

1-1-1992

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Recommended Citation

Duckworth, William C. Jr. (1992) "Evoking Emma in "Poems of 1912-13"," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 10 , Article 15.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol10/iss1/15

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EVOKING EMMA IN "POEMS OF 1912-13"

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Emma Lavinia and Thomas Hardy grew more and more estranged during the last half of their thirty-eight-year marriage, and Hardy showed his disappointment in ways that were painful to Emma. When she died suddenly in November 1912, he was surprised to be devastated by remorse and desolation. He responded by writing a group of elegies which are remarkable for their compelling evocation of Emma and of their courtship and which have been called Hardy's best poems.¹ Several of the most vivid of these "Poems of 1912-13," as Hardy called them, owe their striking character to his use of the involuntary memory, which Marcel Proust describes as the principal source of artistic expression. Hardy's view in writing these poems seems to be more closely related to Proust's concept that art is a revelation of life than to Matthew Arnold's dictum that poetry is a criticism of life. Hardy's earlier view, as expressed in his essays as well as in his fiction and his poetry, had been closer to that of Arnold, but in "Poems of 1912-13" he moved away from a view of art as a representation of life and toward a more modern view. This paper relates Hardy's artistic purpose in these poems to Proust's purpose as expressed in *Remembrance of Things Past* and points out several examples of Hardy's use of the involuntary memory in them.

Bjork points out the strong impression made on Hardy by the literary criticism and social criticism of Matthew Arnold.² In "Apology," a preface to *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, Hardy cites with approval Arnold's assertion that poetry is the application of ideas to life.³ Most of Hardy's early poetry seems to conform to this definition, which emphasizes the practical aspect of poetic composition rather than the subjective aspect which is the source of Proust's idea that art is a direct view of reality. However, even while praising Arnold's principles, Hardy also entertained the idea that a novel is "a picture of life in action"⁴ and that poetry is a revelation of life, not a criticism of life.⁵

So these were not new ideas which sprang up in Hardy's head in 1912. But neither the novels nor the poems written before that time reflect the idea of art as a revelation of life. Irony is perhaps the most striking characteristic of Hardy's novels and of his poetry before "Poems of 1912-13." Hynes says that in "The Convergence of the Twain" "the force of irony is so strong and so manifest as to function as a kind of

malign force"⁶ and this force is felt in Hardy's novels also. E. M. Forster holds that Hardy in his novels places too much emphasis on plot: "Hardy arranges events with an emphasis on causality, the ground plan is a plot and the characters are ordered to acquiesce in its requirements."⁷ These plots, like many of Hardy's poems written both before and after "Poems of 1912-13," are constructed with ironic twists which forbode impending doom.

Although "Poems of 1912-13" deals with a devastating personal loss and makes use of irony, one does not sense its presence as a malign force because Hardy's artistic purpose and technique here differ from his artistic purpose and technique in the novels and in much of the poetry. His conception of art when he wrote "Poems of 1912-13" was closer to Proust's idea that art is the expression "of reality as we have felt it to be," rather than as we have conceived it to be. References in "Poems of 1912-13" to deeply felt memories of actual experiences and to remembered objects and the visions which these memories produce stir the feelings of the reader and heighten the verisimilitude.

In "Poems of 1912-13" Hardy also makes use of the involuntary memory, a phenomenon universally experienced but first analyzed in detail as a literary technique in *Remembrance of Things Past*. Miller,⁸ Robert,⁹ and Mein,¹⁰ as well as Hardy himself,¹¹ note similarities in Proust's and Hardy's novels. As Mein says, it is impossible to conclude with certainty that one influenced the other, but parallels abound. Of course it is unlikely that Proust influenced "Poems of 1912-13," since the first volume of *Remembrance of Things Past* was published only in November, 1913. Before comparing Hardy's aesthetics with Proust's, it will be helpful to consider the use of the involuntary memory in *Remembrance of Things Past* and in "Poems of 1912-13."

