



FATHOM

a French e-journal of Thomas Hardy studies

3 | 2016

The Hollow Amid the Text

Far from the Madding Crowd and the Anxiety of Place

Espace et mouvement dans Far from the Madding Crowd : de la quête d'un lieu à soi à la conquête d'une identité choisie

Nathalie Bantz



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/fathom/544>

DOI: 10.4000/fathom.544

ISSN: 2270-6798

Publisher

Association française sur les études sur Thomas Hardy

Electronic reference

Nathalie Bantz, « *Far from the Madding Crowd* and the Anxiety of Place », *FATHOM* [Online], 3 | 2016, Online since 30 April 2016, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/fathom/544> ; DOI : 10.4000/fathom.544

This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

Far from the Madding Crowd and the Anxiety of Place

Espace et mouvement dans Far from the Madding Crowd : de la quête d'un lieu à soi à la conquête d'une identité choisie

Nathalie Bantz

- 1 In *Far from the Madding Crowd* probably more than in *Desperate Remedies*, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, published respectively in 1871, 1872 and 1873, the reader is made aware of the social and economic aspects of South-West England in Hardy's and in his parents' times. And although the title of the novel is taken from a verse of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", itself inspired by a line in a poem by William Drummond¹, it does not open onto a poet's lament over death or onto his warning against the vainness of riches and fame in the face of death; nor does it celebrate the bliss of a simple life in the countryside, close to a bountiful and peaceful nature. In other words "far from the madding crowd" as a title is not "a cataphorical form [implying] that what follows will realize what is announced" (Lodge 320).
- 2 The world of Hardy's novel is not exactly a quiet place preserved from the turmoils that may beset the outer world. In point of fact, *Far from the Madding Crowd* is not a pastoral, and South Wessex is not the bucolic setting of simple rural lives. Rather, the ancient Saxon kingdom looks very much like Hardy's contemporary England. It is "a modern Wessex of railways, the penny post, mowing and reaping machines, union workhouses, lucifer matches, labourers who [can] read and write, and National school children" (1895 preface to *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy 1986, 5). One could add that it is also a modern Wessex of enclosed fields and turnpike roads, a land that no longer looks like Drummond's or Gray's, a land where the threat of poverty is a constant dread (for example, Gabriel becomes destitute shortly after the beginning of the novel and Bathsheba knows she could fast turn again into the poor girl she was until she inherited from her deceased uncle).
- 3 Furthermore, it is also as maddening and frenzied a world as conflict-ridden crowded places; "madding" is used for "maddening", and with the online *Thomas Gray Archive*, from

the University of Oxford, one can wonder “whether either Drummond or Gray used the word exactly in the sense of ‘maddening’ [as it] seems with them to mean ‘frenzied’”². As a matter of fact, passions in *Far from the Madding Crowd* bring about frenzy and can drive characters mad: “I am beyond myself about this, and am mad”, says Boldwood in chapter 31 aptly entitled “Blame-Fury” (Hardy 1986, 155); for her part, Bathsheba is thought in chapter 33 to have “too much sense under they knots of black hair to do such a mad thing” (173) as marry Troy. But she will nevertheless do that mad thing. In chapter 53, Boldwood’s “fond madness” (or “unreasoning devotion”, 254) overwhelms him so entirely that sanity deserts him for good, his “veins [swell], a frenzied look [gleams] in his eye” (289), he pulls the trigger and shoots Troy.

- 4 Thanks to Troy’s death, Bathsheba is the sole owner of her farm again; on the other hand, Boldwood’s sentence to confinement sets her free from her moral bond to him, and clears the way for Gabriel to become a farmer in his own turn: he “has arranged for Little Weatherbury farm” (302). Out of madness and chaos a new order emerges. And it all has to do with space and place, the latter word referring not only to a portion of space but also to a position in society.

Fixed spaces versus unstable characters

- 5 The lucifer matches Hardy mentions in his preface are friction matches, invented in 1826. As for the turnpike system, it went into decline with the expansion of the railways from the 1830s onwards. The novel is thus set in the years between 1830 and the railway mania of the 1840s. After that date, Bathsheba would probably have been able to take the train to go to Bath.
- 6 During those years, England was entirely under the effect of the enclosure movement which gained momentum with Arthur Young as Secretary of the new Board of Agriculture in 1793. If it is remembered that “enclosure basically meant dividing the land into compact holdings, separated from other holdings by hedges, walls or fences” (Sauvain 7), then the very precise and scrupulous division of space in the novel comes as no surprise. Or does it? Indeed, if references to gates, hedges and fences are relevant as purveyors of an effect of reality, their frequency cannot escape the reader’s attention as there is hardly any chapter that does not mention at least one of them. Apart from firmly grounding the text in a specific period, the numerous evocations of the instruments of land partition force themselves on the mind of the reader to suggest a fixity of space all the more reinforced by the remarkably high occurrences of such words as “doors” and “locks”. Space in *Far from the Madding Crowd* is thus a rigid grid that encloses the characters and that metaphorically evokes the strict social class system of Victorian Britain.
- 7 Beyond the picture of nicely organized patches of land (the turnpike gate also structures the territory) it may be the outline of an adamant system that perpetuates itself by maintaining people locked in the class they were born into that the text delineates (the reaction of some critics to Hardy’s works in general³ show how unyielding the Victorian ideology of class was).
- 8 However, against this background of immobile lines, the characters are astir and engaged in perpetual movement. As a matter of fact, there is a lot of door opening, door closing, walking, horse riding, gig driving, gate, fence or hedge crossing in the novel, all of which cannot but raise the reader’s attention again. This mobility of the characters accordingly

