

Order Versus Disorder in Thomas Hardy's Ghostly Poems

Thomas Hardy'nin Hayaletli Şiirlerinde Düzene Karşı Düzensizlik

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Summary: There are a lot of supernatural elements like spirits and ghosts in Thomas Hardy's poems. The supernatural elements have very significant roles in his poems though he has no credulous faith in supernatural elements. The ghosts that come uninvited to the mortal world realize their mistake, even if they come motivated by the most altruistic of intentions. They cannot change anything in the mortal world. The harmony and the balance between worlds can be realized only if the mortals and immortals accept their lives as they are, without probing or questioning their worlds.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, supernatural elements, spirit, ghost, poetry

Özet: Thomas Hardy'nin şiirlerinde ruh ve hayaletler gibi birçok doğüstü unsurlar bulunmaktadır. Hardy'nin bu doğüstü unsurlara samimi bir inancı olmamasına karşın, bu doğüstü unsurların onun şiirlerinde önemli rolleri vardır. İyi niyetlerle gelmiş olsalar da, davetsiz olarak ölümlü dünyaya gelen hayaletler hatalarını kısa sürede anlarlar. Fani dünyada hiçbir şeyi değiştiremezler. Bu iki dünya arasındaki uyum ancak ve ancak ölümlülerin ve ölmüş olanların kendi dünyalarını sorgulamadan ve araştırmadan olduğu gibi kabul etmeleri ile sağlanabilir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Thomas Hardy, doğüstü unsurlar, ruh, hayalet, şiir

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Thomas Hardy's poems are full of supernatural elements like spirits and phantoms of dead men and women. Trever Johnson maintains that in the most frequently anthologized poems by Hardy, most of the ghostly poems are included.² Eight instances are found in 'Friends Beyond' and four in 'The Shadow on the Stone'.³ For John C. Ransom, these supernatural elements have key roles in his poems.⁴ Close examination reveals that Hardy's curiosity for the ghost does not stem from a credulous faith in the supernatural realm, however.

Hardy's sister Evelyn Hardy states that when he wrote these kinds of poems he had already passed the stage in which "he had been, like other country children of a bygone age, imaginative, dreamy, credulous of vague mysteries, aware of the unknown".⁵ She adds: "Yet as a mature man he denied that he was, like Jude, 'fearful, specter-seeing always'. He told William Archer that he wanted to see, but never had yet beheld a ghost. Then, as if to catch out his real, his disavowed self; his own grandfather rewarded the believer when he was seventy-nine".⁶ Then Evelyn Hardy cites part of a letter written by his second wife Florence Hardy to his intimate friend Sidney Cockrell. This letter records an interesting adventure which Hardy experienced: "He saw a ghost in Stinsford Churchyard on Christmas Eve. The ghost said: 'A Green Christmas'. Thomas Hardy replied: 'I like a green Christmas'. Then the ghost went into the church, Thomas followed, to see who this strange man in 18th century dress might be, and found no one".⁷ Florence Hardy narrates another anecdote she heard from the poet himself, in October of 1927, just months before his death:

During the evening he spoke of an experience he had a few years ago. There were four or five people to tea at Max Gate, and he noticed a stranger standing by me most of the time. Afterwards he asked who was that dark man who stood by me. I told him that there was no stranger present, and I gave him the names of

the three men who were there, all personal friends. He said that it was not one of those, and seemed to think that another person had actually been there. This afternoon he said: 'I can see his face now'.⁸

This denial may be seen as the consequence of the conflict in him between the scientific view of the world and his unconscious. According to Albert J. Guerard, Hardy's unconscious was an inherited sensibility which forced him to heed the beckoning of the supernatural, in conflict with his complex response to orthodox Christianity, which he denied intellectually but could not help believing in emotionally.⁹ Hardy himself explains this contradiction in a letter to Caleb Saleeby summarizing his views of the philosophy of Bergson:

You will see how much I want to be a Bergsonian (indeed I have for many years). But I fear that his philosophy is, in the bulk, only our old friend Dualism in a new suit of clothes—an ingenious fancy without real foundation, and more complicated, and therefore less likely than the determinist fancy and others that he endeavors to overthrow.

