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Thomas Hardy's Poems of the First World War

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Thomas Hardy's Poems of the First World War

Assumendo come riferimento iniziale il libro di Paul Fussell, La grande guerra e la memoria moderna, si affrontano le poesie di Hardy dedicate alla guerra non solo comprese nella raccolta Moments of Vision and Miscellaneous Verses (1917), nella specifica sezione 'Poesie di guerra e patriottiche', ma anche quelle concepite nel periodo anteriore allo scoppio. La 'preveggenza' del poeta e il suo atteggiamento contemplativo nei confronti della storia attingono da una parte a reminiscenze di conflitti precedenti e a suggestioni bibliche, dall'altra alla concezione tragica e cosmica del destino, da Hardy esplicitata nella sua opera narrativa ma non priva di riflessioni metastoriche nell'affrontare con diversi registri l'attualità della guerra europea.

The most important study of literature in English about the First World War, Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), opens with a chapter entitled 'Thomas Hardy, Clairvoyant'. This is not an obvious point of departure. The book, which confines itself to British experiences on the Western Front, reveals how the experiences of war, as translated into literature, changed not only the literary landscape but generated a new myth of war, and that myth has become «part of the fiber of our own lives»¹. In the bulk of the book he examines the classic memoirists, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden, as well as the great poets of the war, David Jones, Isaac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen — but also the journals and letters of countless uncelebrated 'ordinary' soldiers. He shows how the very language was altered by the war; it was not only that adjectives like «lousy» entered the language, or verbs like «entrench»; it became impossible to write about war using the same inherited heroic language that had been so common before. It is a work not only of literary criticism but also of social history; and it is witty, acute and profoundly moving.

The opening chapter, however, begins by discussing a book of poetry published during the first year of the war by an author who was clearly not a combatant and not even, like Kipling, related to any combatants. The book has the significant title *Satires of Circumstance*. Fussell declares that this book, published in November 1914, «as if by uncanny foresight, [...] offers a medium for perceiving the events of the war just beginning»². Only one poem in the book, a patriotic and seemingly non-ironic lyric, 'Men Who March Away', which was added hastily as a postscript, refers directly to the war. All of the others had been written before the war, and some «emanate from Hardy's personal experience as far back as 1870»³. It is one of the great poetry-books of the century, rivalling Robert Frost's *North of Boston*, which was also published in 1914. It contains, among other things, the great sequence 'Poems of 1912-1913', a collection of love poems commemorating his dead wife — and commemorating the discovery of how much he had loved her. But his wife is far from being the only dead person featured in this volume.

As Fussell puts it, his «favourite rhetorical situation is the speaking of the dead»⁴. We hear voices from the grave, which «utter brief, shapely ironic memoirs»⁵. One of the most famous poems in the book, 'Channel Firing', is a dialogue carried out entirely by the occupants of a seaside cemetery, who confuse naval gunnery practice with the thunder of the Day of Judgment. As Fussell suggests, Hardy almost wrote the war before it happened. It is no surprise that Siegfried Sassoon, who wrote the sharpest satirical poems about war, acknowledged Hardy as his master. Hardy had, of course,

¹ P. FUSSELL, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, London – Oxford - New York, Oxford UP, 1977.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ *Ibidem.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ *Ibidem.*

written about war before this, and very powerfully. *The Dynasts*, his sprawling verse drama, gives a meticulous, even pedantic overview of the Napoleonic wars, which also provide the background to his novel, *The Trumpet Major*; war settings are also to be found in a number of his short stories. The Boer War inspired the sequence entitled 'War Poems' in his collection *Poems of the Past and Present* (1901). This sequence includes one of his most famous poems:

They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
Uncoffined -- just as found:
His landmark is a kopje-crest
That breaks the veldt around:
And foreign constellations west
Each night above his mound.

Young Hodge the drummer never knew --
Fresh from his Wessex home --
The meaning of the broad Karoo,
The Bush, the dusty loam,
And why uprose to nightly view
Strange stars amid the gloam.

Yet portion of that unknown plain
Will Hodge for ever be;
His homely Northern breast and brain
Grow to some Southern tree,
And strange-eyed constellations reign
His stars eternally.⁶

This has come to look like another astonishingly prescient poem. It was even included in a major anthology of First World Poetry (published by Penguin), precisely because it seems to anticipate—with uncannily prophetic irony—one of the most famous poems of the war, Rupert Brooke's sonnet 'The Soldier'.