appears as a direct challenge to the immovability of space, and the reader is made to understand that boundaries (gates, fences and the social barriers they metaphorically suggest) are not so much natural, and fated to exist and hamper man in his natural desire to find a decent place for himself, as erected by man, or more exactly by a class of men, for their own interest. In this respect, the novel can read as the story of characters bent on overstepping the limits they were confined to by birth or circumstances, and building new spaces, literal or figurative, for themselves.

- 9 Five characters are seen in constant movement, Gabriel, Bathsheba, Boldwood, Troy and Fanny. For the last three it is to no avail.

From spatial movement to class mobility

- 10 What impels these characters to crisscross the territory is an anxiety of place, that is, an unrelenting drive to find for themselves a particular portion of space where they can belong. All of the five characters are allotted the same chances as, at some point in the text, all have to reconsider their situation and make a decision. All decide to move, but for three of them movement only brings them back to square one, namely, to death.
- 11 Fanny's, Troy's and Boldwood's movements, at times desperate, turn out to be useless. Fanny leaves Weatherbury to meet her lover Troy with the hope of marrying him. But whatever she undertakes fails, and her endless walking from one place to another only takes her to the union workhouse where she dies, utterly destitute. Fanny is *the* moving, walking character of the novel; she is also *the* victim and what the reader witnesses is her long days' journey into death. She is never seen indoors. She is always on the road and on the move, as if doomed to be denied any place where she could settle. Friendless from the beginning, she seems to be walking toward something that recedes as she moves forward – or backward rather, as she only moves from a private shelter (the house of Bathsheba's uncle) to a public shelter, the workhouse. The only place she ever seems to belong to is, ironically, her grave where she eventually rests in peace.
- 12 Troy's wanderings do not lead him to any better place. A soldier, he is from the start an unstable figure moving from place to place. His exile to the United States proves a financial and professional failure:
- He ultimately worked his passage to the United States, where he made a precarious living in various towns as Professor of Gymnastics, Sword Exercise, Fencing and Pugilism. A few months were sufficient to give him a distaste of this kind of life. (Hardy 1986, 260)
- 13 Like other long distance travellers in Hardy's works⁴, he only goes back to his home place to court disaster. He is shot by his rival as soon as he is recognized, as if death were for him the only possible outcome, being already counted among the dead by his community.
- 14 As regards Boldwood, his wanderings are not so much spatial as mental: it is true that he moves back and forth in Little Weatherbury when he goes to "his address beyond Casterbridge" (Hardy 1986, 152) and to "Bath and other towns" (294) where, it is revealed at the end, he buys clothes, accessories and jewellery for Bathsheba. Still, his journey is mainly a mental one, that of his mad daydream about Bathsheba becoming his wife one day. His life has become "a burden" without her (100) and he mentally builds a space where she has her due place – hence the closet with the clothes. When Troy asks whether "insanity has ever appeared in Mr Boldwood's family", one of the field workers answers

that he “once heard that an uncle of his was queer in his head” (184). Doomed to inherit a family madness that has so far lain dormant, Boldwood is a prisoner of an atavistic fate and is locked up in his mad dream. His confinement is the actual translation of what was already a psychic reality. Quite similarly to Fanny and Troy, he dies to the world without: “Boldwood entered, and the door of the gaol was closed behind him, and he walked the world no more” (290).

