FATHOM

a French e-journal of Thomas Hardy studies

1 | 2013
The Letter

Introduction

Hardy's lettering, a "mystic character"

Introduction : la lettre hardyenne, "caractère mystique"

Annie Ramel

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/fathom/224>

DOI: 10.4000/fathom.224

ISSN: 2270-6798

Publisher

Association française sur les études sur Thomas Hardy

Electronic reference

Annie Ramel, « Introduction », *FATHOM* [Online], 1 | 2013, Online since 11 July 2013, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/fathom/224> ; DOI : 10.4000/fathom.224

This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

Introduction

Hardy's lettering, a "mystic character"

Introduction : la lettre hardyenne, "caractère mystique"

Annie Ramel

- 1 "The Letter" in Thomas Hardy's work was the subject chosen for the 2009 international conference on Thomas Hardy, organized in Rouen (France) by Stéphanie Bernard. It was on that occasion that FATHOM, the French Association for Thomas Hardy Studies, was founded.

The "letter" was taken in its double acceptation: a written message, an epistolary exchange, used by people to communicate with each other, and a grapheme, the trace left on a page by a "man of letters"—those traces being made available to a multiplicity of readers through printing and publishing. In that second sense, the "letter" comes very close to referring to Hardy's *writing*, to his novels, short-stories, poems, notes, essays, letters, etc. For after all what is a literary text if not a collection of "letters", arranged and combined with each other to produce a meaning, and to give pleasure to a reader?

In the first sense of the word "letter" (the letter as "epistle"), a further distinction appears necessary: between Hardy's personal letters, in which the speaker is the author himself, and the letters whose speaker is fictional, whether in a novel or in a poem. Letters in the real world, sent by real people, should be distinguished from letters within a text—like for instance the letters exchanged between Tess and her mother, or between Raye and Edith in "On the Western Circuit". We will focus mostly on the second category. If we take "letter" in the second acceptation (a grapheme), we realize that the "letters" of a text are not only the printed letters on the page, but also the letters within the text, all the inscriptions that are part of the diegetic world: for instance the fiery red letters painted on a stile by a religious fanatic in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the letters engraved on the marble stones at Kingsbere, those of "The Compleat Fortune-Teller" (a book "so worn by pocketing that the margins had reached the edge of the type"; Hardy 2003, 23), the letters on the coffin-plate that tell the two suitors that their beloved Elfride is dead in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, the letters engraved by Jude, the words chalked by Gabriel Oak on Fanny's coffin, etc. All those are letters within the text.

Letters within the text, whether they are graphemes or epistles, raise a crucial question:

what is their relation to the text within which they exist, a text produced by an arrangement of letters on a page? Isn't it strange that the word "letter" should apply to both the letters written and read by the characters in the diegetic world and the systems of textuality that represent them? Do those intradiegetic letters, in their various forms, insofar as they reduplicate the text we are reading, create ironical effects, such effects as Jean Baudrillard might have called "the irony of too much reality"? In that perspective the tautology may signal an "excess in reality", a reality so pregnant with sense that there is no way out of a fate that is already written. On the other hand those letters may work as a "mise-en-abyme" of the literary text itself, hinting at the lack of a final significance. For a *mise-en-abyme*, which literally means "throwing into an abyss", always gives you an impression of vertigo, caused by a sense that meaning eludes you, that no ultimate significance may be secured. Redundancy may be read either as an excess in signification, or as a deficiency in signification, when we reach the point where meaning falters. So do the letters within the text produce too much sense, or not enough?

- 2 For **Laurence Estanove**, in "Reality in excess: Letters and Telegrams in Thomas Hardy's poetry", Hardy's poetry, by suggesting a link between the letters within the poem and the poem itself, that is to say a continuity from world to text, creates a form of "visual redundancy", whereby Hardy materializes an "irony of correspondence", Baudrillard's "irony of too much reality". Thus the belief that "the letter killeth" is asserted once more by Hardy: Tess's fate is determined by the excessive power of words, by the "wound" inscribed in her very name. Sometimes, the article argues, the ironic duplication of the poem may endanger the poet's voice itself, when the letter becomes an almost autonomous *persona* in the poem, somehow threatening to usurp the poet's place and power. As Hardy admitted, "one may write a book without knowing what one puts into it" (Hardy 1989, 259). Then couldn't one ascribe the "death of the author"—understood as the dismissal of a text by a disapproving reader, or more largely as its newly-won independence from its creator—to the power of letter, in both senses of the word? Does the letter "kill" an author, or is it not rather what brings life to him, and to his readers? The question raised here is the following: does the letter kill, or does it vivify?
- 3 If Tess is a "tex", in likeness to the "tex" painted on the stile by the fanatic, then she is doomed from the onset. The confusion of her body (a blank page on which Alec has traced a "coarse pattern") with a text allows no space for life. In that case, it is clear that "the letter killeth", a point made by the epigraph from *Jude the Obscure*. **Annie Ramel**, in "The letter that vivifies in Hardy's texts", shows that, in the diegetic world of Hardy's novels, the letter has a lethal power, whatever meaning may be ascribed to the word: as Annie Escuret pointed out, it is a collision with the *mail-cart* that kills Prince, the horse of the Durbeyfields (Escuret-Bertrand 582). And there are innumerable instances in Hardy's work of letters that fail to reach their addressee, or that should never have been sent (like Bathsheba's Valentine card), or that are unsealed too soon, or too late, by the wrong person, thus divulging secrets that should have remained private. And those untimely disclosures, or the failure to impart some vital information, always bring about tragic consequences. But on the other hand it is a widespread belief that the "literary" letter does not kill: we tend to think that, on the contrary, it vivifies. Why is it so? What strange process turns the deadly letter of tragedy into the life-giving letter of the literary text? Such are the questions which that paper tries to address.
- 4 What is crucial here is the relation between text and body: when Tess's body becomes "intextuated" (Certeau 243), death and tragedy are looming ahead. So is it vital for bodies

