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Far from the Madding Crowd *est peut-être le roman le plus léger de Thomas Hardy, où la pastorale se teinte d'un humour savoureux. La catastrophe y reste évitable, grâce à la vigueur et au dévouement de l'emblématique berger, Gabriel Oak. Mais le roman comprend aussi un certain nombre de scènes fortes, sur lesquelles Virginia Woolf mit jadis l'accent. Le bruit du temps introduit sa dissonance dans la logique de la pastorale immuable, tandis que les premiers dérapages amoureux et amères ironies pointent, à travers Boldwood, jouet de l'interpellation et de la sublimation. Les éclairs du sabre remodelant la silhouette de Bathsheba au fil du rasoir préfigurent la violence faite à Tess, tandis que la peinture du personnage de Fanny prend des accents poignants, à travers une forme de présence spectrale au moment de l'enterrement qui va au-delà du mélodrame. De même, l'épisode de la tombe joue sur des motifs gothiques, comme la gargouille, pour réinscrire dans le texte la figure du bébé perdu.*

In her essay on Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf reveals her fondness for *Far From the Madding Crowd*; she pays a more extensive tribute to its visual power than to any of his other novels:

> We see, as if it existed alone and for all time, the waggon with Fanny's dead body inside travelling along the road under the dripping trees; we see the bloated sheep struggling among the clover; we see Troy flashing his sword round Bathsheba where she stands motionless, cutting the lock off her head and spitting [*sic*] the caterpillar on her breast. Vivid to the eye, but not to the eye alone, for every sense participates, the scenes dawn upon us and their power remains. (Woolf, 247-248)

Although, in typical Woolf fashion, she instantly qualifies her praise by saying that such power cannot quite be sustained and comes and goes, it is obvious that for the modernist writer, Hardy does stand out among the great Victorians, because of these "moments of vision", because of his power to make us see, to make us hear (to borrow Conrad's definition of the novel). Perhaps Woolf was so fond of *Far From the Madding Crowd* because it was written at the request of her own father, Leslie Stephen, the editor of the *Cornhill* magazine, who supported and corrected Hardy's writing. And indeed, with the serial publication of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Thomas Hardy does seem to

come into his own, to have found, if not quite his proper plot, at least his voice and his territory (the word Wessex appears for the first time, adumbrating a world about to be mapped). The text toys with Troy and tragedy, but retains its pastoral mood and happy ending, so that, dismissing the clumsy sensationalism of *Desperate Remedies*, Hardy enters the sheep-shearing world of Wessex, romancing realism with uncharacteristic light steps. But for all its soothing pastoral mood and "panoramic" "glide of stars", its steady and sturdy shepherd Oak, who always controls his passion, who sets everything right and plays the flute in tune with the music of the spheres, *Far From the Madding Crowd* also begins to offer a Wessex of the mind, mapping the unhinging effect of life's little ironies, mistimed encounters and erratic coincidences, or mishap, or, in Hardy's words "hap". I would contend that the study of the dangers of idealization and sublimation, as much as the shearing or milking scenes and landscape painting, pave the way for later novels such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles.*

To begin with, *Far from the Madding Crowd* seems to differ from later novels, simply because of its sense of humour. Whereas the allusions to folk tales and Dairyman Crick's stories in *Tess* create the sense of a community but tend to leave the reader outside the joke, there is something truly funny in the wrinkled old man reckoning his age and coming to the conclusion that he must be a hundred and seventeen years old, or even in Joseph Poorgrass's "multiplying eye" regardless of Fanny's coffin outside. The reader can but be tickled by Gabriel's attempt to transform himself into a suitor, drenching his dry and curly hair in oil, "till he had deepened it to a splendidly novel colour, between that of guano and Roman cement" (25). And, much as one may love dogs and sheep, much as one may find Gabriel's "pastoral tragedy" and downfall moving, one cannot help smiling at the description of this philosopher of a dog (which must take after its mother, for there is nothing of sensible old George in him), running full-heartedly after the sheep, chasing them over the edge, so that it is deemed too good a workman to live and is duly shot, "another instance of the untoward fate which so often attends dogs and other philosophers who follow out a train of reasoning to its logical conclusion" (33-34). The death of animals, here, is pitiful, but lacks the tragic emphasis of the death of Prince, the horse which stands bravely leaking blood, towards the beginning of *Tess*. In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, threatening natural elements can just about be contained. Slugs slime across tables to warn of forthcoming floods; conflagration may burst and ravage ricks, but Gabriel Oak can defy the flashing dance of lightning and protect the hay and barley; and punctures may be healing, not just destructive: Prince's pierced flank may be opposed to Gabriel's swift, skilful gesture as he cures the bloated sheep.

