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« *A letter for me ?* » *La lettre et le destin dans « Destiny and a Blue Cloak »* et
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Fabienne Gaspari

- 1 “Destiny and a Blue Cloak”, a short story published en 1874 in *The New York Times*, and “An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress”, a novella written in 1878 for *The New Quarterly Magazine*, were left uncollected by Hardy. In “Hardy’s Unforgotten ‘Indiscretion’: The Centrality of an Uncollected Work”, Pamela Dalziel analyses this process of rewriting and shows that central elements were taken from the former story and used in Hardy’s next novel, *The Hand of Ethelberta*, while the latter story was deliberately excluded from his collected work because Hardy intended to draw on it to rewrite his first unpublished and lost novel *The Poor Man and the Lady*, itself a matrix for “An Indiscretion”. “Litter” or literary refuse set aside from the Hardy canon, these stories also stand as fertile and seminal ground yielding multiple interpretations, especially when one chooses to study the interplay between the letter and destiny in Hardy’s work¹. Falling under the spell of the letter, of social laws but also of the materiality of letters, the female protagonists of these stories appear as entrapped in the written word. I shall try to show how the body comes to be equated with a sign through copying and linguistic metamorphosis in “Destiny and a Blue Cloak”, how patriarchal authority exerts control over writing – whether it takes the form of pacts or of epistolary exchanges, and lastly, how, in the web of the text and of its programmatic construction of the characters’ destiny, “the letter killeth”.
- 2 “Destiny and a Blue Cloak”, a love story with an unfortunate yet less tragic denouement than “An Indiscretion”, brings to the fore the role of correspondence and the function of written promises and pacts, resulting in the victimization of the heroine and the triumph of patriarchal authority. It begins with the confusion over the identity of two women, Agatha Pollin and Frances Lovill, whose names, though different, nevertheless sound like

distorted and distant echoes, which gives further emphasis to the theme of mistaken identities:

"Good morning, Miss Lovill!" said the young man, in the free manner usual with him toward pretty and inexperienced country girls.

Agatha Pollin – the maiden addressed – instantly perceived how the mistake had arisen. Miss Lovill was the owner of a blue autumn wrapper, exceptionally gay for a village; and Agatha, in a spirit of emulation rather than originality, had purchased a similarly enviable article for herself, which she wore to-day for the first time. It may be mentioned that the two young women had ridden together from their homes to Maiden-Newton on this foggy September morning, Agatha prolonging her journey thence to Weymouth by train, and leaving her acquaintance at the former place. (11)

- 3 Agatha is but a pale copy of Frances, inferior in social rank and beauty. Yet confusion is made possible by the fog which wraps the scene, a fog which is both literal and figurative (like the mist which surrounds the seduction scene in *Tess*), and by imitation, another key issue: Agatha, who has started with copying Frances' cloak, now usurps her name, spurred on by a spirit of rivalry and emulation, the young man having aroused Miss Lovill's interest too. Agatha remains silent about her real identity long enough to make herself be liked by Oswald Winwood, long enough therefore to substitute real charms for a mere name and high repute, or her own body for the letters of another woman's name: "Yet she perceived that though he had been led to her by another's name, it was her own proper person that he was so rapidly getting to love, and Agatha's feminine insight suggested blissfully to her that the face belonging to the name would after this encounter have no power to drag him away from the face of the day's romance" (13). Besides the topic of imitation, the incipit introduces the interplay between absence and presence, letter(s) and body, an interplay which underlies the whole story. What Agatha perceives is that she has already won the battle between the lure of her own face and the lure of Frances' name, now a pale and inefficient substitute for the absent woman's body, so that the revelation of her real identity to a baffled Oswald does not mar the incipient love story: "'Well,' he said, 'it doesn't matter; you are yourself anyhow. It is you I like, and nobody else in the world – not the name'" (14).
- 4 A reflection on the impact of a name, on the power of the letter, is thus playfully introduced in the first pages, yet Hardy gives it a much more serious dimension. As the embryonic love story seems to develop in spite of distance (Oswald goes to India), a subplot with multiple ramifications unfolds, with the return of another protagonist, Frances Lovill, mentioned at the start of the short-story then apparently relegated to the background after having been witness to Agatha's confession to Oswald of her usurped identity. Frances, who has married Agatha's uncle, an old man, hatches a plot against her former rival, keeping in store for her a destiny and social death identical to hers, entrapping her into marrying an old man, a relative of hers. In a last ironical twist, Agatha becomes her double and they swap names, as Frances becomes Mrs Pollin and Agatha Mrs Lovill. It seems that Frances reproduces Agatha's dangerous game with letters (and clothes) and reverses her initial copying by forcing her into imitation, that is to say into aligning her destiny with her own. In fact, Agatha stands as a crucial element in a transaction between her uncle and Lovill who is his creditor, her marriage with Lovill entailing the cancellation of her uncle's debt. Agatha is thus much more than a commodity and becomes a form of payment, a sign, a trope: as Elisabeth Bronfen demonstrates in her article on the exchange of bodies and signs in Hardy's work, "woman is a 'valuable par excellence' because her double function as body and trope points to a