According to Proust, the voluntary memory, through which one calls to mind at will past feelings or events, depending on the "arid intelligence," recalls images selected by the will for a "utilitarian, narrowly human purpose." But if a noise or scent or other sensuous impression, which has been felt in the past, is felt again in the present and simultaneously recalled as occurring in the past, then "the permanently concealed essence of things regarding the past is liberated" and "our true self is awakened and reanimated."¹² In *Remembrance of Things Past* the awakening is sometimes accompanied by a strong feeling of pleasure, while in "Poems of 1912-13" it is often accompanied by a sharp feeling of grief.

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The involuntary memory enables the narrator of *Remembrance of Things Past* to recover the past. It is illustrated many times in Proust's work, the first, and therefore perhaps the best known, illustration being the taste of a *petite madelaine* dipped in tea, which restores to the imagination of the narrator his life at Combray (I 48-51). Other examples of the evocation of the involuntary memory occur when the narrator steps on two uneven paving stones in the courtyard of the Guermantes, recalling a visit to the baptistry of St. Mark's in Venice; when a servant accidentally knocks a spoon on a plate, reminding the narrator of a trip on a train; and when he wipes his mouth with a napkin having a texture identical to that of one he used while standing in front of a window opening on the beach of Balbec (III 898-901).

A striking example of the involuntary memory, and one useful for the present purpose because it deals with the death of a family member, concerns the narrator's recovery of the memory of his grandmother. He had just arrived at Balbec for a vacation. In his room, bending down to remove his boots, the narrator says:

I was shaken with sobs, tears streamed from my eyes. The being who had come to my rescue, saving me from barrenness of spirit, was the same who, years before, in a moment of identical distress and loneliness, in a moment when I had nothing left of myself, had come in and had restored me to myself...I had just perceived, in my memory, stooping over my fatigue, the tender, preoccupied, disappointed face of my grandmother, as she had been on that first evening of our arrival, the face not of that grandmother whom I had been astonished and remorseful at having so little missed...but of my real grandmother, of whom, for the first time since the afternoon of her stroke in the Champs-Élysées, I now recaptured the living reality in a complete and involuntary recollection. This reality does not exist for us so long as it has not been recreated by our thought...and thus...it was only at that moment—more than a year after her burial...that I became conscious she was dead. (II 783)

In *Remembrance of Things Past* it is always a sensory stimulus which awakens the involuntary memory, as the examples cited above reveal. A sensory stimulus sometimes stirs Hardy's involuntary memory, but reverie also is an important spur. After Emma's death Hardy discovered among her papers seventy-four handwritten pages which she called *Some Recollections*, describing her childhood and youth and her courtship with Hardy. The tone is nostalgic, without

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reference to the division between Hardy and herself. In telling about their courtship, Emma recalls many of the incidents which Hardy recounts both in "Poems of 1912-13" and in his autobiography. This similarity is not coincidental, for in March 1913 Hardy returned to the scene of their courtship, Cornwall, deliberately immersing himself in an atmosphere which provoked memories of Emma, and aiding the recovery by reading *Some Recollections* during his visit. Evelyn Hardy notes in her introduction to this work that Emma's memoirs reveal "that rare thing, the direct inspiration for some of the most beautiful and best-known lyric poems in the language."¹³ This deliberate evocation of the involuntary memory is a creative process described by Wordsworth: "The emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind"¹⁴ In "Poems of 1912-13" it is Emma's nostalgic and unresentful narrative which has jogged Hardy's involuntary memory. Eight of the "Poems of 1912-13" are dated, and three of these bear the date March 1913—the month of Hardy's sentimental journey.

An impressive example of the involuntary memory in Hardy's poem "Under the Waterfall" (CP 276) is pointed out by Mein. This is the poem which precedes "Poems of 1912-13" in *Complete Poems*. The speaker is a woman who tells about a picnic at which she and her lover had dropped a tumbler into the water beneath the waterfall. The lovers made several futile attempts to retrieve the tumbler by reaching beneath the surface. Now whenever she plunges her arm into water, she recalls the picnic with her lover. This incident, like many described in "Poems of 1912-13," actually occurred¹⁵; many of the poetic visions actually are summoned up by remembrance of things past. As Miller¹⁶ says, Hardy's memory restores the past. His literary genius then enables him to express the restored reality "as he felt it to be."