But if Gabriel's downfall seems from the start to be mere peripeteia, enduring the wheel of fortune before it turns and leads him again to Bathsheba, there is an uneasy tendency, in the novel, to counter the peaceful, cyclical rhythm of seasons, of natural events, with the more disquieting ticking of time. Well may Virginia Woolf harp on time transfixed, on pastoral timelessness: in the eternal landscape, she claims, "Gabriel Oak tending his sheep up there on the back of the world is the eternal shepherd; the stars are ancient beacons; and for ages he has watched beside his sheep" (Woolf 249). Gabriel's watch may not work properly, but Fanny's hair may be found in Troy's watch, the only relic of his potential nobility. Throughout the novel we seem to always hear bells tolling or clocks striking, as when a leering mechanical figure strikes the hour and Troy's anger when Fanny has made her mistake, or when the sound of clocks spreads and echoes:

> The church clock struck eleven. The air was so empty of other sounds that the whirr of the clock-work immediately before the strokes was distinct, and so was also the click of the same at their close. The notes flew forth with the usual blind obtuseness of inanimate things—flapping and rebounding among walls, undulating against the scattered clouds, spreading through their interstices into unexplored miles of space. (162)

The mechanical, inescapable sound reminds me actually of Woolf's own leaden circles dissolving in the air. If the method is right in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, as Woolf claims, it is because the ticking of time is everpresent and inescapable, heading towards the tragedy and mutability of later novels. Though Hardy celebrates a pastoral landscape, time is only one step away from the sweep of machines, the dismal work conditions and trains that we will find in *Tess.* Though Hardy wishes to remain on the brink of pastoral time, it is slipping away even as it is being celebrated.

The heroine of this pastoral world, Bathsheba, is very different from Tess. Tess is hard-working but ethereal, ill-at-ease in the fleshy "tabernacle" she is forced to inhabit (*Tess,* 310), whereas Bathsheba is a practical woman eager to rule her own farm, and at ease in her body; until she is tamed by sorrow, she is happy to flirt and tease men. Hence, though there is a web of pictorial and literary (or Biblical) allusions associated with Bathsheba, the narrative voice attempts to remain practical, refusing

to throw "a Nymphean tissue over a milkmaid" (*Far From the Madding Crowd*, 19). Yet this does not mean that Bathsheba is free from the process of sublimation, a process which fascinated Thomas Hardy. Though there are three suitors in the novel, not two, the split between seduction and sublimation foreshadows Tess.

A woman who first appears in the novel gazing at herself in the mirror, bringing to mind visions of Venus and Vanity, or, of Susanna and the elders, since Gabriel spies on her unseen, Bathsheba is nettled by Boldwood's indifference and sends him a thoughtless valentine. The playful seal used by Bathsheba, "Marry Me", acts as a kind of Interpellation. Almost an insult, mocking Boldwood's aloof indifference to women, the anonymous envelope with its seal dictates his conduct from then on, as he switches from confirmed bachelor to hopeless suitor. Like the snowy landscape tinged by the red rays of the sun (see Isabelle Gadoin's analysis of this scene), Boldwood's mind is a blank, on which the words are stamped in fiery letters, while the seal becomes a scarlet stain printed in his eye; we find here the blueprint of the paradigmatic pattern of red stain upon white tissue which will be at the core of *Tess*, but unexpectedly the violated mind is a man's. This is what Lecercle, after Judith Butler, calls a "scene of Interpellation": imposing/accepting/claiming a name or a (self) description amounts to acquiring not only a linguistic identity but identity *tout court*" (Lecercle, 164). The valentine ritual becomes strangely performative. Images of inversion pepper the novel, from Bathsheba's house which has grown so that the back is now used as the front, to Joseph Poorgrass being unable to spell (87) and printing the "J" and "E" of James Everdene backward, as mirror images (incidentally, the initials shape "Je", the mirror image of the B.E. or "be" of Bathsheba's Everdene's branded sheep, as if the sense of self were both stable and likely to be drastically inverted at any time). Boldwood is the man most submitted to radical inversion, being forever altered by the valentine, as by a curse. The letter is dangerous because it is both written and blank, because it says too much and too little, because it is both forward and mute, or, as Jacques Rancière has it in *La Parole muette*, this is a "lettre orpheline", "discours orphelin qui va rouler à droite et à gauche" (85): " instituée par ces espaces d'écriture qui trouent de leur vide trop peuplé et de leur mutisme trop bavard le tissu vivant de l'*ethos* communautaire" (Rancière 83-84). Linda Shires insists on the way in which Boldwood places the valentine from Bathsheba in the corner of his looking glass, catching a glimpse of himself in the process, a signal of troubled identity. The frozen landscape, with its blades of grass encased in icicles and its frozen footprints of birds, becomes the objective correlative of a heart which is frosted into endless, vacant great expectations. Hardy harps on the ensuing process of sublimation: "The great aids to idealization in love were present here: occasional observation of her from a distance, and the absence of social intercourse with her—visual familiarity, oral strangeness" (98). Neglecting his ricks, and recreating the absent female body he desperately longs for in his closet, a scattered skeleton composed of muffs and scarves and dresses all labelled Bathsheba Boldwood (as if his secret writing too could become performative), Boldwood's fantasy as he obeys the letter's injunction becomes an obsession, to the point of self-annihilation and murder. In *Tess*, we no longer have a split between the good, sturdy Oak and the neglectful aging landowner; Angel Clare seems another Gabriel Oak, but actually recalls Boldwood as he dresses Tess in rhetorical garments which hardly fit a flesh-and-blood creature: the milkmaid at dawn is eerily transfigured by mist and dew, and Angel happily casts over her the "nymphean tissue" no milkmaid should wear: "It was then, as has been said, that she impressed him most deeply. She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman—a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names half teasingly, which she did not like because she did not understand them" (*Tess*, 130).

