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Annie Ramel and Laurence Estanove

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Introduction: The Hollow Amid the Text

Introduction: Dans les creux du texte

Annie Ramel and Laurence Estanove

- 1 Instability, disruption, uncertainty: such are some keywords common to all the essays in this collection dedicated to *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Thomas Hardy's third novel and first popular success, published in 1874. In this special issue, each author views Hardy's novel from a different angle, focusing on literary genres; space and movement; the function of objects; on specific scenes or motifs from the novel; on the diegesis and fictional representation; and on the novel's adaptations. Yet all essays end up on the "margin of the unexpressed"¹, with the realization that "the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing" (Woolf 138) is what literary creation seeks to unveil but always fails to represent.
- 2 In the chapter entitled "Fanny's Revenge", agonizing over the news of Fanny's death and its obscure conditions, Bathsheba finds herself longing for a single simple truth that would clear all doubts and bring "an inexpressible relief" (Hardy 1986, 226). But she is also well aware that absolute certainty – "the truth of the story" she wishes she could ask of Gabriel (226) – can never hold sway. Thus, when Liddy remarks: "we should surely have been told more about it if it had been true – don't you think so, ma'am?", Bathsheba matter-of-factly replies: "We might or we might not." (225) For the Thing-in-itself, the "truth of the story", can only elude our grasp. *Far from the Madding Crowd*, like the other novels by Hardy, tries to approach that truth, but comes up against the wall of an impenetrable mystery. The different approaches chosen here follow courses that converge on the very same point, the discovery of a *hollow amid the text*, an epistemological *impasse* – a "heart of darkness" which is at the core of literary creation. As studied by **Rosemarie Morgan** in "The Hermeneutics of Compassion" opening this issue, one such hollow may precisely be said to concern the case of Fanny Robin, a character that fell victim to the publishing process and its attendant measure of censorship. Basing her work on a meticulous cross-examination of the novel's original

manuscript text, the *Cornhill* bowdlerized version, and later book editions, Rosemarie Morgan shows how Hardy subtly managed to overcome the restrictions forced upon his text by the censoring hand of editor Leslie Stephen. Focusing on the character of Fanny Robin, whose status as “Fallen Woman” certainly asked for a “hollowing out” of the original text, she analyses Hardy’s use of certain structural literary devices to reveal the degree of compassion elicited by the text for the “Timid Girl”.

- 3 Generic instability is the subject of **Peggy Blin-Cordon**’s “High Culture and Popular Culture in *Far from the Madding Crowd*” which also examines the fate of the female figure in the publishing context of the Victorian period. Our attention is drawn to the mixing of genres in Hardy’s novel, to the compromise which the author sought to achieve between the sensation novel, a “lowbrow” genre popularized by the spread of serialized literature, and “highbrow” literature distributed by respected magazines like the *Cornhill*. With *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy attempted to initiate a transition from the popular novel, the “good story” likely to appeal to a large audience, to a more respectable form, a “highbrow” literature aimed at a different social category. Such experimentation effects a blurring of generic borders, and results in an “unstable mix” of the tragic and the melodramatic. Borrowing from the sensation novel allows Hardy to convey a disruptive discourse which challenges the Victorian doxa regarding women: Bathsheba, “an independent and sensual woman” earning her living and following her desire, may be viewed as a bold version of Wilkie Collins’s Marian Halcombe – *The Woman in White* serving as a hypotext whose one-dimensional archetypes are subverted to produce a dissident vision of woman. It is the shift from one genre to another which causes such disruptions, and accounts for the modernity of the novel.
- 4 **Nathalie Bantz**, in “*Far from the Madding Crowd* and the Anxiety of Place”, starts by examining the “frenzied world” of Wessex which Hardy first began to adopt as background for his stories while he was publishing the novel in serial form. That reference would seem to achieve anchorage in space (however fictitious the significance of the term may be). However, Bantz quickly proceeds to show that the “fixity of space” should be contrasted with the instability of the characters, “engaged in perpetual movement”. Again, “instability” is the keyword. Movement is unavailing for the tragic characters, Fanny and Boldwood, but an “anxiety of place” prompts Bathsheba and Gabriel to overstep the limits within which social usage would confine them. Spatial movement means class mobility. *Far from the Madding Crowd* shows the dawning of a new era, with a rising middle class owing its emergence to personal ability, and an idea of the couple based on a parity that defies Victorian standards. Instability is found within the diegesis, but also in the narrative, for the conclusion of the novel is ambiguous, leaving space for sundry interpretations – including one that sees Bathsheba and Gabriel living not as husband and wife but as close neighbours, in a scenario anticipating that of Hardy’s short story “The Waiting Supper”, published 13 years later. Indeed, as every Hardy scholar knows, “love lives on propinquity, but dies of contact” (Hardy 1984, 230). How can a novel be ended if love cannot culminate in “getting-married-and-living-happily-ever-after”, owing to the impossibility of “a consonance in sexual relationships”, as Rosemarie Morgan puts it (Hardy 2000, xxx)? A solution might be for the writer to *defer* – to put off till later what could not be written in the present. Whatever the case may be, meaning at the end of *Far from the Madding Crowd* is not fixed or guaranteed, but unstable.
- 5 “Writing is doubled, deferred, so to speak, and signals the impossibility of transparency and immediacy”: such is also the conclusion, borrowed from Gérard Genette, reached by

