

# Colby



Colby Quarterly

---

Volume 23  
Issue 2 *June*

Article 3

---

June 1987

## Disembodied Voices in Hardy's Shorter Poems

Vern B. Lentz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 23, no.2, June 1987, p.57-65

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

## *Disembodied Voices in Hardy's Shorter Poems*

by VERN B. LENTZ

THOMAS HARDY was fond of a particular kind of poem: the poem in which the words of authority are spoken by a spirit or ghost. Typically, these poems present a problem, and a spirit or ghost speaks words which offer a solution. By rough count, 46 of Hardy's more than 900 poems employ such a disembodied voice. This seems odd, for Hardy was a rationalist and empiricist who did not rely on the supernatural as an answer to any problem. But there they are: 46 poems in which the words of authority are spoken by a disembodied voice. This seems more like Yeats than the agnostic and Darwinian Hardy. What distinguishes this device in Hardy is not that a spirit simply speaks but that its words are authoritative. When Hardy wanted to give speech a special standing he would, frequently, put that speech in the mouth of a spirit; in a Hardy poem ghosts *know* more than mortal humans. Seldom in Hardy's poetry — there are exceptions — does a disembodied voice speak words that are playful, mistaken, or reflective of merely "personal" limitations. Frequently these voices play a didactic role. When Hardy wanted to offer advice or deliver a message he had a spirit deliver that message; when Hardy felt awkward about intruding a comment he apparently felt it was less awkward to have a spirit speak. In one way, these disembodied voices are similar to a moralizing and intrusive narrator in fiction: they offer generalized commentary from an omniscient position. Despite his fondness for ghosts and spirits in poetry, however, Hardy never uses them in fiction. Perhaps this says something about Hardy's notion of the difference between prose and verse: poetry allowed him to be as imaginative and inventive as he chose; prose fiction bound him to the reality of the empiricists.

The best explanation for this rationalist's use of the supernatural lies in H. L. Weatherby's observation that there are "two Hardys" (162): the agnostic, alienated modern Hardy and the Hardy of traditional vision. The first Hardy is "the London and Max Gate Hardy" and the second is "the man who walked to Higher Bockhampton every Sunday and listened to his mother's stories" (163). This second Hardy is quite at ease with spirits and ghosts and naturally expects that humans will hear voices from a supernatural source. In this traditional vision the ghostly voices will have more than human authority. Weatherby argues convincingly that

“Hardy is John Keble and D. H. Lawrence by turns and never recognizes (or acknowledges) the contradiction: both facets of his character seem to have intensified with age” (166).

Hardy was fascinated by ghosts in yet another way: he liked to imagine himself as a spectre. This manner of regarding himself is seen in a curious passage from his autobiography, *The Life and Works of Thomas Hardy*:

For my part, if there is any way of getting a melancholy satisfaction out of life it lies in dying, so to speak, before one is out of the flesh; by which I mean putting on the manners of ghosts, wandering in their haunts, and taking their views of surrounding things. To think of life as passing away is a sadness; to think of it as past is at least tolerable. Hence even when I enter into a room to pay a simple morning call I have unconsciously the habit of regarding the scene as if I were a spectre not solid enough to influence my environment; only fit to behold and say, as another spectre said: “Peace be unto you!” (218)

To consider himself in this way gave not only satisfaction but a god-like perspective from which to comment on the affairs of men and women; in his poems Hardy frequently assumes this perspective and speaks with the voice of a spirit when he wishes to make a generalizing remark. And when spectral aloofness was his dominant mood Hardy could remove himself as far from life as it was possible to go: into the voice of a bodiless intelligence.

Hardy’s poems contain a mix of distinct voices that Hardy assumed, voices that converse with each other. Hardy is chameleon-like in his assumption of discrete voices, no one of which is the sole voice of “the poet.” One of these voices is the disembodied voice of the ghost, or, more accurately, various individual spirits populate the poems and generalize on human affairs. Paul Zietlow and Frederick W. Shilstone have explained with precision and comprehensiveness how separate voices interact, i.e., converse, with each other through the whole of Hardy’s canon. Zietlow elucidates Hardy’s aesthetic and indicates that the poems represent an interplay of various voices and recognizes how Hardy’s poetic sensibility manifests itself in a variety of identities:

The poet’s commitment, then, is not to a sustained interpretation of life, but to moments of experience and to the accurate recording of them. . . . As the speaker in a poem, his identity is defined by the nature of the impression and its means of conveyance, and may bear little relationship to any “real,” historical identity: he writes “dramatic monologues by different characters.”