It is not surprising that evidence of involuntary memory should be found in "Poems of 1912-13." In his first novel, *Desperate Remedies*, Hardy noted that "the beautiful things of the world become more dear as they elude pursuit,"¹⁷ so his vision of Emma became more real, more penetrating, and dearer as she eluded his pursuit in Cornwall. The similarity of his longing for Emma after her death to Proust's longing for his grandmother in the passage quoted above is striking. Miller notes that both Hardy and Proust felt that frustration was a prerequisite for love.¹⁸ "Love lives on propinquity, but dies on contact," said

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Hardy (*Life* 220). Thirty-eight years later he quoted Proust: "Le désir s'élève, se satisfait, disparaît — et c'est tout" (*Life* 432).

In the first of the poems, "The Going" (*CP* 277), the involuntary memory is triggered by a shadow at dusk, which, "for a breath," the poet mistakes for Emma:

Why do you make me leave the house
 And think for a breath it is you I see
 At the end of the valley of bending boughs
 Where so often at dusk you used to be. (15-18)

Hardy refers to this experience in a letter of 7 December 1912,¹⁹ where he says that "the saddest moments of all are when I go into the garden and to that long straight walk...where she used to walk every evening just before dusk." Since almost everyone has "thought for a breath" that he glimpsed a familiar face, this feeling is easily understandable and the description is effective. When the poet realizes the error "The yawning blankness/ Of the perspective sickens me" (20-21). The poem ends:

...O you could not know
 That such swift fleeing
 No soul foreseeing
 Not even I — would undo me so! (39-42)

Here Hardy's involuntary memory is stirred by a familiar walk associated with Emma which restores her living presence to his imagination. In this poem, as in others in this group and in the passage from *Remembrance of Things Past* quoted above, a sensation reminiscent of a past experience or an evanescent image stirs the involuntary memory which suddenly restores the real person. Restoration brings in its train grief or remorse.

"The Haunter" and "The Voice" (*CP* 284 and 285) must be considered together, for in "The Haunter" Emma is the speaker, saying that though she follows Hardy everywhere, he does not know it, while in "The Voice" Hardy is made more lonely by hearing Emma's voice. This contretemps accentuates the mysterious uncertainty of the two poems. Emma was dressed in "summer blue" when Hardy arrived at St. Juliot for a visit in August 1870 (*Life* 78), so one can hypothesize that it is the "original air-blue gown" of "The Voice" which evokes a vision of Emma. This vision leads to the feeling that she is calling and his frustration assures him that she is unaware that he hears:

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Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you then,
 Standing as when I drew near to the town
 Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,
 Even to the original air-blue gown! (5-8)

The speaker is left in despair, and the reader is left wondering about the reality of the voice. The last stanza reads:

Thus I; faltering forward,
 Leaves around me falling,
 Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
 And the woman calling. (13-16)

This mysterious vision of Emma is responsible for the emotional effect of the poem. Neither in this poem nor in any other in this group is there any reference to religious solace, but implicit or explicit references to the supernatural are present and they heighten the effect Hardy sought. The evocation is particularly effective in "The Haunter" and "The Voice," imparting an uncanny feeling of apprehension, like that in "The Ancient Mariner" or "The Raven," tempting the reader to attach validity to the supernatural phenomenon. One is reminded that Hardy said, "Half my time (particularly when I write verse) I believe—in the modern sense of the word—...in spectres, mysterious voices, intuitions, omens, dreams, haunted places, etc., etc." (*Life* 451). By attaching a mysterious vision to a remembered object, such as the "air-blue gown," Hardy at once stirs the sympathy of the reader and enhances the reality of the vision. These spectral visions, awakened by Emma's memoirs, seem to have sprung full-blown from Hardy's involuntary memory.