- 15 To this group of characters whose moves are useless, another stands in contrast, that of Gabriel and Bathsheba. Gabriel works his way up from a young shepherd to a bailiff and finally to a farmer. When reversals of fortune make him start anew because he loses his sheep, he leaves the place where his father and grandfather were shepherds before him to try his luck again. Always willing to seize a new opportunity, he will even plan, some time later, to emigrate to California. Little by little he manages to find a place for himself. Not any place, but the place he thinks he deserves. He considers poverty as a momentary stage before moving up the social scale again: “I used not to be so poor” he says (Hardy 1986, 55), and further on: “don’t suppose I’m content to be a nobody. I was made for better things” (151).
- 16 Bathsheba’s own journey takes her from an unnamed city (it is said that her parents were townfolk, Hardy 1986, 51) to her aunt’s place in Norcombe and eventually to Weatherbury. Notwithstanding her choice to marry Troy, she is proud enough to be unwilling to depend on a man. She thus never lets the farm she inherits go to the dogs, and always sees to it that the work is done.
- 17 The difference between these two groups of characters is that Gabriel and Bathsheba are proud, resolved to be independent, and determined to be restored to what they think is their due social position. By contrast, Troy’s, Fanny’s and Boldwood’s decisions are only motivated, respectively, by desire, love and even mad love, that is, by a passion that overwhelms them, renders them dependent on its sole object, and drives them to imprudence and negligence: Boldwood forgets to have his ricks covered, Troy cannot resist a pretty face and causes his own death, Fanny loses everything in the first place because she hurries to marry the man who has fathered her child.
- 18 Gabriel never yields to grief and despair as Boldwood does. As for Bathsheba, she does, at one point, not so much cry for her lover Troy as for the loss of her property: prior to the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882, a woman’s property became that of her husband on their marriage. Furthermore, Bathsheba confesses her rather tepid consent to marry (“the perception that had accompanied her happiest hours was rather that of self-sacrifice than of promotion and honour”, Hardy 1986, 211). She seems to have yielded to what decorum, convention and propriety demanded and now wishes she had not renounced her freedom for the sake of respectability: “O, if she had never stooped to folly of this kind, respectable as it was [...]” (212). Her claim to independence and her opinion on marriage (she goes as far as to advise Liddy never to tie the knot) defy Victorian conventions. They run against what Victorian values rest on, namely the family, with woman at its core as a devoted wife and mother. The novel later reaches an even more subversive dimension when Bathsheba’s eventual marriage to Gabriel marks the dawning of a new order.
- 19 The “rags to riches” story in which two poor people, totally destitute at some point, manage to climb the social ladder forces itself on the reader’s mind as being more than simply that. It not only shows how a young shepherd turns into a rich farmer. It also symbolically enacts the replacement of an obsolete, debilitated order, represented by its

last insane scion Boldwood, with a new one the social success of which is not inherited but based on its members' intelligence and abilities. Gabriel does not belong to the landed gentry, no estate has been passed down to him, he is no gentleman, he has not received a classical education as Boldwood may have, although he is a great reader. With the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867 as a social and political background, Gabriel represents the newly enfranchised leaseholders who constitute an emerging middle-class determined to have its share of the country's wealth (one of Gabriel's promises to Bathsheba at the start of the novel is that if she ever marries him she will have a piano, the piano in the parlour being a mark of middle-classness). The text does not stop here though. Indeed, the new order it builds is twofold.

- 20 In addition to its social and political aspect, this new order also sketches a new mode of relationship between spouses, and more generally between men and women. At the close of the novel, Bathsheba and Gabriel are thus not only on a par with each other, socially that is, but the text, generating a counter-discourse on women, suggests that their union establishes an equality that transcends gender-based constraints. The reason why Bathsheba ever starts to be less involved in her farm management is not because she is a woman but because she has been shaken by the events she has gone through and she has lost her energy. She has always resented the restrictions imposed on her sex, and she has always wanted to live like a man, that is to say, to enjoy the same rights to self-independence and freedom. But she ends up trapped in the only possible plot available, for her as a character, and for the author as well, that of a "shrew" tamed if not by a first, at least by a second husband.
- 21 Bathsheba's sensual pleasure with herself as evoked early in the book when she is riding her horse is not morally tolerable for the Victorians; nor is her stubborn resistance to Boldwood's proposal on the grounds that she does not love him and would rather live alone; nor is her regret at having married at all. And when she less than half-heartedly accepts Boldwood's proposal, she is no longer her own self. She has become (or seems to have become) tamed, in other words, transformed into a less rebellious and unmanageable woman. The relentless forces she has been fighting against, the standards of feminine propriety, have eventually managed to crush her will. Or so it seems. And the scene when Boldwood grasps her hand so much so that she cannot escape his firm grip while he slips an engagement ring on her finger brings to mind another scene when the then proud woman would not have her hand held: "loose my hands, she asked Gabriel, I won't have them held" (Hardy 1986, 104). The taming process has worked its way between these two significant moments. Or has it really? Here is what Bathsheba says shortly after she and Gabriel first meet: "I want somebody to tame me, I am too independent and you would never be able to, I know" (29). "Want" here does not necessarily mean "would like to" but can also be simply understood as "lack", as Bathsheba knows that she should be shepherded back to the submissiveness that becomes her sex. By having her eventually marry Gabriel though, the text manages to sideline conventions and the expected conventional outcome. Although it ends with a wedding in due form, the new order of things it adumbrates is more akin to John Stuart Mill's vision of marriage than to a strict version of Victorian union. It is for example made very clear, albeit inconspicuously, that Bathsheba's property will remain her own and that the same will apply to Gabriel. The text remains vague so as to make it uncertain whether Bathsheba and Gabriel will ever live under the same roof. On the evening of their wedding day,