to be radically distinct from texts? Should the letter be strictly confined within the symbolic realm, without any possible encroachment on the body's life and enjoyment? Should it remain alien to *jouissance*? In her article on two "women of letters", "'An Imaginative Woman' and 'On the Western Circuit': Women of Letters and the Irony of Life", **Stéphanie Bernard** addresses the question, in all its complexity. The two short stories are about a split between bodies and letters: in "On the Western Circuit", both writers (Edith Harnam and Raye) fall in love with an other who exists only through the letters they read. It is Anna, not Edith, who marries Raye, a situation that Edith finds unbearable, wishing Anna's child were hers. Ella Marchmill, in "An Imaginative Woman", never meets the poet she has fallen in love with. Her only physical contact with him is through reading letters traced on the bedroom wall by the poet's hand. In both stories the other's body is "captured in a dream that becomes a dead letter". Yet it is letters that cause love in both stories: Ella's experience, as she deciphers the writings on the wall, is strongly erotic; the lines and curves of the letters touch her like a caress, as the hands of the poet might have done. So the Letter (especially the Letter of the Law) may kill and petrify, when disconnected from human bodies. But the poetic letter is a burning substance of enjoyment, which can give rise to love and create new worlds. It is that bond to the body which has the power to vivify.

- 5 **Fabienne Gaspari** too addresses the question of the body's relation to text in "'A Letter for me?': Letters and Destiny in 'Destiny and a Blue Cloak' and 'An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress'". In the two stories, the written word results in the victimization of the heroine, as it ensures the triumph of patriarchal authority. Following Elisabeth Bronfen's analysis, the author of the article shows how the lack of a stable distinction between body and sign, between figural and literal meaning, leads to tragedy—thus confirming Hardy's assertion that "the Letter killeth". Woman as a form of payment to cancel a debt means that a woman's body turns into a sign, in other words that a woman's flesh (a "pound of flesh", one might say) comes to be substituted for the Symbolic debt. In the wake of Marjorie Garson's work, the article argues that engraving words in stone, or making them substantial by writing them on paper, is an attempt at making them real, incarnate. This article's conclusion differs from that of Annie Ramel (for instance), in that it sees all writing, including the "literary" letter, as a form of engraving, or in-graving (putting in a grave). Derrida's influence is traceable here, especially the idea that "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" (Bronfen 69). Two radically different visions of the Letter are therefore juxtaposed in this volume: the Lacanian letter, which vivifies, and the Derridean "testamentary" grapheme. The reader will of course benefit from the possibility of comparing the two approaches. On the question of "texts within the text", which in "The Indiscretion of an Heiress" are quotations from English poets heading each chapter, Fabienne Gaspari tends to agree with Laurence Estanove, in her belief that they reproduce the structuring principle of Hardy's fiction, namely the existence of a programme orchestrating a relentless movement towards failure and death. They are a form of tautology.
- 6 **Gildas Lemardelé's** article, "Love and Letter: Pauline Epistles and Rewriting in Thomas Hardy's Novels", takes the biblical "letter" in its epistolary sense, but also in the more general sense of a "text", since the focus is on intertextual borrowings from the Holy Scriptures, more particularly on the subversion of the Pauline concept of *agapè*, the principle of love *par excellence*. For the sacred texts within Hardy's text, far from being

taken literally, have undergone a process of rewriting which has radically altered their purport: in a universe devoid of a transcendent and personal God, Hardy's "selfless love" (his secularized version of *agapè*) is always thwarted, ineffective, vain, sometimes ridiculed. It often has fatal consequences. Selfless characters are not rewarded, but made to suffer. Thus the Biblical hypotext serves to heighten the tragic dimension of the novels. But the complexity of Hardy's adaptation of Pauline principles forbids any sense of closure. Intertextuality here is not tautological, it opens a space for interpretation, and allows the display of beauty and truth.

