instance, though, one may wonder whether the logic of the case is not entirely reversed. It is precisely because Fanny's existence, as well as that of her child, have been consistently *erased* all along the novel (Gadoin, 43-49), that they may be allowed to be spoken, and re-instated at last at the very end. Even before she dies, Fanny's presence seems to be systematically negated or "cancelled", in Rosemarie Morgan's words. She is associated with landscapes of utter blankness, like the "dreary" prospect surrounding the Casterbridge Barracks in which she first appears, hardly visible at first, since thickly falling snowflakes veil and dissolve all forms and features (69-70). The "penumbrae of night" (202) similarly prevail over her last walk towards the Poorhouse – literally a way of the Cross, complete with its painful stations and compassionate helpers, albeit in the demeaned form of an errant dog… Finally, it is the association of snow, mist and the shadows of night that composes the opaque spectral atmosphere in which Joseph Poorgrass drives her coffin home (217). In all three descriptions, Hardy works hard at making us see the very conditions of Fanny's invisibility, her very shape being systematically effaced in a "monochrome of grey" (217).

More interestingly, the erasure of the body goes along with the silencing of her name. In the scene at the Casterbridge Barracks, she is presented as only a "shape", a "spot", a "figure", or at best a "speaker", before Troy at last identifies her as "Fanny" (71). But the recognition is short-lived, and when the deserted girl again comes to cross Troy and Bathsheba's way in chapter XXXIX, Troy answers his wife's question "What is her name?" with a cowardly evasion: "How should I know her name?" (202) This strikes the key for the following chapter, which relates the poor girl's agony on the road to Casterbridge without *once* identifying her by her proper name: she is then reduced to the anonymous status of "the woman", "the pedestrian", "the girl", to end up as "the prostrate figure" – almost anticipating the image of the dead body lying in the grave. This symbolic "erasure" of identity will find its appropriate materialisation when Gabriel Oak, in a most significant gesture, "rubs out" the mention of the child from the lid of Fanny's coffin (224). But this act of erasure is not only the consequence of men's refusal to face the moral consequences of their acts; it seems that the forces of nature also conspire at times to wipe out any trace of men's lives and misdeeds. And the episode in which the furious torrent of water thrown by the church gargoyle sweeps away the careful arrangement of flowers upon Fanny's grave only seems to repeat, but with a vengeance, Hardy's favourite image of the rain falling on tombs and obliterating not only the names of the deceased, but any sign of accomplishment whatever.

Under that light, it might seem as mere poetic justice that Fanny's name should finally be *carved* on the marble stone for the eyes of all to see, thereby putting an end to the hypocritical repression of the image of the fallen woman by too narrowly moral a society. Contrary to many other protagonists of Hardy's novels, Fanny *will* in the end exist and persist as a name on a stone. And we may wonder whether her true "revenge" is not here, in the defiant proclamation of the long-"defaced" name, rather than in the famous moment of disclosure of Troy's betrayal, with the opening of the coffin (in chapter XLIII, entitled 'Fanny's Revenge'). It is also rather apposite that the shameful lovers should finally be reunited in the selfsame grave, on Bathsheba's initiative. The relationship which Troy had tried to silence all along is thus made vividly visible – another of Fanny's symbolic return to existence.

And yet even then, one has to recognise that the scene in which Bathsheba and Gabriel are shown *reading* Fanny's name and epitaph at last and remembering the past is not devoid of ambiguity. Indeed the words of homage carved on the tomb on Troy's orders may also seem to carry a faint ring of irony. For Fanny's status as Troy's "beloved", as proclaimed by the memorial stone he paid for, was only won after her death, and clearly *because* of her death; and his so-called "loving" memory came belatedly indeed, according to the famous Hardyan "too late" complex... All of this may give a slightly bitter flavour to those simple words, which only form the degree zero of an epitaph… Fanny's case is a most complex one indeed, in that it departs from the global Hardyan logic of heroes returned to "silent dust" in a "neglected spot", and only welcome by the "dull cold ear of Death", in Thomas Gray's terms.

These ambiguities in Hardy's approach of death and remembrance are encapsulated in one of his poems, entitled 'While Drawing in a Churchyard' (*CP,* 491), which seems to hold extremely close relationships with Gray's 'Elegy' – so close indeed that we may wonder whether Hardy was merely developing Gray's central idea in order to provide some pessimistic variant on the theme of the meditation on a tomb, or whether his poem is not to be read as a satirical, or at least as a disillusioned, rewriting of Gray's work.