[t]he two sat down very quietly to tea in Bathsheba's parlor [...] for it had been arranged that Farmer Oak should go there to live, since he had as yet neither money, house, nor furniture worthy of the name, though he was on a sure way towards them, whilst Bathsheba was, comparatively, in a plethora of all three. (307)

- 22 The reader is inclined to understand that it is a transitory situation. At least it is what “as yet” implies, due to the fact that Gabriel will not start his tenure of Boldwood's farm until Lady Day, namely March 25. But the text keeps eloquently silent on what they will do afterwards. Will Bathsheba move to Gabriel's house once he has money, a house and furniture worthy of the name, or will she stay in her own house? Meaning remains uncertain. The text seems to refrain from having the newly-wed couple settle the way people usually do. As a matter of fact, not only does Bathsheba marry the very man she thinks is unable to tame her, but her living standards are still, although only momentarily now, higher than his. Most importantly, despite Gabriel's claims of her as “his” wife, the text seems to imply, although indirectly, that she will retain sole ownership of her property. Interestingly, the verb “have” is used for Gabriel (“he *had* as yet neither money, house, nor furniture worthy of the name”, Hardy 1986, 307) whereas for Bathsheba, it is “be” that is resorted to to explain that she is wealthy (she “*was*, comparatively, in a plethora of all three”). Her wealth thus belongs to her not as something she *has* but something she *is*, as if it were a state of being she could not be deprived of. The implicit moral agreement that seems to characterize their union is redolent of what John Stuart Mill had developed earlier in his “Statement on Marriage”, written in 1851 as he was about to marry Harriet Taylor. There, he announced that his wife would “retain the same absolute freedom of action, and freedom of disposal of herself and of all that does or may at any time belong to her, as if no such marriage had taken place” (Mill, vol. 21, 97).
- 23 The ambiguity of Hardy's text leaves space for another interpretation, and another, unofficial text appears between the lines, according to which Bathsheba and Gabriel do not conform to what is expected from them. This unofficial text is the palimpsest of a text yet to be written, a short story that Hardy was to compose thirteen years later (in the summer of 1887), and which he substantially revised in 1913 to remove whatever had been there to comply with the publishers' and the public's wishes. Entitled “The Waiting Supper”, it depicts two lovers reunited after years of separation who decide to live as they are, unmarried but close to each other as their respective houses are only a few hundred meters apart. The similarities between the two works seem to be more than simply fortuitous, which makes it possible to think about the ending of *Far from the Madding Crowd* as a hypotextual version of the conclusion reached in the story. Conversely, the ending of the story, a hypertext to that of the novel, is to some extent already in the novel as a ghost text that remains to be written and that will voice what the novel left unsaid. Although it is not always wise to draw parallels between an author's life and his works, one such parallel is appropriate here. 1874, the year of the novel's completion, was also that of Hardy's first wedding. It is very probable that he could only confusedly shape his opinion on marriage at the time, but his text nevertheless contains the seeds of a mature reflection on it and on what he obviously already considers its disastrous effects on love (Troy's sneering judgment on marriage expresses just that)⁵. Interestingly enough, it was in 1889, two years after he wrote “The Waiting Supper”, that he made the following notebook entry: “Love lives on propinquity, but dies of contact” (F. Hardy 220). In 1874, he could probably feel that to him, there was something wrong with living with somebody but he had at that time no other solution to suggest, or simply he could not suggest any other solution, for propriety's sake. Hence, maybe, the text's indecision as

regards Bathsheba and Gabriel's *modus operandi*. Hence, too, the 1887 short story followed by its 1913 version's unambiguous ending with the lovers living separately: Hardy had then more to say and was also freer to say more.

- 24 *Far from the Madding Crowd* also examines the nature of the love-bond. Like all of Hardy's texts, it makes it very clear that the feeling has nothing to do with passion, which is only doomed to abate. It is a "substantial affection", "strong as death", a "good-fellowship, camaraderie" quite akin to the comradely love close friends can experience (Hardy 1986, 303). Besides, the text calls Bathsheba and Gabriel "friends", "such tried friends" (303), which constitutes another subversive moment of the novel. As a matter of fact, the "Angel in the House" the wife is supposed to be has nothing of the friend or the comrade. Such a creature (named after the poem by Coventry Patmore) is supposedly all obedience, meekness and devotion, all three characteristics incompatible with genuine friendship. But the reader is clearly made to understand, as he will also be in "The Waiting Supper" and in others of Hardy's texts, that the only lasting bond involves both equality (parity, deep affinity that is) and propinquity, as opposed to contact.
- 25 Against the rigid grid that makes up the social frame of the story, there is thus constant movement, places gained and places lost. At the close of the novel, the cards have been reshuffled and one class of characters has survived, who are not the poorest or the wealthiest but those in between, strong-willed, bent on finding a place of their own and reluctant to depend on other people either financially or emotionally. If such a portrait seems to be that of Gabriel, it is also that of Bathsheba, Gabriel's mimetic double: it is none of the women around her but Gabriel whom Bathsheba tries to imitate when, realizing that what she has been trained to be, say and feel as a woman leads her nowhere, she desperately seeks a role model:

She suddenly felt a longing to speak to someone stronger than herself, and so get strength to sustain her surmised position with dignity and her carking doubts with stoicism. Where could she find such a friend? Nowhere in the house. She was by far the coolest of the women under her roof. Patience and suspension of judgment for a few hours were what she wanted to learn, and there was nobody to teach her. Might she go to Gabriel Oak!—but that could not be. What a way Oak had, she thought, of enduring things. Boldwood, who seemed so much deeper and higher and stronger in feeling than Gabriel, had not yet learnt, any more than she herself, the simple lesson which Oak showed a mastery of by every turn and look he gave [...]. That was how she would wish to be. (Hardy 1986, 226)
- 26 *Far from the Madding Crowd* not only presents a collapsing old order superseded by a rising rural middle-class whose access to property is less due to inheritance than to merit and ability. It also delineates an order of things that goes beyond what the Victorian middle-class believed was proper concerning "the relation of the sexes" (Orel 127), with a man and a woman — the latter not so tamed after all — forming a couple that quite defies the Victorian conception of married life and the relations between spouses.
- 27 Movement in space has been metaphorically translated into social movement (into social ascent for Bathsheba and Gabriel) and political discourse, the latter being for Hardy an ever-present component of what he calls "a sincere school of fiction": to him, a writer is endowed with the mission of "reflect[ing] life, reveal[ing] life, criticis[ing] life" (Orel 127).

Contextualization and the Victorian concept of poverty

- 28 Seeking to further “express truly the views of life prevalent in [his] time” (Orel 127), Hardy broaches another topic, poverty, held dear by the Victorians as it involves such notions as morality and immorality. But if his text reproduces the standard apprehension of poverty as closely related to morality, it is only to invalidate it.
- 29 Victorian society was a strict class society divided into two groups, the wealthy, or at least the socially successful who were gradually acceding to higher living standards, and the poor. This group was itself composed of two sub-divisions, the deserving poor and the undeserving poor. The first category was thought to be a necessary ingredient of society. The members of the second were deemed unmoral and responsible for their plight. In *The Relief of Poverty, 1834-1914*, Michael E. Rose writes:
- [t]he nineteenth century had inherited the attitude that such a state of affairs [the existence of poverty] was right and proper. Poverty had been regarded by many writers as a necessary element in society, since only by feeling its pinch could the labouring poor be inspired to work. Thus it was not poverty but pauperism or destitution which was regarded as a social problem. Faced with this problem, many early Victorians adopted an attitude which combined fatalism, ‘the poor ye have always with you’, and moralism: destitution was the result of individual weakness of character. (Rose 10)
- 30 The novel’s narrative discourse resorts to the morally-charged discourse on the deserving poor familiar to the Victorian middle-class readership. It is interspersed with phrases like “sustained efforts of industry” (Hardy 1986, 13) or “promising look and character” (34), usually referring to Gabriel, able-bodied, provident, self-reliant and thus deserving, who is one of the “members of the working class [rural or not, my comment], likely to experience poverty at some period of their lives” (Rose 9). Compared to Troy and the various rustics who cannot resist a good drink even when a storm is brewing and the ricks need to be covered, Gabriel’s temperance enhances their, and mostly Troy’s, improvidence. A balanced mixture of pride and selflessness, Gabriel is devoted to Bathsheba as his employer probably as much because he loves her as because he is highly conscientious. Another of his qualities to complete this appealing portrait designed to please the Victorian public is his thriftiness: he still makes his own bed even though he could afford a servant. As such, Gabriel guarantees the moral quality of the book.
- 31 At the other end of the spectrum stands Fanny. She exemplifies the undeserving poor and is clearly meant to contrast and highlight her fellow characters Bathsheba and Gabriel, and thus to activate the novel’s own discourse on poverty – “own discourse” as opposed to the official discourse that legitimated the treatment of poverty in Victorian England, or, one should say, “the morally wasting disease of pauperism” (Rose 11). Fanny provides Hardy with the opportunity of introducing direct references to the “workhouse”, and consequently indirect references to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Until that date, the needy received assistance, material and financial, directly from their parishes: they could be sheltered in workhouses and a Poor Rate was levied on the parishes’ inhabitants. But from 1834 onwards, money and other forms of help were only given in the workhouse (so-called “indoor relief”). There, the harsh living conditions were supposed to work as a deterrent from asking for help and more generally to being poor, a moral stigma being attached to poverty or rather to pauperism. With this background in mind, Troy’s efforts to give Fanny money so that she will not have to go to the workhouse can be more