moment in the symbolic order where the boundary between these two functions seems to blur [...] the body is not only traded, but given and received as a token or sign. As a commodity, it acts as the site of continual slippage between any stable distinction between trope and body, between figural and literal meaning" (Bronfen 67).

- 5 Writing, as pact or promise, but also writing as correspondence, both nourishes and destroys love in Hardy's "An Indiscretion" and "Destiny and a Blue Cloak". Undergoing the pressure of patriarchal authority, Agatha is made to sign a contract, dictated to her by the parson – "a good man, who fears God and keeps the commandments" (24), her uncle says. This is a blatant illustration of the deadly role of writing and of its association with the stifling influence of the Holy Scriptures:

"It would be as well to write Mr Lovill a little note, saying you agree to what I have advised", said the Parson evasively.

"I don't like writing."

"There's no harm. 'If Mr Winwood doesn't come I'll marry you,'&c. Poor Mr Lovill will be content, thinking Oswald will not come; you will be content, knowing he will come; your uncle will be content, being indifferent which of the two rich men has you and relieves him of his difficulties. Then if it's the will of Providence, you'll be left in peace. Here's a pen and ink; you can do it at once." (25)

- 6 Her own writing, at first sight the only way out of the dead end the protagonist finds herself in, effects another turn of the screw, since this contract actually serves her enemy's ends (Frances's) and seals her fate. Far from being mere religious cant, the Parson's apparently bland remark about Providence has an ironical resonance and hints at some more efficient and superior form of writing, for indeed the Parson is an accomplice to Frances's scheme, Frances being the Deus ex Machina now pulling the strings of Agatha's destiny. A few words hastily scribbled on a scrap of paper come to be endowed with great value and significance: they give an illusory sense of power and freedom to Agatha who, Penelope-like, thinks she has alighted on a means to put off her old suitor until her lover's return. What is at stake for Agatha in this transaction with old Lovill is that the agreement should be concluded by both parties for it to be a fair and balanced commitment, so that her next venture is to coax the old man into signing a pact:

Agatha at this moment took the slate from the child and scribbled something on it.

"Now you must please me just writing your name here", she said in a voice of playful indifference.

"What is it?" said Lovill, lookin over and reading. "'If Oswald Winwood comes to marry Agatha Pollin before November, I agree to give her up to him without objection.' Well, that is cool for a young lady under six feet, upon my word – hee-heel!" [...]