"It is sad that so many of worth,
Still in the flesh," soughed the yew,
"Misjudge their lot whom kindly earth
Secludes from view.

"They ride their diurnal round
Each day-span's sum of hours
In peerless ease, without jolt or bound
Or ache like ours.

"If the living could but hear
What is heard by my roots as they creep
Round the restful flock, and the things said there,
No one would weep."

"'Now set among the wise,'
They say: 'Enlarged in scope,
That no God trumpet us to rise
We truly hope.'"

I listened to his strange tale
In the mood that stillness brings,
And I grew to accept as the day wore pale
That show of things.

From Gray's 'Elegy', Hardy seems to borrow the images of the yew tree and the old beech "wreath[ing] its old fantastic roots" among the graves ('Elegy', stanza 26, l.102), as well as the "stillness" that prevails all around. But beyond this, Hardy seems to take his cue straight from Gray's capital line "E'en from the tomb the voice of Nature cries". Indeed, what Hardy does is to literally give a voice to the yew tree planted by the side of a grave. It is the tree that overhears and then repeats the whispers of the dead in their coffins. In a series of embedded voices, the yew tree and then the dead themselves express their opinion in direct speech, as pointed by the declarative formula "they say" in stanza three. Hardy bets on straightforwardness, and has the trees and old bones voice their "strange tale" themselves, whereas Gray resorted to mediation and the intervention of his poet-narrator to "relate" the rustics' "artless tale"… The difference between the two approaches is already hinted in the very titles of the poems: while Gray offers an elegy *written* after a failed attempt to *read* the mute headstones in a country churchyard, Hardy contents himself with listening to the spectral voices calling from beyond the grave.

Hardy's poem is just as short and terse as Gray's 'Elegy' was ample and slow-moving. And it radically, and most provocatively, reverses Gray's message. The lament here is no longer that of the passer-by who is moved to give a song of praise to the obscure dead, but on the contrary, that of the bodies lying in the grave, who deplore the mistaken assumptions of the living, on a mode that paraphrases the cliché of regret – saying in substance "if they only knew" ("If the living could but hear"…). For those who are still alive ignore the type of absolute and soothing repose to be found at last in the grave. And the tender embrace illustrated by the roots of the yew tree intertwining almost lovingly with the remains of the dead ("creep[ing] round the restful flock") suggests a return and a reintegration of all living elements with Mother Earth. The grave is, therefore, not to be feared and lamented but rather to be accepted philosophically, as Hardy's narrator finally resolves to do in the last lines: "I grew to accept as the day wore pale / That show of things".

But there is more to it than this sole reversal of points of view. In Hardy's poem, the dead merely aspire to *remain* where they are, and certainly not to rise again on God's call on the Day of Judgement or Resurrection. This is the most provocative statement of the whole poem: the "wise" are those who bluntly refuse the promise of an afterlife.

> 'Now set among the wise,'
> They say: 'Enlarged in scope,
> That no God trumpet us to rise
> We truly hope.'

In an extremely Hardyan type of irony, the stanza reverses the very definition of "hope": for these "restful" dead, the only "hope" in fact lies in the negation of *Christian* hope – that of life eternal in the skies… The concluding stanzas of the two poems thus stand in stark contrast. Whereas Gray

represented the unknown youth waiting in "trembling hope" for the ultimate reunion in "The bosom of his Father and his God", Hardy suspends his sceptical meditation on the idea of a new "*show* of things"—which might in the end prove to be nothing more than a superficial vision, or a very partial understanding of the enigmatic ways of the world…

Because Hardy refuses to believe in a possible afterlife, death might appear as frighteningly final, as he very forcefully asserts it in the closing lines of 'A Sign-Seeker': "And Nescience mutely muses: When a man falls he lies" (*CP,* 50). The remark is echoed and amplified in the poem 'To Outer Nature' (*CP,* 61) which shows the ineluctable rule of nothingness after death, rendered by the striking compound "darkness-overtaken": "Things / Cease to be things / they were in my morning".

> Fad'st thou, glow-forsaken,
> Darkness-overtaken!
> Thy first sweetness,
> Radiance, meetness,
> None shall re-awaken.