forcefully interpreted. There, she is sure to be found guilty on two counts. By seeking help, she will prove her “undeservingness”: she will be thought to “lack the moral determination to survive outside [the workhouse]”⁶. Secondly, as she is pregnant and unmarried, she will be considered a fallen woman and exposed to the workhouse staff’s contempt and bullying; she is also bound to be separated from her baby once it is born, as all women were. That Fanny dies in the union workhouse was thus doubly expected by the Victorian public: the conditions there were harsh, and she had to be punished as an unmoral character.

- 32 So far, the text complies with the requirements publishers placed on authors. Compared to Fanny, Gabriel, again, epitomizes the deserving poor whose success, after a dire period of destitution, seems to justify the whole system and prove it is based on sound grounds. His example legitimizes, at first glance at least, the recourse to the notions of merit, industry and self-help to account for a poor person pulling himself (herself is another story) out of poverty. By contrast, the fate reserved to Fanny is that of a well-deserved death.
- 33 Yet, the text brings evidence of the limits of such ideology as it takes pains to carefully explain Fanny’s situation and as it implicitly invites the reader to compare it with Bathsheba’s and Gabriel’s. This in turn delegitimizes the official discourse on poverty. Another layer of the text’s subversiveness then appears that discloses the inefficiency of the system. If access to a higher standard of living for the poor, albeit difficult, was not impossible, two impediments were likely to stand in their way. First “the working classes were encouraged to improve but they were also reminded they should be content with their lot as labourers” (Loftus). Secondly, such a task was difficult to achieve without the development of “personal contacts and supportive connections”, of an “access to networks of support” and of course of “family relations and family friends” (Loftus). If the reference here is to the setting-up of businesses or the access to a profession in an urban environment, the comments apply to rural contexts as well. Fanny, Bathsheba and Gabriel all experience poverty, to different degrees, but only Fanny dies of it.
- 34 Compared to her fellow characters, she accumulates the weaknesses that will precipitate her doomed fate. In point of fact, she has no real friend and she is a woman. But what is more, she has no family. Her lineage, unlike Gabriel’s or Bathsheba’s, is not easily traced (in contrast to her, Gabriel probably started working with his father, whose name he bears, and Bathsheba has an aunt to live with as a protection against poverty, and an uncle whose tenancy she inherits). Fanny embodies the all too easily seduced and abandoned maid whose untimely pregnancy leads to her losing whatever paid activity she had as soon as her state starts showing (she found a job in Melchester as a seamstress in the house of a “very respectable widow-woman” [Hardy 1986, 214], “very respectable” having here an ominous undertone for the modern reader who understands that Fanny was probably turned away by such a woman). Bathsheba’s former maid is trapped in a fate she has no means of escaping because society has no way out of it for the type of women she is supposed to represent. The only possible outcome for her is punishment and death, such a conventional ending nevertheless putting a prudish veil over the gruesome reality of poor women sometimes compelled to resort to prostitution to survive (Barret-Ducrocq 51-52). Through this character, the text points out the inappropriateness of using moral categories where only social analyses should be applied. Hardy’s is a sociologist’s eye with the aim of depicting society as it is. This stance puts him at cross-purposes with the publishers’ and the public’s expectation of finding their worldview

reproduced in fiction, and with the moral authorities of his time, still prone to consider poverty a moral disease. To achieve his goal Hardy contrasts two young women who could have experienced the same fate (pregnancy out of wedlock, complete destitution, death) had it not been for the “supportive connections” (Loftus) which one of them, Bathsheba, was lucky enough to have and which saved her, first by supplying her with sustenance when she had “hardly a penny in the world” (Hardy 1986, 129) then by bequeathing an abode to her. Yet, Bathsheba knows that she could become poor again if she lost her farm’s tenancy: “Once out of the farm, the approach of poverty would be sure” (249).