- 7 **Jacqueline Dillion** too focuses on the part played by Scripture in Hardy's fiction, in "'Unholy Exclamations': Scripture as Fetish in *Far from the Madding Crowd*". But she is more particularly concerned with the Biblical letter as fetish, in an article written against the historical backcloth of nineteenth-century studies on fetishism (Auguste Comte and Edward Tylor). And there she finds herself dealing with one of the main issues of this volume, the question of the relation between text and body: if signifier, signified, and referent are one and the same; if the fetish, rather than the representation of meaning, is according to Comte meaning itself, it is clear that language can no longer re-present an absent thing. When language turns performative (as in Joseph Poorgrass's use of Christian prayer, Old Testament law, and Anglican liturgy), it "presentifies" the thing and ceases to function as "the murder of the thing" (Lacan 104). What becomes problematic then is language itself, which is the very question raised by the end of the article. Though most of the episodes studied are usually considered humorous and light, they involve the crucial issues debated in this volume.
- 8 **Isabelle Gadoin**, in "Le blanc de la lettre dans *Far from the Madding Crowd*" (the sole article in French of this selection), begins with some reflections on the signifying "blanks" between the letters of a text. Then she moves on to the other sense of the word "letter", to the Valentine card sent by Bathsheba to Boldwood. And finds that, far from allowing communication between an "I" and a "you", between a sender (whose name is unknown, left as blank) and a receiver (defined by his social status, absent from the message which contains no personal pronoun referring to him), the letter is in fact illegible: Boldwood remains stupefied, at a loss to understand what he has received; his mind goes blank—like his eyes, "wide-spread and vacant" (Hardy 1986, 81). Here, the disjunction between the letter and the world it is supposed to represent, between words and things, text and context, is the widest possible. But the article goes further by showing how the unreadable letter, as it becomes a blot of blood on Boldwood's retina, turns into something which is no longer readable, but pure visibility: we have moved from the readable to the visible, from the dead letter to the living sign, from the linguistic to the semiotic. The letter has been made incarnate. The other of intersubjective relations turns into the Other, whose injunction ("Marry me") is an imperative that cannot be ignored. Paradoxically, the maximum disjunction between the letter and the world turns into pure conjunction, as letter and flesh become one. The article ends with a parallel (inspired by Kandinsky) between the illegible letter as sheer visibility and absolute silence—a silence full of potentialities. For the letter thus conceived may open vistas into the invisible, the inaudible, the unspeakable.
- 9 The unspeakable is the subject broached by **Émilie Loriaux** in "Some Strategies of Concealment in Hardy's language". The focus is on the language used by the heroines: Tess's "good English" learnt during her "troubles", Fanny's letter to Gabriel, written in a formal register that shows her aspiration to a higher social class, yet has a tragic

resonance. The article then studies the effects produced by punctuation (dashes in particular) as well as extra-linguistic forms of writing, such as onomatopoeia, whose transcription is “personal to an author” and which betray Hardy’s sympathy with the life and language of country folks. But Hardy’s use of such forms, which are “beyond language”, is much more than that, it is the medium chosen to express the “unstateable”, the “unspeakable”—like the prolonged “murmur of unspeakable despair” uttered by Tess before she kills Alec (Hardy 2003, 380). The phoneme “o” repeated by Tess is prelinguistic, it is a “natural” sound according to the OED, it is “pure”, “untinctured” English. The unsayable is conveyed to us through Tess’s cries and murmurs. In such climactic scenes the inexpressible is half-concealed, half-revealed, by the use of “mystic character” (Hardy 2000, 186)— a phrase applied to the hoof-prints left by Bathsheba’s horse, “difficult to describe in words” (Hardy 2000, 184).

- 10 “Mystic character” may be taken as a metatextual reference to Hardy’s lettering, which remains forever to be deciphered. It is the very subject that all the papers in this volume have tried to address.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bronfen, Elisabeth, “Pay as You Go: on the Exchange of Bodies and Signs”, ed. Margaret R. Higonnet, *The Sense of Sex: Feminist Perspectives on Hardy*, Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993, 66-86.

Certeau, Michel de, “Inscriptions de la loi sur le corps”, *L’Invention du quotidien. Arts de faire*, 1, Paris: UGE, 10/18, 1980.

Escuret-Bertrand, Annie, “L’œuvre romanesque de Thomas Hardy (1840-1928): lecture”, Thèse d’état (Unpublished PhD Diss.), Montpellier, 1983.

Hardy, Thomas, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), ed. Robert C. Schweik, New York and London: Norton Editions, 1986.

Hardy, Thomas, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), ed. Rosemarie Morgan, London: Penguin Classics, 2000.

Hardy, Thomas, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate, London: Macmillan, 1989.

Hardy, Thomas, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), ed. Tim Dolin, London: Penguin Classics, 2003.

Lacan, Jacques, *Écrits: A Selection*, transl. Alan Sheridan, London: Tavistock Publications, 1977.

AUTHOR

ANNIE RAMEL

Université Lumière-Lyon 2
Professeur émérite