Similarly, Troy may appear as an early, less sinister version of Alec d'Urberville. If Boldwood is trapped in a snowy landscape, Troy creates, not an aurora borealis, but an "*aurora militaris*" (145), to seduce Bathsheba and cut her into shape. Bathsheba is dazzled by the "firmament of light", the swishing sounds of the blade and "circling beams" (144) enclosing her at light-speed, as it were: the electrical performance, with all its sexual charge, seems to echo and subvert the myth of Pygmalion, recreating the shape of an ideal woman, but in order to petrify her: "It may safely be asserted with respect to the closeness of his cuts, that had it been possible for the edge of the sword to leave in the air a permanent substance wherever it flew past, the space left untouched would have been almost a mould of Bathsheba's figure" (145). The rape of the lock, the pierced caterpillar show that Bathsheba will not grow into a butterfly with this entrancing relationship; the kiss leaves her trembling but guilty. The swashbuckling performance, with all its youthful excess, and the caterpillar are replaced in Tess with the rings of smoke, the roses delineating her bosom and the quieter offering of a strawberry out of season, pressed between Tess's lips: in both cases, physical contact is slight but pierces the boundaries of the female body, as she is pressed into a physical shape which denies her identity.

Thus Bathsheba's compassion for Fanny may also come from the instinctive intuition that they are, in fact, the two sides of the same coin. Bathsheba's pride dissolves when she sees Troy kissing Fanny's unresponsive marble face, just as Fanny was wounded when meeting by chance Troy with his newly-wed wife. No wonder that Bathsheba should be twice compared to a "robin", a bird which is also Fanny's surname. Before the coffin, the distance between the two women is blurred, and Troy is shocked to see a clinging, helpless Bathsheba, a mere woman instead of a semi-masculine entrepreneur: "It was such an unexpected revelation of women being all alike at heart" (230). Tess will blend the figures of Fanny and Bathsheba, a milkmaid who is no longer flirtatious, a virginal daughter of nature who is also a fallen woman and the mother of a dead baby. Before this oxymoronic fusion which is at the heart of *Tess*, Fanny's dead body is given more than a melodramatic presence through a spectral web of haunting images. There is the dog which helps her in her painful progress as a broken outcast, the dog which is stoned away, a sentimental image of alienation in the manner of, for instance, Landseer's *Old Shepherd's Chief Mourner*. The effect is strengthened by the projection of pastoral images: while Troy is a black sheep, Fanny's pulse in Gabriel's hand recalls a lost lamb. But the reader tends to remember more diffuse images, such as seasonal transformation, when a powerful alliteration in "f" seems to inscribe an echo of Fanny in all things: "the transformation of the **f**erns, the **f**illing of the pools, a rising of **f**ogs, the embrowning by **f**rost, the collapse of the **f**ungi, and an obliteration by snow" (69). The ground becomes a "firmament of snow", while the gurgling brook beside the blank wall of the garrison offers a contrast to the soldier's lingering laughter, mocking her. The mist shrouding Fanny's coffin is an equally powerful image, in a scene which Virginia Woolf includes among the visual vignettes which she praises: the "air is an eye suddenly struck blind" (217), recalling the pond signifying Boldwood's unrequited love, the "glistening Cyclops' eye in a green face", or, when Gabriel's sheep die, the pool "glittering like a dead man's eye", swallowing the "skeleton of a chrome-yellow moon" (33). There is an invisible yet almost tangible presence in the air, as if some haunting presence were about to materialize: the mist shrouding the coffin becomes some kind of strange, "atmospheric fungi", growing into a body, "an elastic body of a monotonous pallor throughout" (33). The fog is endowed with a presence, like a hand reaching out. Heavy drops fall from the trees, as if the landscape, unlike Joseph Poorgrass, were weeping:

> Then their dank spongy forms closed in upon the sky. It was a sudden overgrowth of atmospheric fungi which had their roots in the neighbouring sea, and by the time that horse, man, and corpse entered Yalbury Great Wood, these silent workings of an invisible hand had reached them, and they were completely enveloped, this being the first arrival of the autumn fogs, and the first fog of the series. (217)

Hardy here is working through Romantic elemental imagery, recalling Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* (which will be quoted later when Bathsheba runs to her swampy hollow), but the image of the "atmospheric fungi" is more puzzling than the whirling leaf-clouds in the sky. Fungi seems to bear a dim echo of both fœtus and Fanny, as if the text sought to inscribe the presence of an absence, as if the fungi were a symptomatic element.

Elizabeth Bronfen draws attention to Fanny's "revenge", the way in which the "process of disembodiment" during her lifetime (marked by her "corporeal absence at the wedding ceremony" (Bronfen, 70)) is replaced by powerful tropes after her death: "Fanny Robin's passage from living body to corpse can ironically be seen as one from near-silent invisibility to speaking visibility" (Bronfen, 69). We wish to add that the baby's presence/absence is also compellingly inscribed in the text. No wonder that the image of Fanny's tomb should be given a spectral presence, set under the sign of a Gothic "gurgoyle", a spelling which blends the gargoyle, a diminutive creature, and the sound of gurgle. It is highly significant that Troy should wish to lavish flowers upon the tomb, in desperate compensation, what Penelope Vigar sees as an "ironically sentimentalized anomaly" (Vigar, 423). But the tomb will not give birth to flowers, the elegiac gesture is dramatically cut short by the microscopic flood which uproots the plants and carries the bulbs away. The scene picks up the motif of water associated with Fanny, and turns this longing for regeneration into a dark scene of violation: the flowers which are wrenched away deny any kind of birth, while the hole carved in the tomb mimics the gaping wound of a post-abortion womb. The grimacing, grotesque gargoyle, with its wide open mouth spitting the endless waters of mock parturition, stands above the tomb like a petrified embryo, opposing the powers of de-creation, the revenge of the absent child to the would-be flowers. It is not difficult for Bathsheba to plant the flowers again, and shift the waters away from the tomb; it is next to impossible for Troy. Fungi and gurgoyle imagery thus make up for the description that was cut out by Leslie Stephen, in the original version of the coffin scene, where the baby was "a flow’ret crushed in

the bud", and its face had "the soft convexity of mushrooms on a dewy morning" (312). When Bathsheba runs away after seeing Troy kiss the corpse, she enters a hollow which inverts the swashbuckling scene, a post-Darwinian "malignant" swamp full of oozing matter, a "nursery of pestilences", where the bloody or sinewy mushrooms seem to inscribe in the landscape the baby's spectral body:

> The fungi grew in all manner of positions from rotting leaves and tree stumps, some exhibiting to her listless gaze their clammy tops, others their oozing gills. Some were marked with great splotches, red as arterial blood, others were saffron yellow, and tall and attenuated, with stems like macaroni. (233)

Beyond the post-Darwinian emphasis on matter, there is an inscription of what she cannot speak of, voiceless as she temporarily is. But if Gabriel could erase the words "and child", if Bathsheba is devoid of voice, the clammy fungi with yellow sinews and arterial blood turn the hollow into a parodic womb; the landscape spells the absence of a child who did not live long enough to allow the transfiguration that takes place in *Tess*, in the scene of the baptism of Sorrow.

If Leslie Stephens made Hardy cut the image of the baby's mushroom cheeks, mushroom imagery will surface in Tess to describe her cool cheek as she receives Alec's parting kiss indifferently, an image suggesting that she is now a walking corpse (though she is pregnant), while the pestilential hollow will be replaced by the hollow in which she buries in leaves to sleep, and is forced to kill the dying pheasants.

To conclude, Hardy is experimenting with the novel in *Far From the Madding Crowd.* The cuts are limited, whether in terms of censorship or bodily wounds. Troy's sword does not touch Bathsheba, and finds its counterpart in Gabriel's ability to defy the blades of lightning, or in the shears he whets but controls, only accidentally letting blood when he is himself emotionally wounded, only to instantly nurse and heal. Such will no longer be the case with *Tess*, whether in terms of a pierced body, or of a maimed text hacked by censorship…

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