- 35 The spectre of destitution thus remains a constant dread, which emphasizes the connection between the two female characters. Thanks to this link it creates, the text manages to both show a situation and question the way it is addressed. In other words, it calls into question the efficiency and relevance of the discourse on poverty as a discourse on morality. To do so, it brings the reader into an intimacy, if with not exactly with Fanny at least with her story, it avoids moral allusions or judgment, and shows that her plight has nothing to do with immorality but with the lack of parental nurturing care and of a serious education, and consequently with the fact of being a poor and uneducated woman who has grown up parentless. In Hardy’s works, novels and short stories alike, the absence of one or the two parents for the main character is too frequent to be casual and groundless. On the other hand, education is, with this author, a recurring theme. Incidentally, women’s lack of education, due to the restrictions imposed on their sex, was the reason why he only half-heartedly agreed to their enfranchisement. To him, man is responsible for women’s intellectual insufficiency: “Man himself is responsible for the vacuum in women’s brains” (Dutta 202). Under such conditions, Hardy considered it unsafe to grant women the right to vote.
- 36 However critical and subversive the novel’s discourse on poverty may be because it does away with the concept of morality, it reaches another dimension of transgression in its treatment of Fanny’s resting place. If Fanny’s death pays lips service to the conventional ending required for a ruined woman, the text manages to challenge and even mock that convention by having Fanny’s grave planted with flowers (and trimmed by Bathsheba) with the headstone explicitly mentioning the amorous relationship that united her to Bathsheba’s husband-to-be. Also daring is the author’s choice to have Bathsheba forgive and pity a woman who bore her husband’s child. Bathsheba finally harbours no resentment against Fanny and even decides to keep her coil of hair instead of burning it. Her behaviour thus also invalidates the official discourse on so-called fallen women. And instead of being forgotten as decorum would demand that she be, Fanny will remain in Bathsheba’s memory as a “poor thing”, worthy of being remembered.
- 37 The text’s narrative sympathy towards Fanny, who happens to be a more important character than may first appear, fuels the issue of the treatment of poverty that the novel introduces. Again it all has to do with movement. Against and in spite of a rigid background of conventions, biases and prejudices, the text moves forward and articulates a reconsideration of the way of the world in Victorian Britain. More exactly the text becomes the very space where that reconsideration can take place.

- 38 The successful undertaking of *Far from the Madding Crowd*'s protagonists parallels that of the author. Hardy's literary career was launched by the very favourable reception of the book's monthly instalments over the year 1874 and its publication in volume form in the November of the same year. 1874 is thus a landmark, as Hardy then both earned a position as a recognized British writer and claimed his moral property of Wessex, a combination of the historical, the actual and the imaginary, a dream place that shelters the raw material of his childhood memories and his adult literary re-creations. With *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy proved he was "a good hand at a serial"⁷, which he had resolved to become a few years before because it conditioned his works' commercial success. On the other hand, the novel also confirmed his ability to refrain from "nailing his colour to the mast too definitely" (Hardy 1984, 62-63), a reproach Meredith had addressed to him on the occasion of his first rejected and unpublished novel. Yet such apparent compliance only screens a strong determination never to totally yield to the publishers' demands. For example, when he was asked by Leslie Stephen, editor of the *Cornhill Magazine* to "remove all evidence of Fanny Robin's illegitimate baby [...]" Hardy went a very long way to minimize its presence" (Page 385). Hardy's freedom sometimes lay just there, in the space between "remove" and "minimize". And however squeezed that freedom was, he never gave it up. He never lowered his colours but always managed to hide them somewhere in the text. Wessex was the place where his imagination could run free. His text was the place where his imagination took shape. And when that could no longer be, after the fierce attacks on *Jude the Obscure* in 1895, Hardy did not give up his colours, he gave up the text, the prose text. He then chose to devote himself to another type of text, the verse text, to him the only free textual space:

Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion — hard as a rock — which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting [...]. If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have let him alone. (F. Hardy, 284-285)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barret-Ducrocq, Françoise, *Love in the Time of Victoria*, London & New York: Verso, 1991.
- Crowther, M. A., *The Workhouse System, 1834-1929. The History of an English Social Institution*, Cambridge: CUP, 1981.
- Dutta, Shanta, *Ambivalence in Hardy. A Study of his Attitude to Women*, London: Macmillan, 2000.
- Green, Laura, "'Strange [In]difference of Sex': Thomas Hardy, the Victorian Man of Letters, and the Temptation of Androgyny", *Victorian Studies* 38.4, (Summer 1995): 523-549.
- Hardy, Florence Emily, *The Life of Thomas Hardy. 1840-1928*, London: Macmillan, 1962.
- Hardy, Thomas, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate, London: Macmillan, 1984.
- Hardy, Thomas, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), ed. Robert C. Schweik, New York & London: Norton, 1986.

Lodge, David, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2008.

Loftus, Donna, "The Rise of the Victorian Middle Class", *British History in Depth*, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/middle_classes_01.shtml, last accessed 24 April 2016.

Mill, John Stuart, *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education*. The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, ed. John M. Robson, Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963-1991, 33 vols, The Online Library of Liberty, last accessed 24 April 2016.

Orel, Harold (ed.), *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, London: Macmillan, 1967.

Page, Norman (ed.), *Oxford Reader's Companion to Hardy*, Oxford: OUP, 2000.