You must not think me a hard-hearted rationalist for all this. Half my time (particularly when I write verse) I believe—in the modern use of the word—not only in things that Bergson does, but in specters, mysterious voices, intuitions, omens, dreams, haunted places, etc.

But then, I do not believe in these in the old sense of belief any more for that; and in arguing against Bergsonism I have, of course, meant belief in its old sense when I aver myself incredulous.¹⁰

So Thomas Hardy seems to want to believe in the validity of the supernatural as he wants to believe in the validity of orthodox Christianity. As Dorothy Scarborough acknowledges, one should not rob him of experiencing that universal shock of wonder elicited by the appearances of a ghost.¹¹ Hardy is undoubtedly sure of his artistic capability and talent. That is what he means by 'believing' in specters, mysterious voices, intuitions, omens, and dreams while he is writing poems.

Though often mentioned by critics, Hardy's skill in employing the supernatural elements has not been sufficiently studied, apart from *The Dynasts*, where those elements are different in nature and

² Johnson, Trever. "Pre-Critical Innocence' and the Anthologist's Hardy", *Victorian Poetry* 17. 1979. p.11.

³ Gibson, James. Ed. *The complete poems of Thomas Hardy*. London: Macmillan, 1976. p. ix.

⁴ Ransom, C. John. Ed. *Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy*. New York: Collier Books, 1966. p. 36.

⁵ Hardy, Evelyn. *Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography*. London: Hogarth Press, 1954. p. 34.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 34-35.

⁷ Hardy, Evelyn. *Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography*. London: Hogarth Press, 1954. p. 35.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 35-36.

⁹ Guerard, J. Albert. *Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963. p. 126.

¹⁰ Hardy, Evelyn. *Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography*. London: Hogarth Press, 1954. p. 45.

¹¹ Scarborough, Dorothy. *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1981. p. 107.

function from the ghosts of the short poems.¹² Messent asserts that critical references to Hardy's usage of the supernatural are peripheral.¹³ For Jean R. Brooks, appearances of the supernatural are sometimes a life-giving force to the dead material of some of Hardy's narrative poems.¹⁴ According to David Perkins, the inclusion of the spiritual personifies the process of memory, which constantly intrudes on the protagonist.¹⁵ Two studies of the elegiac 'Poems of 1912-13' "concern themselves mainly with the mythic subtext"¹⁶ and "with the problem of identification",¹⁷ while this group of poems includes a number of Hardy's most important supernatural poems. The purpose here is to present a detailed examination of the interactions between the temporal world and the spiritual world in Hardy's shorter poems.

Hardy apparently found the inclusion of supernatural elements a technically rich device. The protagonists in his poems take pleasure in a close relationship with the world of spirits, and often metamorphose into ghosts. Early in his career Hardy's protagonists display this distinctive characteristic, especially in 'I Have Lived with Shades':

I have lived with shades so long,
And talked to them so oft,
Since forth from cot and croft
I went mankind among,
That sometimes they
In their dim style
Will pause awhile
To hear my say; (1-8)

This uncanny power to inhabit either world is also seen in his 'The Souls of the Slain':

Soon from out of the Southward seemed
nearing
A whirr, as of wings
Waved by mighty-vanned flies,

¹² Messent, B. Peter. Ed. *Literature of the Occult*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1991. p. 81.

¹³ Ibid. p.81

¹⁴ Brooks, R. Jean. *Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971. p. 132.

¹⁵ Qtd in. Guerard, J. Albert. *Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963. p. 149.

¹⁶ Buckler, E. William. 'The Dark Space Illumined: A Reading of Hardy's Poems of 1912-23'. *Victorian Poetry* 17. 1979. p. 101.

¹⁷ Murfin, C. Ross. 'Moments of Vision: Hardy's Poems of 1912-13'. *Victorian Poetry* 20. p.79.