This theory justifies the more playful or fanciful flights of the imagination that often occur in Hardy’s poetry. But the theory also sanctions deeply serious modes, because a full response to the unique moment brings the poet’s self into temporary focus. For a moment, the poet achieves a clear, fixed identity, crystallized from the surging, contradictory being of his consciousness. . . . At such a moment one becomes a reality—not the totality of what one could be, but a single aspect of that potential. . . . (Zietlow 57).

Shilstone stresses the way in which these voices talk to each other. His argument is that Hardy became increasingly uncomfortable with the ironic stance to which his fiction had forced him by the time of *Jude the Obscure*. The irony of Hardy’s fictional narrators became so sardonic and

aloof from human concerns, Shilstone writes, that this narrative voice was devoid of sympathy and compassion, hardened by tragedy into an unfeeling remoteness from life. Such remoteness, and the irony that comes from it, indeed represents one aspect of Hardy's character. Another aspect of Hardy's mind, however, insisted on compassion and what Hardy called "loving-kindness" (2:319). Hardy's desire to separate himself from life manifested itself in irony; his "loving-kindness" manifested itself in a desire to identify himself with the lives and sufferings of fellow humans. In the poetry Hardy's complex character takes the form of separate voices, the speakers of various poems. Hardy was able to move rapidly away from a too cruel irony in one poem to the voice of a different human character in another poem. The disembodied voices represent — except in the "Poems of 1912-13" — the cold and ironic aspect of their creator. But Hardy was not always comfortable with this side of himself and, by placing the irony in the voices of ghosts and spirits, detaches himself from the cruelty of that irony by locating its voice elsewhere. All of these various disembodied voices stand outside the flow of time and natural process and offer ironic comment on mortals who are trapped within "the cell of Time" (1:326). The irony is a product of the timeless perspective of the spirits on the temporal concerns of humans. Recognizing this, it is important to acknowledge, firstly, that Hardy's irony appears in voices other than disembodied ones, and, secondly, that in the poems Hardy employs other voices than those of the ironist.

A basic principle of Hardy's art was his aesthetics of disjunction. The disjunctions of the poems using a disembodied voice involve the juxtaposition of the voices of the living with the voices of the dead, the physical with the spiritual, and, most importantly, the temporal with the timeless. Hardy was quite willing to distort reality as a means of achieving a poetic effect. The disjunctive mode is one in which distortion or disunity of form is a calculated technique designed to convey a truth about the human condition. In his autobiography Hardy discusses this disjunctive mode at several points. In an entry headed "Reflections on Art" he writes that "Art is a disproportioning — (i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion) — of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities." And elsewhere, in discussing "the constructional part" of his writing, he says that "the adjustment of things unusual to things eternal and universal" is "the key to the art" (239, 268). Even at those times when the voices of the living seem to converse most naturally and easily with the voices of the dead Hardy is aware that he brings together two presences which are basically dissimilar. Morton Dawen Zabel noticed these "startling touches of weirdness" in discussing the way in which discordance is central to all of Hardy's poetry and fiction. Hardy was both the modern empiricist and the poet of traditional vision: because of these contradictory facets of his own sensibility it was easy for him to bring together in his verse the living and the spectral to establish an ironic perspective.

Another principle of Hardy's aesthetic underlies his fondness for disembodied voices. In the "Apology" to *Late Lyrics and Earlier* he writes that "the real function of poetry [is] the *application* of ideas to life [in Matthew Arnold's familiar phrase]" (2:320, emphasis mine). That Hardy repeats Arnold's rather mechanical term "application" to describe the way in which poetic ideas bear upon life is significant. In this formulation "ideas" come from the world of the spirits and are "applied" to "life"—the world of mortal humans. The two elements are brought together by the poet and they don't quite fit; a dissimilarity is present that may grate upon the reader. As in the aesthetics of disjunction a discordance exists, a sense of the poet fusing together two realities which are unlike in kind.