In the poem 'The Impercipient' (*CP,* 67-68), the narrator is amazed at seeing the unwavering faith of whole congregation gathered at a "Cathedral Service", but he concludes unmoved that the true rest is to come – probably in the silence of non-existence: "Enough. As yet disquiet clings / About us. Rest shall we". The tone of utter finality would suffice here to negate any possibility of an "after" whatever, and therefore of any hope… As John-Paul Riquelme has clearly demonstrated, "Hardy's transformations of poetic traditions [as Thomas Gray's for instance] result in arresting elegies that are in salient ways both anti-elegiac and unconsoling (Riquelme, 205). "Those elegies, or poems of mourning in response to a loss, are regularly anti-elegiac […]. They recognise that loss as irreversible" (Riquelme, 214).

Nevertheless, in spite of this extremely strong sense of an ending to human life, the process is not *entirely* final. To the poet's acute perceptions, something indeed may ring from beyond death, and a strange sense of communion may arise from the contemplation of the tomb. This intuition organizes the whole scenario of the poem entitled "Her immortality" – a phrase that might at first puzzle the reader acquainted with Hardy's beliefs (or in point of fact disbelief!). But the whole poem works to explain what this "immortality" is. Passing by a green pasture where he last saw his beloved alive, the narrator is for a short while tempted to commit suicide. But he is stopped at that point by the voice of the girl, crying out from beyond the grave, in direct speech once again. She entreats him to do no such thing, because his death would definitely annihilate the only thing that still remains of her: her memory, that lives on within the man's mind (*CP,* 55-56).

> […] "Think, I am but a Shade!
> A Shade but in its mindful ones
> Has immortality;
> By living, me you keep alive,
> By dying you slay me.
> 'In you resides my sole power
> Of sweet continuance here;
> On your fidelity I count
> Through many a coming year"

Hardy's loss of faith, which might explain the harrowing silence that prevails in his churchyards and over his tombs, is therefore counterbalanced by his deep humanism, and his implicit eulogy of compassion. In this poem, the desperate lover *is* himself the girl's "immortality", not abstract but embodied, alive and burning. He is the one who will give her an extended lease of life, merely by going on thinking of her and treasuring her memory, as he comes to understand and accept it in the very last stanza (*CP,* 56), when he concludes this unspoken dialogue by saying in turn:

> […] When I surcease
> Through whom alone lives she,
> Her spirit ends its living lease,
> Never again to be!

In his sceptic, agnostic way, Hardy may be giving here a new definition of the *soul*, as that part of a human being which survives in the minds, and above all in the hearts, of the living. Critics have very often underlined the spectral quality of Hardy's poetic vision. But in those examples it is not so much a "surviving image" that remains (to borrow the terms of the French critic George Didi-Huberman, in *L'Image survivante*) as a "surviving voice", the voice of "continuance" as the girl puts it

in the last poem quoted – a voice that refuses to fall within blank oblivion and goes on calling to those who may still feel.

This process might of course be understood very simply as the poetic trick of personification, and more precisely of prosopopoeia, which consists in giving a voice to the dead. But I have the feeling that in Hardy's conception the silent dialogue with the dead is far more than a mere poetic trope or a figurative effort. It has to do with a certain quality of intense perception and instinctive participation "into the life of things", to take up Wordsworth's words. In the last instance quoted, only the lover and the poet, whose senses are sharpened and made especially receptive by the intensity of either their feelings or their sensibility, could catch the message of the dead girl while gazing at the "heated sod"… Only because of his capacity to commune with the world of things is the poet able to seize upon the faintest signs, and make silence resonant, and even vibrant with the souls of the departed… In his article on 'Thomas Hardy and the Language of the Inanimate', Satoshi Nishimura insists on the poet's ability to play on words so as to animate or revive things or beings – or, to come back to our starting words, to "disinter", or "exhume" buried emotions: "the act of writing consists for him [Hardy] not in representing an existing reality with language, but in using language as the medium through which to call a reality into being" (Nishimura, 911). While on the whole agreeing with this statement, I would insist on the particular sharpness of the poet's sensations to begin with. Even *before* giving a tongue to the invisible or the inaudible, he has to act as a "Sign-Seeker", and to be "*percipient*" enough to catch all the most minute signs of Nature through the depths of silence.

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