He wrote his name then. "Now I have done it, and shown my faith", he said, and at once raised his fingers as if to rub it out again. But with hands that moved like lightning she snatched up the slate, flew up stairs, locked it in her box, and came down again. (27)

- 7 A clear reminder of the role which the written word plays in the making and unmaking of the protagonist's future, this episode also suggests its fragile and ephemeral nature.
- 8 However, by putting under lock and key this "mere memorandum" (27), the young woman is also metaphorically transforming the ephemeral chalked letters into a form of engraving, thus locking herself up in some unfortunate future, acting as agent and tool in her own undoing, tracing, of her own free will, the words formerly dictated to her by the parson, and therefore reproducing mechanisms of patriarchal oppression. If the letter can empower woman and can constitute a challenge to patriarchal law, it also binds and

imprisons her. Agatha's endeavour to give a body to her purpose results in entrapment, echoing Jude's attempt when he carves on the back of a milestone the word "THITHER" (120) with an index indicating the direction of Christminster – the focal point of his aspirations. For Marjorie Garson, "the act of embodying an aim in a word, and cutting that word into stone, is perfectly emblematic of Jude's logocentric desire. His aim is to make the word real – to ensure its fulfillment – by giving it a body. But in Hardy's world the opposite happens. When the word falls into matter, becomes incarnate in paper or stone, it partakes of the exigencies of material existence, and becomes sinister, mocking, dangerous" (Garson 157).

- 9 Epistolary exchanges also rest on the connection between body and word and letters become a substitute for the beloved's absent body, filling up the gaps opened by distance, by Oswald's departure, first for London, then for India. The copy of the *Times* sent by Oswald to Agatha displays his name and shows he has passed his examination: "In the middle of the sheet, in the most conspicuous place, in the excellent neighbourhood of the leading articles, was a list of names, and the first on the list was Oswald Winwood" (16). Hardy's text leads the reader to the discovery of Oswald's name, delaying its mention which comes after a series of spatial indications following a ternary rhythm and suspending, as it were, the revelation, only to give it greater impact and to create a sort of *mise en scène* around Oswald's name, coming at the end of Hardy's sentence, remaining on the periphery and yet being both first and central, a linguistic *mise en scène* based on inversion which itself corresponds to Agatha's feverish expectations. It also becomes clear that the diary she writes and fragmentarily uses in the letters she sends to her lover is a means to compensate for absence and distance. It is associated with wandering in nature and metaphorically evoked as a form of weaving. The figure of woman as weaver-writer-sketcher emerges, Agatha also appearing as a landscape painter, recording in her diary, as a painter would on the canvas, the passing of time and the cyclical rhythms of nature: "At length he had arrived in India, and now Agatha had only to work and wait; and the former made the latter more easy. In her spare hours she would wander about the river brinks and into the coppices, and there weave thoughts of him by processes that young women understand so well. She kept a diary, and in this, since there were few events to chronicle in her daily life, she sketched the changes of the landscape, noted the arrival and departure of birds of passage, the times of storms and foul weather – all which information, being mixed up with her life and taking colour from it, she sent as scraps in her letters to him, deriving most of her enjoyment in contemplating his" (17). Letters are written and sent, but they are also received and read, an activity which turns Agatha's life into a rhythmical pattern of expectation and fulfillment, leading her to meet the postman at regular intervals and to inquire: "A letter for me?" (17).
- 10 "Write you must not" (29): Agatha's uncle's injunction is a brutal reassertion of patriarchal law, as well as his reminding her of her promise ("you keep your promise to the letter" 29) – a metaphorical phrase which means obedience to one's own words and inevitably entails an equation between the letter and constraint. This injunction puts an abrupt end to the correspondence between Agatha and Oswald, a correspondence which is also interrupted by Oswald's illness which makes him unable to write, delays his return and, through the malevolent interference of Frances, leads to the failure of Agatha's plans for their wedding. In "An Indiscretion", the lovers also compensate for distance with epistolary exchanges which end in a rather abrupt way after three years. The last letters are inserted in the text and clearly mention Geraldine's father's authority: "My father has