The first, in the order of publication, of Hardy's poems using a spectral voice is "A Christmas Ghost-Story" (1:121), one of the poems that Hardy wrote on the occasion of the Boer War. The poem sets a pattern for Hardy's other poems employing a ghostly voice as it begins with a description of ordinary, particularized reality which is then juxtaposed with the voice of a "phantom" who makes a generalizing comment. This poem has a significant place in the group of poems which Hardy titled "War Poems" for it sums up all the rest. The words of the phantom are authoritative; undoubtedly the ghost speaks for Hardy. This disembodied voice is the one voice amongst all those in the "War Poems" that is most clearly the poet's. One other poem in the group does employ a disembodied voice: in "The Souls of the Slain" (1:124) a "senior soul-flame" addresses other ghosts and makes a statement on personal immortality. This poem also begins with a concrete description of the actual world—Hardy even employs a footnote to identify the exact place—after which "A dim-discerned train / Of sprites without mould" appears, speaks, and thus sets the stage for the authoritative words of their leader.

In "Lausanne: In Gibbon's Old Garden" (1:138) Hardy writes of a place he visited and imagines the ghost of Gibbon speaking. Again, the setting is specific and the words of the spectre make a generalizing comment. The juxtaposition is that of the past with the present as well as the solid, physical world with the world of Gibbon's spirit. Hardy was also willing to use disembodied voices for humorous effect; both "The Levelled Churchyard" (1:196) and "Ah, are you digging on my grave?" (2:38) use the voice from the grave to mock the self-centered concerns of individuals. "Her Father" (1:273) and "The Moth-Signal" (2:111) use spectral voices to comment rudely and tauntingly on the romantic affairs of men and women. In both poems the ghost speaks only at the end; and in each poem the ghost's voice is a jarring intrusion into a dramatized human situation. Hardy's aesthetics of disjunction function here as the poet insists on the discordance between the timeless and the temporal.

A favorite motif of Hardy's is that the dead are better off than the living. In three poems Hardy has ghosts speak from under the sod to explain to the living that death is preferable to life. In all three of these poems the

words of the ghosts have authority; the message that spectral voices deliver is conclusive. And it gains significance as it is repeated through Hardy's canon. In "Voices from Things Growing in a Churchyard" (2:395) several representative voices speak from the grave to deliver the message that all is well with the dead. The voices of the dead in "While Drawing in a Churchyard" (2:287) speak the same sentiments and conclude: " 'That no God trumpet us to rise / We truly hope.' " In "Jubilate" (2:257) the dead show as much with their dancing as they put into words; but their one line message to the living, " 'We are out of it all! — yea, in Little-Ease cramped no more,' " confirms what Hardy's ghosts have said elsewhere.

In a number of poems the dead and the living converse; they speak to each other, frequently in a pattern of question and answer. "Night in the Old Home" (1:325) presents a speaker who is "A thinker of crooked thoughts upon Life in the sere" who questions "my perished people" and hears them advise him to:

"Enjoy, suffer, wait: spread the table here freely like us,  
And, satisfied, placid, unfretting, watch time away beamingly!"

Here there is not a jarring disjunction between death and life. The words of the dead come in an easy conversational answer to the question of the living. "The To-Be-Forgotten" (1:181) follows a similar pattern as the living voice questions the dead and receives the dead's answer. In this poem, as in "Night in the Old Home," the spectral voices are not simply overheard by the speaker but their words come in response to the speaker's questioning; they form a conversation between life and death. The theme of "The To-Be-Forgotten" is the same as that of "The Souls of the Slain": immortality is remembrance in the minds of the living. "The Dead and the Living One" (2:300) presents two ghosts and one living voice who, all three, enter into conversation. Here, again, the ghosts speak with authority and the mortal is naive. The poem closes with the female ghost's mordant laugh which is as conclusive as speech, and which serves the same function as the Ancient Briton's grin in "The Moth-Signal" and the words of the "cynic ghost" in "Her Father."

In Hardy's poetry ghosts can be victims as well as advisors. In "Spectres that Grieve" (2:37) the restless "phantoms of the gone" respond to a human's question, explaining that because they are misrepresented in the memory of mortals they must wander as "shaken slighted visitants" instead of enjoying the relief of death. The ghosts of "Family Portraits" (3:262), ancestors of the speaker, appear and act out a drama which, if completed, would explain the speaker's "blood's tendance." The fearful speaker interrupts and the ghosts withdraw with a reproach and a warning. In all these poems where the living and the dead converse it is the living who have questions and the dead who speak the answers; the condition of death appears to insure inviolability and authority.