Hynes says that Hardy was a religious poet without a religion, and that his poetry "acknowledged need for such comforts as religion has traditionally offered." Hardy had suffered a crisis of faith, as had Matthew Arnold and many other Victorians, but Hardy's pain perhaps was more acute because he was reluctant to accept the loss. Hynes feels that Hardy's need for religious belief led him to attach religious feelings to "lesser phenomena," such as superstitions.²⁰ The feeling of apprehension in the elegies that relate to the supernatural is accentuated by this uncertainty as to the reality of the vision. Is the voice the poet's fanciful response to a noise made by the wind? Or is Emma really calling?

"After a Journey" is rich in allusions to ideas which would stir the involuntary memory. A quotation from the *Aeneid* (IV, 23), "Veteris vestigia flammae" ("ashes of an old flame"), introduces "Poems of

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1912-13." This quotation, referring to the tale of Aeneas and Dido, is brought to mind again by the opening line of "After a Journey" (*CP* 289): "Hereto I come to view a voiceless ghost." So "After a Journey" recounts Hardy's descent into the underworld in search of the wife he had neglected for so many years. The poet asks the ghost what she had found to say of their life together: "Summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division?/ Things were not lastly as firstly well/ With us twain, you tell?" (13-15)

These lines refer to an entry in Emma's diary, discovered by Hardy after her death. The diary is lost, but in it she described her grief at their estrangement and at Hardy's apparent indifference. One easily imagines that recollection of her words is a painful experience which summons her ghost. Dido's ghost fled at the approach of Aeneas, but Emma's stays to reproach Hardy. She then leads him to familiar spots which they used to haunt together. One of these is a waterfall, where the lovers at a picnic had dropped a tumbler and tried to retrieve it. Hardy's poem, "Under the Waterfall," discussed above, describes the awakening of the involuntary memory by the sensation of dipping an arm into water. Hence his visit to the waterfall with Emma's ghost jogs the involuntary memory of "After a Journey." The poet refers to this stimulus in 11. 19-22 when he says that the waterfall has a "voice still so hollow" that "seems to call out to me from forty years ago."

In describing her first meeting with Hardy in *Some Recollections*, Emma says that no author and wife could have met in a more romantic setting, "the wild Atlantic Ocean rolling in with its magnificent waves and spray...its cliffs and rocks and gorgeous sunsettings" (62-63). Emma also tells how Hardy walked beside her as she rode her mare, showing him the cliffs, "gazing down at the solemn small shores [below] where the seals lived" (69-71). This experience is remembered in "After a Journey," where Hardy describes walking along the cliff and looking down to see "the seals flop lazily" (1. 26). Reading Emma's words at the scene of their meeting must have been a poignant experience for Hardy in March 1913.

In "Beeny Cliff" (*CP* 291) the involuntary memory is jogged by "bright hair flapping free" as Emma rode high above "that wandering western sea" near her home in Cornwall. Hardy said of Emma that she was "so living" and his recollection of her on horseback was a part of this feeling.²¹ In *Some Recollections* (63) Emma notes that it was "an unforgettable experience to me, scampering up and down the hills on my beloved mare alone." In "The Phantom Horsewoman" (*CP* 294) the speaker sees a "ghost-girl-rider" who "draws rein and sings to the swing of the tide," while her ability as an equestrienne is remembered also in

"The Going" (CP 277) and in "Places" (CP 293). "Rain on a Grave" (CP 280), "I Found Her Out There" (CP 281), and "Lament" (CP 283) speak of Emma's child-like qualities. Her daring riding and her ingenuousness were attractive to Hardy during courtship. The attraction was diminished when "autumn wrought division," but returned involuntarily after Emma's death.

In these poems some sensation stirs the involuntary memory; it restores Hardy's feeling for Emma—as Hardy observes (above, p. 137) "Love lives on propinquity"—but reality enters to put an end to the vision and to reawaken the poet to his painful burden. This is often the effect of impressions recovered through the involuntary memory in *Remembrance of Things Past*, the incident regarding the narrator's grandmother being a notable example. This pattern of recovery and loss occurs not only within the poems but also in passing from poem to poem. For example, "Lament" states that Emma is "Dead/ To all done and said/ In her yew-arched bed" (42-44). In the next poem "The Haunter," Emma's ghost speaks, saying that the poet does not know that she is following him. Next comes "The Voice," in which Hardy hears Emma's voice. The poet's longing is intensified by propinquity, only to be followed by gloom when Emma eludes him.