Or by night-moths of measureless size,
And in softness and smoothness well-nigh beyond
hearing

Of corporal things (13-18).

Hardy also dramatizes the dialogues which take place in this unearthly crowd. In 'Murmurs in the Gloom' Hardy's narrator is capable of parting the unseen curtain between worlds, to watch and hear millions of spirits sigh out their afflictions and complaints:

I wayfared at the nadir of the sun
Where populations meet, though seen of none;
And millions seemed to sigh around
As though their haunts were nigh around,
And unknown throngs to cry around
Of things late done (1-6).

The poems become more interesting and effective when the protagonist himself is a ghost, as in 'I Rose up as My Custom Is' and 'The Haunter'. In these poems his protagonists become either the alter ego of this ghost or the silent listeners to dramatic monologues.

In 'The House of Silence' the narrator visits the spirit world, endowed with the visionary power of the poet:

"That is a quiet place –
That house in the trees with the shady lawn."
"--If, child, you knew what there goes on
You would not call it a quiet place.
Why, a phantom abides there, the last of its race,
And a brain spins there till dawn."

"But I see nobody there, -
Nobody moves about the green,
Or wanders the heavy trees between."
"--Ah, that's because you do not bear
The visioning powers of souls who dare
To pierce the material screen.

"Morning, noon, and night,
Mid those funereal shades that seem
The uncanny scenery of a dream,
Figures dance to a mind with sight,
And music and laughter like floods of light
Make all the precincts gleam.

"It is a poet's bower,
Through which there pass, in fleet arrays,
Long teams of all the years and days,
Of joys and sorrows, of earth and heaven,
That meet mankind in its ages seven,
An aion in an hour."

Hardy also evokes the supernatural in an attempt to visualize what will happen if the law of mutability is challenged. The acceptance of this truth helps to accomplish that balance which Hardy hopes will be achieved through "loving-kindness, operating through scientific knowledge, and actuated by the modicum of free will".¹⁸ Many inhabitants of Hardy's poetic world do not seem to recognize this truth. The result is disillusionment, bitterness, and even tragedy.

Ghosts make the mistake coming back to a world where they no longer belong by assuming that they are immortalized in the memories of their survivors. They eventually realize the grave mistake of bringing into the mortal world the principles they have been habituated to in the world of immortality, so they disrupt the exquisite balance of two worlds. This disruption is often seen in poems that focus on the private relationship between married people or lovers. In 'I Rose up as My Custom Is', the speaker-ghost comes on the eve of All-Souls day to find out how his former wife is faring. First of all, he learns that she has been married, despite her promise never to re-marry—and she has married a man exactly his opposite. She attempts to justify herself in a realistic and logical way:

She was quite civil, and replied,
"Old comrade, is that you?
Well, on the whole, I like my life.
I know I swore I'd be no wife,
But what was I to do?
"You see, of all men for my sex
A poet is the worst;
Women are practical, and they
Crave the wherewith to pay their way,
And slake their social thirst.

"You were a poet—quite the ideal
That we all love awhile:
But look at this man snoring here
He's no romantic chanticleer,
Yet keeps me in good style.
"He makes no quest into my thoughts,
But a poet wants to know
What one has felt from earliest days,
Why one thought not in other ways,
And one's Loves of long ago" (16-35).

The speaker-ghost is shocked by her excuse, despite his acceptance at the beginning of the interview that her life with him was not that happy and satisfied. He remembers that he

... used to drag her here and there
Wherever his fancies led,
And point out pale phantasmal things,
And talk of vain vague purposings
That she discredited (11-15).

However, he seems to forget this, or he imagines that his former behavior does not diminish him in her eyes compared to another husband. He reluctantly turns back to his permanent place, with its atmosphere of horrors:

Her words benumbed my fond frail ghost;
The nightmares neighed from their stalls
The vampires screeched, the harpies flew,
And under the dim dawn I withdrew
To Death's inviolate halls (36-40).