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.
And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.⁷

There are, of course, a number of significant differences. Brooke's poem is written in the first person, while Hardy's commemorates a humble, almost anonymous soldier. Indeed, his near-anonymity is the very point of the earlier poem, which is devoted in a way to re-establishing the

⁶ T. HARDY, *The Complete Poems*, London, MacMillan, 1976, 90-91.

⁷ R. BROOKE, *The Poetical Works*, London, Faber & Faber, 1970, 23.

soldier's identity. As the first two lines indicate, his dead body has been treated with complete indifference, thrown «in [...] just as found». The lack of ceremony is indicated by one of Hardy's characteristic negative coinages, 'Uncoffined' (like the 'Unhope' of 'In Tenebris', for example). Of course, he is not literally an 'unknown soldier', since he does have a name. However, the name itself is actually a kind of symbol of anonymity. 'Hodge' was a traditional way of referring to peasants, obviously dismissive in tone (like 'rube' in American, from Reuben). Hardy had written about this deplorable habit, as he saw it, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*:

The conventional farm-folk of his imagination — personified by the pitiable dummy known as Hodge — were obliterated after a few days' residence. At close quarters no Hodge was to be seen. [...] He had been disintegrated into a number of varied fellow creatures.⁸

We are also told that Hodge was a 'drummer'. From this we can imagine that he would have been a mere boy. Here, too, there is an ironic contrast with a classic type, the heroic drummer-boy, as in Kipling's story 'The Drums of the Fore and Aft' (*Wee Willie Winkie*, 1888). Hodge, unlike the protagonist of this story, apparently got no chance to show any heroism. The emphasis in this poem is on the boy's unawareness; he was clearly involved in something much bigger than him, in a totally alien world.

In Hardy's fiction place is all-important; it is essentially a part of one's identity. His characters are all defined with reference to the landscape; we understand them and interpret their behaviour by the extent to which, and by the way in which, they belong to the land. Hodge is in a completely unknown place, defined by unknown words: kopje, veldt, karoo. But in death Hodge will become part of this land, and to Hardy's way of seeing things there is some bleak comfort to be found in this thought, as we can see by recalling a later poem of his, 'Transformations', which begins:

Portion of this yew
Is a man my grandsire knew,
Bosomed here at its foot:
This branch may be his wife,
A ruddy human life
Now turned to a green shoot.⁹

Considering things in this light one could say that 'Drummer Hodge' is perhaps not so far from Rupert Brooke's sonnet in tone; there is a consolation to be found. Whereas in Brooke's poem the source of this consolation is a sentiment of patriotic triumphalism, in Hardy's it lies in a sense of intertwined biological, botanic and even geological destiny. But it is consolation all the same, even if a deeply ironic one.

This is the way Hardy always works. From close up things are tragic and devastating; seen from far enough away — from a cosmic distance — one sees the inevitability of things, and in the end even a bleak fittingness. One of Hardy's collections of short stories is entitled *Life's Little Ironies*; but these little ironies in the end are all a part of the cosmos's great ironies. In this poem there is the irony of a boy called Hodge ending up in an alien land, with alien names — and ultimately being at home there.

There is no surprise in this. Here we return to that word *inevitability*, which so often characterises the processes of Hardy's fiction and poetry. It is often connected with the expectations of the form. As Donald Davidson puts it: «the characteristic Hardy novel is conceived as a *told* or *sung* story, [...]

⁸ T. HARDY, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, London, MacMillan, 1914, 152.

⁹ T. HARDY, *The Complete Poems*, 472.

it is an extension, in the form of a modern prose fiction, of a traditional ballad or an oral tale»¹⁰. His poems, even when they are not actually ballads, lead us to expect certain outcomes natural to the ballad. As Thom Gunn says, we know that «a girl in each of the poems is a *dead* sweetheart because the writing is such that we are given ballad expectations»¹¹. 'Drummer Hodge', with its rhyme scheme and alternation of tetrameter and trimeter lines, consists of three ballad stanzas that have been unexpectedly extended to six lines. And thus this poem, although published in 1901, with its grim irony, combined with the premonition of the appalling anonymity of slaughter, set the tone for the great war-poems to come.