Thierry Goater in “Paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces’: the Power of Impressions in *Far from the Madding Crowd*”. The latter title takes its quotation from a letter Stéphane Mallarmé wrote to Cazalis, echoed by a note in Hardy’s *Life*: “We don’t remember as we should that in getting at the truth, we only get at the true nature of the impression that an object, etc., produces on us, the true thing in itself being still, as Kant shows, beyond our knowledge” (July 1892, F. Hardy 9). Art is but a matter of “impression”, which therefore gives Goater’s essay its subject. The article first dwells on the diegetic level, showing how the characters, whose limited scope of vision is rendered by internal focalization, may be misled by “impressions”. Then the author moves on to Hardy’s theory of perception, in particular to the idea that a writer, in depicting the common events of life, should “bring out the features which illustrate the author’s idiosyncratic mode of regard” (March-April 1890, F. Hardy 294). The consequence is that Hardy’s art is radically different from mimetic realism, insofar as it relies on grotesque or melodramatic distortions, on intensification, a disproportioning, which are sometimes close to impressionism. “Impression” also means that the reader must be “impressed”, affected, moved, fascinated, and also possibly influenced ideologically speaking. The logical outcome of such an aesthetic is that “impressions” allow the artist to share his “moments of vision” and thereby to express the inexpressible, while drawing attention to the text as artefact may well endanger fictional illusion. The article ends at the point where the absence of the true thing-in-itself becomes manifest.