In 'His Visitor', the speaker-ghost is a wife who comes from Mellstock, hoping to find her house as she has left it. She addresses her surviving husband, intimating her wish to leave the place which had been her house for twenty years of married life. She remarks on the changes before departing:

So I don't want to linger in this re-decked
dwelling,
I feel too uneasy at the contrast I behold,
And I make again for Mellstock to return here
never,
And rejoin the roomy silence, and the mute and
manifold
Souls of old (20-25)

¹⁸ Gibson, James. Ed. *The complete poems of Thomas Hardy*. London: Macmillan, 1976. p. 157.

The ghost's visit sometimes turns out to be totally frustrating for the lack of communication. In 'The Haunter', the woman ghost cannot catch the attention of her dear former husband. She complains pathetically of her muteness:

He does not think that I haunt here nightly:

How shall I let him know

That whither his fancy sets him wandering

I, too, alertly go? -

Hover and hover a few feet from him

Just as I used to do,

But cannot answer the words he lifts me -

Only listen thereto! (1-8)

Similarly, in 'The Spell of the Rose', the wife is unable to test his avowed love, which is symbolized by the rose she planted just before her death:

But I was called from earth-yea, called

Before my rose-bush grew;

And would that now I knew

What feels he of the tree I planted,

And whether, after I was called

To be a ghost, he, as of old,

Gave me his heart anew! (8-14)

The return of the ghost-lover disrupts the balance of the living partner, too. In 'At Shag's Heath', the simple village wife is going to drown herself because the ghost of King Monmouth, whom she betrayed, comes to her with his upbraiding figure at night:

All blood and blear, and hacked about (7).

He intensifies her sense of guilt not only by forgiving her but also by revealing his enduring love to her. In the same way, the sprightly, happy maid Nell in 'The Harvest-Supper' is thrown into a state of complete confusion by the unexpected appearance of the ghost of her beloved, who comes to blame her for dancing and singing with alien soldiers. When taken home from the place of merry-making, her pathetic lament is heard:

'Never more will I dance and sing',

Mourned Nell; 'and never wed!' (3-4).

Hardy's poem 'The Supplanter' shows how the disillusionment of the living partner can lead to tragedy. The devoted lover who travels a long way to put a 'wreath of blooms and bay' on the grave of his beloved becomes

ruthless and inhuman with the unexpected appearance of her ghost. Like Nell's lover, she appears to him during the festivities, but unlike Nell, he is reluctantly persuaded to participate. Following his seduction by the 'Damsel of the Graves', his sense of guilt is not mitigated by the passage of time. On the following anniversary, he genuinely intends to love her, but he does not find in his heart a grain of love for that now 'outcast, shamed and bare' damsel or for his child from her. Instead, he bids the two a merciless farewell:

He turns un pitying, passion-tossed;

"I know you not!" he cries,

"Nor know your child. I knew this maid,

But she's in Paradise!"

And he has vanished in the shade

From her beseeching eyes (XVI 1-6).

Nell pledges never to sing, dance, or wed; the speaker in this poem seems condemned never to love again.

'Her Immortality' introduces us to a narrator who feels pathetically out of place, trying to keep alive the memory of a loved one. Like the man in 'The Supplanter', the speaker travels 'through/A pasture, mile by mile' (1-2) to visit her resting place. He, among his nearest kinfolk, still remembers her; however, his fidelity cannot be expressed by any kind of art, which is, after all, the fruit of mortal endeavor.

This difficult lesson is also learned by the sculptor in 'The Monument-Maker', who imagines that he has immortalized his devotion for his beloved through her magnificent monument. When he finishes her monument, his beloved hovers at his shoulder and laughs in a daemonic tone:

'It spells not me! . . .

'Tells nothing about my beauty, wit, or gay time

With all those, quick and dead,

Of high or lowlihead,

That hovered near,

Including you, who carve there your devotion;

But you felt none, my dear!' (21-27).