discovered what we fell for each other. He took me into his room and made me promise never to write to you, or seek you, or receive a letter from you. [...] So don't write, poor Egbert, or expect to hear from miserable me.[...] P.S. Might we not write just one line at very wide intervals? It is too much never to write at all" (81-82). The post-scriptum contradicts the firm tone of the letter and reveals Geraldine's dilemma, to write or not to write, as she is unable to write because loyalty and a promise to her father prevent her from doing so. Then a few notes sent by Geraldine are inserted in the text, notably one note received while Egbert is waiting for her, an event which clearly shows how the letter has come to displace physical presence. Proliferating in the story through *collage* or *montage*, text even supplants reality and events themselves when Hardy inserts fragments from news in magazines announcing Egbert's success as a writer (90) immediately followed by a paragraph announcing Geraldine's wedding with another man; text becomes the product of rumour when Egbert and Geraldine's clandestine wedding and their subsequent elopement are rendered public in a daily paper under the heading "The Tollamore Elopement" (106-107). As he tries, in the early stages of their relationship, to make Geraldine aware of the insurmountable social barriers between them, Egbert's quotation from Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*, "And calumny meanwhile shall feed on us/As worms devour the dead" (73), takes on a premonitory value and refers to the deadly power both of social laws and of words.

- 11 The hero's grandfather's comment on this love story, "it can but end in pain" (65), turns into a prediction, a choral comment echoing Aunt Drusilla's words in *Jude the Obscure* and announcing a fateful outcome. The interplay between writing and death, the idea that "the letter killeth" (34), Hardy's epigraph to *Jude the Obscure* (taken from II Corinthians iii, 6), structures Hardy's novella "An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress". First the epigraphs (from Browning, Shakespeare, Tennyson, Thackeray, Shelley) preceding each chapter are more than a tribute paid by Hardy to other writers, more than the result of a mere wish to inscribe his own writing in the literary canon. These fragments take on a programmatic function, thus contributing to the building of a sense of impending tragedy and to the weaving of a textual web imprisoning the protagonists. The intertextual references do not only foreshadow the events unfolded in the chapters they head but provide a new perspective from which to view them, whether they refer to the emptiness and vanity of speech, to powerlessness and ineffectual endeavours, or to ephemeral love. While Hardy's text unfolds the characters' awakening to love and their struggles to overcome social barriers and personal prejudices, the epigraphs provide a background against which one has to read the central story. They interact with the events in the novella, which they announce, sum up, or just echo, and they also create a form of polyphony. If these quotations generate a sense of closure (by foreboding failure and tragedy before they occur in the story), they simultaneously open other possibilities by turning Hardy's text into another story of doomed love, a story which both exists on its own and yet is also part of a wide network or web formed by other literary works.
- 12 Chapter 1 is introduced by a quotation from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*:
- When I would pray and think, I think and pray
To several subjects: heaven hath my empty words;
Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue,
Anchors on Isabel.
- 13 Chapter 2 begins with Browning's "The Flight of the Duchess":
- She was active, stirring, all fire –
Could not rest, could not tire –

Never in the world such an one!
 And here was plenty to be done,
 And that she could do it, great or small,
 She was to do nothing at all.