But Hardy writes other poems in which the dead are as perplexed and uncomfortable as the living, even a few poems in which the living answer the questions of the dead. In "I rose up as my custom is" (2:94) and "The Woman I Met" (2:360) discontented ghosts appear to the living. In the first of these poems the ghost receives a lecture from a living woman who has the authority within the poem. In the second a female ghost appears to the speaker; the ghost's purpose is not to make a pronouncement but to express feelings which she kept to herself when living. This ghost has a complex and vulnerable character. In "Something tapped" (2:202) a lonely and helpless ghost complains bitterly to the living; in "An Upbraiding" (2:282) an angry ghost berates a mortal; this ghost speaks its mind but its words carry no special authority; instead, these spectres reveal very "human" and intimate concerns. In similar poems the speaking ghosts are not greatly different from other personae; they reveal personalities like human personalities. These poems emphasize what the living and the dead have in common and grant no special insight to the dead. The female ghost of "The Monument Maker" (3:14) flirts with the sculptor as if she were alive; the ghostly speaker of "Not only I" (3:101) regrets the loss of life, something ghosts rarely do in Hardy's poems, and enumerates the various aspects of its temporal existence which are now "doomed awhile to lie / In this close bin with earthen sides." The speaker of "Regret not me" (2:106) assures the living that death is peaceful; nevertheless, the poem consists of a listing of the charming experiences of its life and, by implication, indicates the same sense of loss that pervades "Not only I."

Hardy also uses disembodied voices which are not the ghosts of individuals but disembodied intelligences which voice a poem's most conclusive words. "The Musical Box" (2:223) is one of the most important poems in the Hardy canon, a poem which identifies the precondition which must exist if humans are to enjoy happiness or satisfaction. And while the speaker of the poem is human, it is "a spirit" that enunciates the words which the speaker must grasp: "O value what the nonce outpours" and again: "O make the most of what is nigh!" In "The Clock of the Years" (2:278) the speaker and a "spirit" converse. The spirit is laconic; but he voices the wisdom of the poem. In a similar manner "At the Entering of the New Year" (2:415) uses a spirit to speak the words of authority within the poem. In both "There seemed a strangeness" (3:34) and "A Night of Questionings" (3:35) more talkative spirits, identified as "a Voice" and "the wind," philosophize on the human predicament. In all of these poems understanding, the answers to human questions, comes from a source somewhere between the human and the divine. A somewhat different use of the disembodied voice comes in two of Hardy's poetic fantasies: "Aquae Sulis" (2:90) and "The Graveyard of Dead Creeds" (3:33). In each poem the voice of an extinct religion is overheard and the imagined voices of the religions pronounce their own doom.

In the "Poems of 1912-13" Hardy makes direct use of a disembodied voice twice and twice more refers to "hearing" the voice of his deceased wife, Emma. The ghost of Emma speaks in "His Visitor" (2:57) as the spectre returns to Max Gate to observe and comment on the changes that have taken place. This ghost is different from Hardy's other phantom appearances; a different spectral sensibility exists here. Emma speaks of the domestic details of her old home; she comments on the everydayness and circumstantiality of things in a very specific, almost empirical, manner. This phantom refers to two shared lives: the very ordinariness of the items that hold her attention invoke a shared experience. Here the disembodied voice does not make pronouncements or offer insights; instead, her consciousness registers the concrete details of her household economy. Emma's spirit speaks again in "The Haunter" (2:55) to say that she is closer to her spouse now than when living. The pair were estranged when Emma was alive; but now, her ghost explains, "If he but sigh since my loss befell him / Straight to his side I go." This spectre talks about intimacy, the intimacy of death with life. The speaker of "Your Last Drive" (2:48), who is undoubtedly close to Hardy himself, addresses his words to a "dear ghost." He imagines the ghost speaking to him and quotes her words. What the phantom says is that, in contrast to the words of "The Haunter," a vast chasm exists between death and life; no separation can be more absolute:

But I shall not know  
How many times you visit me there,  
Or what your thoughts are, or if you go  
There never at all. And I shall not care.