The speaker of 'The Second Night' is indifferent, not even keeping a pretense of love for his beloved. In his anxiety, he professes his love anew, not noticing that it is too late for his confession. He is unaware that he is not speaking with his beloved but with her ghost. She committed suicide that morning because he did not come to their usual appointment that night. She likely had mistrust of his loyalty.

These examples from Hardy's poems pose a question: How can a balance and harmony between the two worlds be realized? One condition seems to be that the dwellers in each world be content with what their world provides, and choose not to trespass in the other realm. Since in Hardy's view, death is "a relief, an escape, indeed a triumph",¹⁹ once any one crosses death's threshold, he will never have a wish for return. For that reason, the frenzied speaker in 'A Wasted Illness' repents his recovery after he is about to cross 'the all-delivering door'. And in 'Channel Firing', the dead get up in confusion and horror, deeming it is Doomsday, which will end the tranquility of their repose. For a while, they remain in this condition, till they are convinced by the Lord that it is not Doomsday. It is

... gunnery practice out at sea

Just as before you went below;

The world is as it used to be (13-15).

God will never blow the Trumpet, for 'you are men/And rest eternal sorely need' (17-18). Similarly, the ghosts, in 'While drawing in a Churchyard' rejoice in the eternal repose, because they hope that 'no God Trumpet' will not destroy their joyful condition.

This ideal balance and harmony in the world of the dead can be achieved only if its dwellers have totally withdrawn themselves physically and emotionally from the world of mortals. It is possible to see this circumstance in 'Friends Beyond' and in 'Jubilate'. In both poems, the dead are ecstatic because they have escaped from the dungeon of the mortal world. In 'Friends Beyond', they reveal the secret of their unfamiliar and new heaven: None of the speakers is regretful having lived in the immortal world; and none of them longs to return to it. The dialogue among the dead explains their blissful world: William Dewy says, 'Ye mid burn the old bass-viol that I set such value by (16). The Squire: adds, You may hold the manse in fee,/ You may wed my spouse, my children's memory of me may decry (17-18). Lady Susan adds her voice:

You may have my rich brocades, my laces;
take each household key;

Ransack coffer, desk, bureau;

Quiz the few poor treasures hid there, con the
letters kept by me (19-21).

Likewise Farmer Ledlow: 'Ye mid zell my favorite heifer, ye mid let the charlock grow, Foul the grinterns, give up thrift' (22-23). Farmer's Wife adds: 'If ye break my best blue china, children, I sha'n't care or ho' (24). The poem ends in a chorus of all the dead:

'We've no wish to hear the tidings, how the
people's fortunes shift;

What your daily doings are;

Who are wedded, born, divided; if your lives beat
slow or swift.

'Curious not the least are we if our intents you
make or mar,

If you quire to our old tune,

If the City stage still passes, if the weirs still roar
afar' (15-31).

The ghosts here identify exactly the problems that confuse the less fortunate ghosts of other poems. The Squire's indifference to the notion of his wife's remarrying or to his kids' forgetfulness is counterbalanced in 'I Rose up as my Custom is' and by the speaker's horror at the event of the same action in 'Her Immortality'. Farmer's Wife will not be angry if her best blue vase is broken and Lady Susan does not mind if all her dear things are ransacked, whereas a simple change in the position of the household furniture scares away the ghost of the 'The Re-Enactment'. All ghosts proclaim that it does not disturb them if their intentions are misunderstood or misjudged: however, this misunderstanding is the chief complaint of the ghosts of 'Spectres that Grieve'. Their grievance confuses Hardy's speaker, for they accept at the beginning that death itself is a triumph rather than a catastrophe for them. The speaker's question, 'Why, having slipped life, hark you back distressed?' has an interesting answer:

'We are among the few death sets not free,

The hurt, misrepresented names, who come

At each year's brink, and cry to History

To do them justice, or go past them dumb (13-16).

Theirs is a kind of forced expiation, similar to that of Hamlet's father. All of these ghosts cross the borders of immortality of their own free will. The ghosts are to be pitied, and this pity is what the speaker feels after they disappear, leaving him 'musing there/On fames that well might instance what they had said' ('Satires of Circumstance' 15-16).