Equally prescient, although perhaps less surprisingly so, given its date, is the poem 'Channel Firing' in *Satires of Circumstance*. It is the second poem in the book and so helps to set the tone for the whole volume. The opening stanza sets the scene:

That night your great guns, unawares
Shook all our coffins as we lay,
And broke the chancel window-squares,
We thought it was the Judgement-day.¹²

As Fussell put it: «One reason modern English poetry can be said to begin with Hardy is that he is the first to invite into poems the sound of ominous gunfire heard across the water»¹³. After the skeletons in their resting places have been reassured that it is just «gunnery practice out at sea / Just as before you went below» they settle down to rest once again. The last stanza tells us:

Again the guns disturbed the hour,
Roaring their readiness to avenge,
As far inland as Stourton Tower,
And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge.¹⁴

The place-names might seem to evoke something heroic and wonderful: the historic victory of King Alfred over the Danes, commemorated in Stourton Tower, the foundational mythology of Camelot, and the mysterious pre-historical remoteness of Stonehenge, not accidentally «starlit». But in keeping with the movement of the whole poem, with its unsettlingly lively conversation among skeletons, the underlying message seems to be that nothing has changed: all of English history — and pre-English prehistory, if it comes to that — has been nothing but «red war». And we remember, after all, that Stonehenge featured most memorably in Hardy's fiction in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, in which his heroine lay on the slab, waiting to be sacrificed to social laws which were as cruel as any pagan god.

Hardy said about 'Channel Firing' that he had not foreseen

the coming so soon of such a convulsion as the war, though only three or four months before it broke out he had printed a prophetic poem [...] whereof the theme, 'All nations striving strong to make / Red war yet redder,' was, to say the least, a perception singularly coincident.¹⁵

¹⁰ D. DAVIDSON, *Still Rebels, Still Yankees and Other Essays*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State UP, 1953, 49.

¹¹ T. GUNN, *The Occasions of Poetry*, London, Faber & Faber, 1982, 81.

¹² T. HARDY, *The Complete Poems*, 305.

¹³ P. FUSSELL, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 68.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 306.

¹⁵ J. O. BAILEY, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: a Handbook and Commentary*, Chapel Hill, Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1970, 263.

The other poem in the volume clearly related to the war was 'Men Who March Away'. As already mentioned, this had been added to the volume at the last moment, after being published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 9th Sept 1914, a month after the outbreak of war. The poem has a strong marching rhythm, with insistent refrains. It is clearly patriotic in tone, and could even be dismissed as little more than militaristic propaganda. However, there is one stanza that seems a little out of keeping with this dogged purpose.

Is it a purblind prank, O think you,
 Friend with the musing eye
 Who watch us stepping by,
 With doubt and dolorous sigh?
 Can much pondering so hoodwink you!
 Is it a purblind prank, O think you,
 Friend with the musing eye?¹⁶

The answer comes at once in the next stanza: «Nay. We well see what we are doing», suggesting that all such doubts and sighs are entirely out of place. The poem was republished in Hardy's subsequent volume, *Moments of Vision and Miscellaneous Verses* of 1917 as the first of a section of seventeen poems entitled 'Poems of War and Patriotism'. However, despite the title, it would seem that some of these later poems have actually been composed by the «friend with the musing eye».

They constitute a curiously mixed bunch. There are straightforward recruiting poems, like 'Men Who March Away'. In a number of cases the titles say almost all we need to know: 'An Appeal to America on behalf of the Belgian Destitute', 'On the Belgian Expatriation', and 'A Call to National Service'. Some of the more blatant propaganda poems are sonnets, a form that was not particularly congenial to Hardy; many of them seem particularly stilted.

One possible exception is a sonnet with a title that seems to anticipate Wilfred Owen, 'The Pity of it':

I walked in loamy Wessex lanes, afar
 From rail-track and from highway, and I heard
 In field and farmstead many an ancient word
 Of local lineage like 'Thu bist,' 'Er war,'

 'Ich woll', 'Er sholl', and by-talk similar,
 Nigh as they speak who in this month's moon gird
 At England's very loins, thereunto spurred
 By gangs whose glory threats and slaughters are.

 Then seemed a Heart crying: 'Whosoever they be
 At root and bottom of this, who flung this flame
 Between kin folk kin tongued even as are we,

 'Sinister, ugly, lurid, be their fame;
 May their familiars grow to shun their name,
 And their brood perish everlastingly'.¹⁷

It is far from being a perfect poem, and has some undeniably clumsy lines. However, the linguistic reflection contained therein is interesting: Hardy, unlike his mentor William Barnes, wrote few poems entirely in dialect, but he does use it occasionally to brilliant effect. Here the reflection

¹⁶ T. HARDY, *The Complete Poems*, 538.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 542.

on the Germanic roots of the Wessex dialect obviously leads to further reflections on the sinister forces that have thrown such «kin folk kin tongued» against one another. The very terms he uses remind us of William Barnes's fondness for Anglo-Saxon compounds and coinages («speechcraft» instead of grammar, «starlore» for astronomy, «welkinfire» for meteor...). However, the most striking of all the poems in the section is the three-stanza lyric, 'In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations':

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.¹⁸

Hardy had been asked, on 31st December 1915, by the editor of *The Saturday Review* for a «few lines [...] a verse, a letter anything. We try — against disheartening influences — still to keep the torch alight in the black»¹⁹. He sent the poem to them on 18th Jan 1916. Of all the poems in this section in the book, this is the one that seems least dark, least bleak. Partly this is because it seems to transcend circumstances, achieving an aura of timelessness. Indeed, Hardy stated that though he wrote the poem in answer to the editor's plea, the stimulus for it had come 45 years earlier, during the Franco-Prussian war.