- 14 This serves as an introduction to the chapter which focuses on Egbert's nascent passion for Geraldine, his admiration of her beauty and his painful consciousness of his social inferiority. The praise contained in the first five lines of Browning's poem corresponds to Egbert's perception of Geraldine as a unique and promising young woman, yet the conclusion contradicts the preceding lines: "She was to do nothing at all" tolls the end of the hopes and the death of the energy and passion voiced in the poem and introduces a sense of closure at the very outset of Hardy's story. The concluding chapter which stages Geraldine's death soon after her wedding with Egbert opens with lines on ephemeral love, setting the tone for the rest of the chapter: "How small a part of time they share/That are so wondrous sweet and fair!" (Edmund Waller, "Go, Lovely Rose!")². In the previous chapter, the extract from *Romeo and Juliet* ("Hence will I go to my ghostly father's cell;/His help to crave, and my dear hap to tell" 103) reinforces the tragic dimension. Each chapter thus hinges on a fragmentary story (a stanza from a poem or a few lines from a play), itself working as an embryonic structure or a matrix from which the chapter develops.
- 15 The epigraphs reproduce a structuring principle – the existence of a programme orchestrating a relentless movement towards failure and death – contained in the very first lines of Hardy's text in which Geraldine, observed by Egbert, is framed by the sculpture of a skull hanging over the family's pew in church:
- She reclined in her corner, her bonnet and dark dress growing by degrees invisible, and at last her only upturned face could be discerned, a solitary white spot against the black surface of the wainscot. Over her head rose a vast marble monument, erected to the memory of her ancestors, male and female; for she was one of high standing in that parish. The design consisted of a winged skull and two cherubim, supporting a pair of tall Corinthian columns, between which spread a broad slab, containing the roll of ancient names, lineages, and deeds, and surmounted by a pediment, with the crest of the family at its apex.
- As the youthful schoolmaster gazed, and all these details became dimmer, her face was modified in his fancy, till it seemed almost to resemble the carved marble skull immediately above her head. (43-44)
- 16 Through framing and freezing, Egbert's gaze recurrently transforms Geraldine into an image, a painting, but what occurs here is a process of transformation of face into skull, of living body into petrified stone, intimately linking death and the female protagonist who is therefore metaphorically dead at the very outset of the story, fixed and transformed into a statue by Egbert's fascinated stare but also by Hardy's writing itself which comes to be equated with the "broad slab, containing the roll of ancient names, lineages, and deeds" which seems to frame her body. Disturbingly enough, Egbert who, unlike his father, did not become a painter and whose literary tastes entail a need "to read, mark, learn, and look around him" (51), could be considered as the origin and even the agent of this metamorphosis, reminding us of the fact that the writer's need to "mark" also results in a form of engraving or in-graving (putting in a grave).
- 17 What this phenomenon illustrates is the association between the letter and death stemming from the process of substitution entailed by writing as it represents and therefore both imitates and supplants presence, as Elisabeth Bronfen, quoting from Derrida's *On Grammatology*, shows: "this substitution doubles the exchange of an animate present body for an inanimate sign representing the body in its absence: an exchange

characteristic of all writing. As Derrida puts it, 'Writing in the common sense is the dead letter, it is the carrier of death. It exhausts life [...] All graphemes are of a testamentary essence. And the original absence of the subject of writing is also the absence of the thing or the referent'" (Bronfen 69). In "An Indiscretion", writing, in the sense of carving or more precisely in-/engraving, precedes life: the all-pervasive references to other texts do not only metafictionally point, in a self-referential gesture, at Hardy's production as text but they also generate the story itself. The insertion of quotations is not restricted to the heading of chapters but occurs in the body of the story: Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* influences the first moments of Egbert and Geraldine's love story, books are the subject of their first conversations which engender feelings described in terms which could also be applied to love: "One day, they met on a bridge, they did not part till after a long and interesting conversation on books, in which many opinions of Mayne's (crude and unformed enough, it must be owned) that happened to take her fancy, set her glowing with ardour to unfold her own" (56). Memories of these encounters are "registered in [Egbert's] mind with the indelibility of ink" (56), writing being indeed a prevalent metaphor.

- 18 "Now do you see a wheel within a wheel, Agatha?" (34): Frances's question in the conclusion of "Destiny and a Blue Cloak" could be converted into "Now do you see a letter within a letter?", a formula insisting on the manifold aspects of the term "letter" in the short-story and the novella under study, on the vertiginous succession of embedded writings, and on the all-pervasive power of the word and its association with death. Hardy's work is often about text replacing life, displacing and even killing it, about the body – more exactly the female body – becoming a sign. The woman pays, as Hardy wrote in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and as Elisabeth Bronfen puts it: "The female protagonist's body is most conspicuously exchanged, inscribed, gazed at, deciphered, imitated, substituted for and ultimately replaced by something else" (Bronfen 67).