The ghosts that come uninvited to the mortal world will realize their mistake, even if they come motivated by the most altruistic of intentions. They cannot change anything in the mortal world.

¹⁹ Paulin, Tom. *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception*. London: Macmillan, 1975. p. 32.

They also cannot find any one to listen to them willingly. In 'Lausanne, In Gibbon's Old Garden', Gibbon's ghost realizes the wisdom of Milton's saying: 'Truth like a bastard comes in to the world/Never without ill-fame to him who gives her birth' (15-16). Millions of the spirits of human beings beseech in vain for a savior in 'Murmurs in the Gloom'. The phantom of a mouldering soldier laments in 'A Christmas Ghost-Story':

South of the Line, inland from far Durban,
A mouldering soldier lies—your countryman.
Awry and doubled up are his gray bones,
And on the breeze his puzzled phantom moans
Nightly to clear Canopus: "I would know
By whom and when the All-Earth-gladdening
Law
Of Peace, brought in by that Man Crucified,
Was ruled to be inept, and set aside? (1-8).

The ghosts also discover that their advice falls on deaf ears in 'Night in the Old Home' in which the speaker's parish kindred come to recommend a better way of life than the one he is leading with his 'Crooked thoughts'. His response is:

'Do you uphold me, lingering and languishing
here,
A pale late plant of your once strong stock?' I
say to them;
'A thinker of crooked thoughts upon Life in the
sere,
An on That which consigns men to night after
showing the day to them?' (9-12).

As for the world of mortals, it is a dreary world because there is no balance and harmony there. The humans not only disrupt the peaceful rest of the dead as in 'The Supplanter' and in 'The Dead and the Living One', they often assume a ghostly guise to shock one another into the revelation of their true feelings. In 'In the Night She Came', the ghost of the speaker's beloved visits him on the night of the day he pledges his eternal love. She comes:

Toothless and wan, and old
With leaden concaves round her eyes,
And wrinkles manifold (6-8).
He is confused and tries to complain:
'O whereof do you ghost me thus!
I have said that dull defacing Time

Will bring no dreads to us' (10-12).

She asks, 'And is that true of *you*' (13)? In his amazement, he cannot help admitting: 'Well ... I did not think/You would test me quite so soon!' (15-16). The next day the ghostly adventure of the previous night has already dispersed the illusions of their genuine love. Accordingly, they feel 'divided by some shade' (24).

'A Wife Comes Back' exhibits just the opposite situation. The ghost of the long-separated wife visits her husband one night, putting on 'youth in her look and air' (9). As she stands before him, she wears the charming body she had on the night when they first met, 'When she was the charm of the idle town,/And he the pick of the clup-fire set' (15-16). As he stretches his hand pleadingly to embrace her, she disappears. He dresses up and rides all day to the town where she has been living since their separation, remembering the vision he perceived the night before. He thinks he will find her in real life as she was in his vision, and that 'She will pardon a comer so late as this/Whom she'd fain not miss' (36-37). When they meet, the vision is evaporated by the shock of discovery:

She received him—an ancient dame,
Who hemmed, with features frozen and numb,
'How strange!— I'd almost forgotten your name!—
A Call just now—is troublesome;
Why did you come?' (38-42).

The harmony and the balance between worlds can be realized only if the mortals and immortals accept their lives as they are, without probing or questioning their worlds. This is the advice of the dead kindred of Hardy's speaker, when they meet him in their old house in 'Night in the Old Home':

'— O let be the Wherefore! We fevered our years
not thus:

Take of Life what it grants, without question!' they
answer me seemingly.

'Enjoy, suffer, wait: spread the table here freely
like us,

And, satisfied, placid, unfretting, watch Time
away beamingly!' (13-16).

This advice, which comes from a ghost of kindred, may not be accepted, but it rings with authority and obtains its power from real experience of both mortal and immortal worlds. If all humans follow this advice, they will be able to restore a balance and harmony in their worlds.

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