The title is taken from the Book of Jeremiah, 51:20: «*Thou art my battle axe and weapons of war: for with thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms*». This was clearly what was happening across the Channel from where Hardy was writing, and so the title seems appropriate enough. However, if we read on in the Book of Jeremiah, it begins to seem rather less so:

And with thee will I break in pieces the horse and his rider; and with thee will I break in pieces the chariot and his rider;
With thee also will I break in pieces man and woman; and with thee will I break in pieces old and young; and with thee will I break in pieces the young man and the maid;
I will also break in pieces with thee the shepherd and his flock; and with thee will I break in pieces the husbandman and his yoke of oxen; and with thee will I break in pieces captains and rulers.
And I will render unto Babylon and to all the inhabitants of Chaldea all their evil that they have done in Zion in your sight, saith the LORD.

There is clearly no comfort there; it is a picture of total destruction, involving the shepherd and the flock, the young wight and his maid. Hardy's poem, on the other hand, offers once again a kind of cosmic consolation: the great cycles of nature will go on, despite the fall of dynasties and war's annals. It is a very muted expression of hope; the emphasis is on quietness, with the «slow silent

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 543.

¹⁹ J. O. BAILEY, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy...*,

walk» of the «half asleep» horse and the whispering lovers. These are set against the undeclared but obviously understood background of the tremendous din of the war. The picture is a minimalist one; they are not harrowing the earth but simply clods; the horse is no heroic steed, charging to battle, but an old stumbling hack; the couch-grass gives off «thin smoke without flame», in again unstated but clear contrast with the vast conflagrations of war.

There is also a very William Barnes-like contrast between the deliberately chosen Anglo-Saxon language referring to the timeless cycles of the activities of the earth, and the grand classical vocabulary used for the world-shattering events of the great conflict, with its 'Dynasties and 'Annals'. The archaisms of the last stanza — *yonder, wight, ere* — also seem deliberate, in an attempt to give the poem the dignity of timeless truth. This still works today, despite the unintended irony of the fact that the first picture he offers, intended as one that will remain constant over time, is undeniably superseded: what could be less actual than a man harrowing a field with a horse? In the end it is the force of the sentiment behind the poem that convinces: the poem testifies to a *need* to believe in unchanging realities, ones that Hardy could convince himself of just so long as he succeeded in achieving sufficient distance from the individual tragedies to be able to see them as part of a grander pattern, in which the great cycles of nature somehow manage to persist, despite all mankind's destructive urges.

Of course, in a Hardy novel we would not expect the maid and her wight to live happily ever after; probably the wight would be called to fight in the war and the maid would be seduced by another man. And the horse would possibly become permanently crippled in the field, bankrupting the man, while the fire in the couch-grass would spread to the barn...

The poem has a kind of poignancy in its position in the volume, surrounded by other texts that are either unconvincingly propagandistic or unremittingly pessimistic. The section concludes with one of Hardy's moon poems; a characteristic situation in his poems and in his novels is that of people being observed through open windows or doors; one could talk of the narrative strategy of the glimpse («One without looks in to-night / Through the curtain-chink»²⁰). This time it is the moon that looks in²¹, observing the writer who is callous enough to want to write a book in a world in which a man has committed suicide at the news of his son's death in battle.

The last two stanzas are particularly bleak:

'And now I am curious to look
Into the blinkered mind
Of one who wants to write a book
In a world of such a kind?'

Her temper overwrought me,
And I edged to shun her view,
For I felt assured she thought me
One who should drown him too.²²

The section of war poems began with the patriotic soldiers dismissing the «musing eye» of the uninvolved and cynical spectator; it ends with the moon itself, with «her meditative misty head»,

²⁰ T. HARDY, *The Complete Poems*, 598.

²¹ Hardy had written two earlier poems in which the moon plays the part of the observer: 'Shut Out That Moon', 'The Moon Looks In'.

²² T. HARDY, *The Complete Poems*, 551.

playing the part of the observer. However, this time it is observing another observer and despairing over his lack of despair.

In all his works Hardy has rarely taken so steady and so full a look at the worst.