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NOTES

1. The writer defined the story as "a sort of patchwork of the remains of 'The Poor Man and the Lady'", "a pale shadow of it", and linked his undertaking to a process of restoration resting on the interaction between palimpsestic strata or layers of writing: "I thought I might find it amusing in my old age to endeavour to restore the original from the modification, aided by my memory and a fragment still in existence of 'The Poor Man and the Lady' – merely a few pages." See Introduction to "An Indiscretion into the Life of an Heiress" (xvi).

2. In the text of the *Harper's Weekly*, Hardy chose to underline the tragic denouement by quoting the friar's prediction in *Romeo and Juliet* ("These violent delights have violent ends/And in their triumph die") which he altered for the *New Quarterly Magazine* (see note 106 247-248).

ABSTRACTS

"Destiny and a Blue Cloak", a short story published in 1874 in *The New York Times* and "An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress", a novella written in 1878 for *The New Quarterly Magazine*, narrate the sad fate of two young women who are entrapped in patriarchal law and become the playthings of Providence. The actual death of the protagonist of "An Indiscretion" echoes the social and symbolical death of the protagonist of "Destiny and a Blue Cloak". The analysis of the theme of the letter in these texts implies studying its multiple meanings but also taking into account the relationships between body and letter. Indeed letters (in the sense of epistolary exchange) play a great role in the plot. Correspondence introduces an interplay between presence and absence and substitutes text for body. These letters which are secretly sent challenge patriarchal authority yet they are also accompanied by pacts and promises, words the characters are bound to, even when they are hastily chalked on a slate. It becomes obvious that "the letter killeth" as it finds itself linked to fate and death, a notion which gives its impetus to the plot of "An Indiscretion" but more generally to Hardy's writing, itself the result of a deterministic and pessimistic vision, a form of programmatic writing. This impression is reinforced by the quotations heading each chapter, giving just another turn of the screw to tragedy and tightening the web of the text around the protagonist.

« Destiny and a Blue Cloak », nouvelle publiée en 1874 dans *The New York Times*, et « An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress », novella écrite en 1878 pour *The New Quarterly Magazine*, relatent le triste destin de deux jeunes femmes, prisonnières de la loi patriarcale et jouets de la Providence. La mort réelle de la protagoniste de « An Indiscretion » fait écho à la mort sociale et symbolique de la protagoniste de « Destiny and a Blue Cloak ». Étudier, dans ces deux textes, le thème de la lettre, c'est faire jouer entre eux les multiples sens qu'il y revêt mais aussi prendre en compte les relations entre corps et lettre. En effet, les lettres comme missives jouent un rôle fondamental dans l'intrigue. Introduisant un jeu entre absence et présence, la correspondance, moyen de combler l'attente et la distance, substitue le texte au corps. À ces lettres envoyées en secret, défi lancé à la loi patriarcale, viennent s'ajouter le pacte et la promesse, le mot qui lie et qui engage, même lorsqu'il est griffonné à la craie sur une ardoise et donc aisément effaçable (« Destiny and a Blue Cloak »). Mais il devient évident ici que la lettre tue, car elle se trouve liée

au destin et à la mort, idée qui façonne non seulement la diégèse de « An Indiscretion » mais aussi l'écriture de Hardy, produit d'une vision déterministe et pessimiste, écriture que l'on pourrait définir comme programmatique, impression que viennent renforcer les citations en épigraphe, citations donnant un tour d'écrou supplémentaire à la tragédie et resserrant un peu plus autour de la protagoniste l'étau, ou plutôt la toile, du texte.

INDEX

Mots-clés: nouvelle, lettre, destin, corps, tragédie, écriture

oeuvre citée Destiny and a Blue Cloak, Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress (An)

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