Rose, Michael E., *The Relief of Poverty, 1834-1914*, London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1990.

Sauvain, Philip, *British Economic and Social History, 1700-1870*, Leckhampton, England: Stanley Thornes Ltd, 1987.

NOTES

1. William Drummond (1585-1649). His collection *Poems* was published in 1616. It is divided into two parts. The 43rd sonnet, partly quoted below, belongs to the first part:

What sweet delight a quiet life affords,
And what it is to be of bondage free,
Far from the madding worldling's hoarse discords,
Sweet flow'ry place, I first did learn of thee:
Ah I if I were mine own, your dear resorts
I would not change with princes' stately courts.

2. The Thomas Gray Archive, last accessed February 2011.

3. Mowbray Morris was chief editor for *Macmillan's Magazine* from 1885 to 1907. His condescension toward Hardy as a writer from the lower classes is blatant: "[Hardy] is too apt to affect a certain preciosity of phrase which has a somewhat incongruous effect in a tale of rustic life; he is too fond — and the practice has been growing on him through all his later books — of writing like a man 'who has been at a great feast of languages and stole the scraps,' or, in plain English, of making experiments in a form of language which he does not seem clearly to understand, and in a style for which he was assuredly not born. It is a pity, for Mr Hardy had a very good style of his own once, and one moreover excellently suited to the subjects he knew and was then content to deal with" (quoted in Green 535).

4. Oswald Winwood in "Destiny and a Blue Cloak" (1874), Clym in *The Return of the Native* (1878), Mr. Barnet in "Fellow-Townsmen" (1880), Phil in "Interlopers at the Knap" (1884) and the son of John Lackland in "A Few Crusted Characters" (1890).

5. "All romances end at marriage" (Hardy 1986, 209); "You knew what married life would be like, and shouldn't have entered it if you feared these contingencies" (210).

6. "The [1834] law was based on a hard belief that the deserving poor and the undeserving poor could be distinguished from each other by a simple test: anyone who accepted relief in the repellent workhouse must be lacking the moral determination to survive outside it" (Crowther 3).

7. In a letter to Leslie Stephen in 1874 (F. Hardy 100).

ABSTRACTS

Far from the Madding Crowd marks the dawning of Hardy's literary career. It is also the first of Hardy's works to introduce "Wessex", a place name referring to "the horizons and landscapes of a merely realistic dream-country" (preface, 1895). For Hardy, the urge to find a name that encompasses the whole territory covered by his stories has to do with the need for "a territorial definition of some sort to lend unity to their scene" (preface). And as the texts gain a soil to take root in, Hardy gains a name as an acclaimed writer and a place to belong to. To the outcast who turned his back on a long family line of rural workers and the trespasser who overstepped class barriers to be admitted into a middle-class that oftentimes only grudgingly tolerated him, such a dream place may have represented the only free space where the self-created author could escape the contingencies of his reality. It is both imaginary, as the backdrop of the stories (although based on reality) and mental, as there only could Hardy repeatedly shape the raw material of his childhood memories and adult re-creations into literary form. *Far from the Madding Crowd* appropriately evinces an anxiety of place, as it also tells about characters struggling to find a place of their own, sometimes achieving their quest, sometimes failing to do so and receding into death. The text reaches its final word with a return to an order of things and place that probably raised a few eyebrows among "right-minded" reviewers, critics and readers (Hardy's expression).

Far from the Madding Crowd marque l'essor de la carrière de romancier de Thomas Hardy. Il est également le premier des textes de l'auteur à introduire le Wessex comme univers diégétique. L'appropriation d'un espace particulier, aussi imaginaire soit-il, est ainsi pour Hardy la condition pour un libre exercice de l'écriture. C'est aussi dans cette quête d'un espace à soi que les personnages du roman sont engagés, certains avec succès, d'autres non. Sur fond d'espaces savamment organisés de telle sorte à évoquer métaphoriquement la fixité de l'organisation sociale des classes, les personnages sont constamment en mouvement. Seuls ceux qui parviennent à maîtriser l'espace qui les entoure et à le faire leur sont capables de défier les limites imposées par leur naissance et d'accéder à une définition de soi, choisie.

INDEX

Keywords: social classes, space, place, poverty, workhouses, property, gender

Mots-clés: classes sociales, espace, lieu, pauvreté, hospices victoriens, propriété, genre

AUTHOR

NATHALIE BANTZ

Dr Nathalie Bantz defended her PhD dissertation on Hardy's short stories at Nancy University in April 2009 and has published it as a book, *Les Nouvelles de Thomas Hardy. Stratégies narratives d'une écriture sous contrainte*. Her research focuses on the subversive aspects of Hardy's works and more

particularly on gender issues. She has also started to work on a translation of some of Hardy's short stories still unpublished in French