The speaker of "The Voice" (2:56) hears the sound of the dead: "Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me." This poem lays equal stress on separation and intimacy: the speaker cannot quote her words, what the voice says is not fully articulated and the speaker even wonders whether the sound he hears is only the wind. And yet, "faltering forward," he cannot rid himself of the voice which, in one way, is even closer to him than the phantom of "The Haunter" who cannot make herself heard. The ghostly voices of the "Poems of 1912-13" are the voices of a highly individuated woman who Hardy knew intimately. This ghost is too much of an actual person to have the kind of authority possessed by the more ethereal presences who speak to humans from a spiritual realm. Even after her death, Emma was too human to possess the authority of a spirit.

The fact that Hardy used the disembodied voice so frequently is striking. It does seem to have allowed him to occasionally do in verse what he was used to doing in his fiction: offer commentary from an omniscient position. But this is only one of the functions of the disembodied voice. For a writer who was acutely aware of time and natural process, the voice of a spirit was one way to escape from that process and bring a timeless perspective to bear on human life. In the shorter poems, Hardy uses



disembodied voices in at least three ways. The most familiar is the anonymous spirit who makes generalizing and ironic comments on human situations. Frequently, the anonymous spirits answer the direct questions of men and women, thus entering into a conversation with the living. The message that these anonymous ghosts have for humans is that the dead are content, that death is a relief, that the dead have no desire to return to life. These spirits speak with authority: wisdom is gained in death and humans can trust that the words that come from beyond the grave carry the authority of a spiritual world. Another type of ghost is fitful and bewildered. Death has not brought relief to these spirits and they wish to make contact with the living to have questions answered and situations resolved. The third use of the disembodied voice is in the "Poems of 1912-13," where the spirit of Emma Hardy visits her former home and her former husband apparently motivated by a simple, and almost human, need for companionship. This ghost is different from the others in that she has an individual personality not greatly different from the personality that was hers when alive. Emma's ghost does not offer understanding or make statements. It seems that she only wants to visit, to establish some kind of contact with her living husband, that loneliness may be her most urgent motivation.

Hardy, then, was fond of writing poems which employ the disembodied voice of a spirit or ghost. These poems are found throughout his canon; they are not clustered in any particular volumes of his verse. The ghostly perspective intrigued Hardy: in his autobiography he writes of regarding himself as a spectre "not solid enough to influence my environment" even in the midst of social visits. Hardy was both the advanced thinker and the poet of traditional vision. This traditional vision, his interest in the folklore of Wessex, made it easy for him to use spirits who speak words of authority to humans. On the other hand, his use of spirits to supply the answers to human problems may be an agnostic's way of indicating that there are no answers. Hardy's aesthetics of disjunction was a fundamental principle of his art, a mode he used throughout his poetry and fiction. This principle made it natural for him to conjoin two separate worlds—the world of the living and the world of the dead—for ironic effect. In the disembodied voice poems, the irony is a product of the difference between the two perspectives. On a less theoretical level, Hardy loved the odd and the unusual; he was fascinated by queer twists. A spectral perspective enabled him to exploit oddities and underline coincidences. Paul Zietlow and Frederick W. Shilstone have elucidated Hardy's use of various speaking voices throughout his poetry: Hardy's usual manner of composition was to create a voice not his own to speak in his poems which, he insisted, were "dramatic monologues by different characters" (1:235). The disembodied voices are one set of voices which recur again and again amongst the variety of personae in Hardy's canon.

*Works Cited*

- HARDY, THOMAS. *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*. Ed Samuel Hynes, 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*. Ed. Michael Millgate. Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1985.
- SHILSTONE, FREDERICK W. "Conversing Stances in Hardy's Shorter Poems." *Colby Library Quarterly* 12 (1976): 139-48.
- WEATHERBY, H. L. "Two Hardys." *Sewanee Review* 93 (1985): 162-71.
- ZABEL, MORTON DAWEN. "Hardy in Defense of His Art: The Aesthetic of Incongruity." *Southern Review* 6 (1940): 125-49; rewritten with the same title for *Craft and Character*. New York: Viking, 1957.
- ZIETLOW, PAUL. *Moments of Vision: The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974.