It was through the involuntary memory that Proust recovered the past. He held that "the essence of things" is stored in the form of impressions in an "inner book" within the artist. The reality that the writer has to express lies within the depths of his being. He must "submit to the reality within himself" to bring his creation to light (III 916-917). Henri Bergson, a philosopher who influenced Proust, defines art as "a more direct vision of reality."²² This concept of art, which Hardy seems to adopt in "Poems of 1912-13," differs greatly from the view expressed in his essays, which was, as mentioned above, closer to the classical ideas of Matthew Arnold. The view expressed in the elegies is closer to that of those modern critics who find existentialism in both Hardy's prose and poetry. In writing "Poems of 1912-13" Hardy sought to produce a work of art to commemorate Emma. It was poetry as a revelation of life, not as a criticism of life, that he intended here. He set out to evoke the spirit of Emma Hardy and he did this by stimulating the involuntary memory until a vision of the young Emma did "actually exist in the mind."

Thus Hardy's involuntary memory enabled him to discover felt reality and to recreate the past in many of these poems, especially in "The Going," "I Found Her Out There," "The Haunter," "The Voice," and "After a Journey." These poems present a vivid revelation, rather than a criticism, of life. Here one finds impressions, not convictions,

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felt reality, not conceptual reality. Hardy's artistic purpose and method here are closer to those of Proust and modern writers than to those of Matthew Arnold. Their ability to stir deep feelings accords "Poems of 1912-13" a high rank among English lyrics.

NOTES

¹P. E. Mitchell, "Passion and Companionship in Hardy's Poetry." *VP*, 27 (1989), 77-93.

²Lennart A. Bjork, "Hardy's Reading." *Thomas Hardy: The Writer and His Background*, ed. Norman Page (New York, 1980), pp. 115-124.

³Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (New York, 1976), p. 558. All references to Hardy's poems are to this edition, by poem number.

⁴Thomas Hardy, *The Personal Writings of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Harold Orel (Lawrence, 1966), p. 113.

⁵Thomas Hardy, *The Literary Notes of Thomas Hardy*, ed. L. A. Bjork (Goteborg, 1974), I p. 129.

⁶Samuel Hynes, "The Hardy Tradition in Modern English Poetry," *SR*, 88 (1980), 33-51.

⁷E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York, 1954), p. 93.

⁸J. Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), p. 97, 177.

⁹P. E. Robert, *Marcel Proust, Lecteur des Anglo-Saxons* (Paris, 1976), pp. 121-140.

¹⁰Margaret Mein, "Proust et Thomas Hardy," *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, Jan.-Mar. 1983, pp. 43-66.

¹¹Thomas Hardy, *The Personal Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Richard Taylor (New York, 1979), p. 92.

¹²Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Trans. Terrence Kilmartin and C. K. S. Moncrieff (New York, 1981), 3: 902-906. All references to Proust are to this edition, by volume and page.

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¹³Emma Hardy, *Some Recollections* (London, 1961). Introd. by Evelyn Hardy, p. xv. All references to *Some Recollections* are to this edition.

¹⁴William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads. Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson; rev. ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford, 1981), p. 740.

¹⁵Florence E. Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1928* (Hamden, 1970), p. 71. References to this work are cited as *Life*, followed by page number.

¹⁶J. Hillis Miller, p. 239.

¹⁷Thomas Hardy, *Desperate Remedies* (London, 1912), p. 5.

¹⁸J. Hillis Miller, p. 175.

¹⁹Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography* (New York, 1985), p. 487.

²⁰Hynes, p. 40.

²¹Thomas Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (London, 1912), pp. 59-60.

²²Henri Bergson, "Laughter." *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, 1956), p. 161.