- 6 The question of such fictional illusion is central to **Michel Morel**’s “*Mise en abyme* in *Far from the Madding Crowd*”. The essay draws a parallel between two looking-glass scenes: the scene at the beginning of the novel in which Bathsheba, sitting on a waggon loaded with household goods, gazes at her own reflection in a looking-glass, blushes, and seeing her reflection blush blushes the more, under the silent “espial” of Gabriel (and the reader). The scene does work as a *mise en abyme*, because it contains the seeds of the whole story of Gabriel and Bathsheba, encapsulated “as a smaller narrative escutcheon embedded within the larger one of the novel itself”. It is therefore both inside the story, and outside – since it stands for the whole story. In fact the scene seals a generic contract with the reader: we know that romance is to be expected. The other specular scene shows Boldwood in his parlour staring at the Valentine card placed in the corner of the looking-glass, then shifting his gaze to catch the uncanny sight of his own face in the middle of the mirror, “wan in expression, and insubstantial in form”, his eyes looking “wide-spread and vacant” (Hardy 1986, 81). This second mirror-scene, which strangely parallels the first one, also functions as a *mise en abyme*, but this time the generic contract with the reader promises tragedy, not romance, as “we seem to be given something like the encased and condensed outline of the plot soon to unfold”. *Mise en abyme* usually works in two opposite directions: it briefly suspends the “willing suspension of disbelief” as it makes us realize that what we are looking at is but an artefact; and at the same time *mise en abyme* gives a referential quality to the scene we are reading, it somehow “naturalizes” it. Michel Morel finds that, quite unexpectedly, *mise en abyme* in the two specular scenes rather works in the direction of make-believe, and tends to make us side with the axiological system at work. However, the reader is placed in a position which is simultaneously inside and outside the story: it is both the position of a naive reader and that of a critic, aware of the processes of representation. One may thus see it as a position of “extimacy” with regard to the text (to use a neologism coined by Lacan), one which precludes the possibility of ever getting to the bottom of the abyss opened in the text by the *mise en abyme*.

- 7 In “Bathsheba’s Lost Hat and Metonymic Substitution”, **Annie Ramel** focuses on objects – one of those desired objects being of course Bathsheba. Basing her analysis on Lacan’s definition of *objet petit a* as a hollow that any object may come to fill, the author draws a fundamental distinction between surplus objects that are in excess of reality, like the Valentine card received by Boldwood or his collection of fetish objects locked in a closet, and objects that can go missing, that may be lost and regained, like Bathsheba’s hat, or for which substitutes may be found. Those alone are the true objects of desire. The distinction in fact draws a line between romance and tragedy, between desire and *jouissance*, the latter leading inevitably to tragic developments. The central signifier around which the article revolves is the word “mould”, recurrent in the novel in various acceptations, but used most remarkably in the sword scene where, “had it been possible for the edge of the sword to leave in the air a permanent substance [...] the space left untouched would have been almost a mould of Bathsheba’s figure” (Hardy 1986, 145). The author compares that “mould”, which is both a void and a “permanent substance”, to Lacan’s metaphor of the “hat-mould” (*enforme*) by which he illustrated his concept of *objet petit a*. Doesn’t Gabriel long to fill the “void” in him with “a satisfactory form”, and don’t we all “colour and mould according to the wants within us whatever our eyes bring in” (17)? The literary text is but a “mould” too, leaving space for a plurality of readings, providing a form which looks like a “permanent substance” yet only gives shape to a void.
- 8 With **Isabelle Gadoin**’s “Of Gargoyles and Men: Creative Vitality in Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd*”, the focus is not on the “plinth-mouldings” of Weatherbury church, but on the gargoyle directing all its vengeance into Fanny’s grave. Architecture is the subject of the paper, centred around the idea of “creative vitality” borrowed from Ruskin. The author takes issue with the prevalent view which defines the “Gothic” in Hardy’s writings in literary terms, and does not take the word in its primary architectural sense – despite the crucial importance of architecture in Hardy’s formation. Little has been said by Hardy or his biographers about the influence Ruskin might have had on him; yet it is certain that Hardy was familiar in particular with *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, to the extent that one may rightfully see Ruskin’s theories on Gothic architecture as the substratum underlying the description of the gargoyle. A detailed and well-documented parallel is made between Ruskin’s ideas on the “life” of a work of art and Hardy’s notion of “vitality” (Hardy 1986, 241), between Ruskin’s insistence on imperfections, deficiencies, irregularities in a work of art as signs of true invention (and therefore as expressions of untrammelled life), and Hardy’s claim that art should be “a disproportioning”, a way of seeking “beauty in ugliness”. Hardy’s gargoyle has all the qualities listed by Ruskin in his definition of Gothic architecture, including savageness and grotesqueness. In front of Ruskin’s picture of a grotesque head in Venice as in front of Hardy’s gargoyle, the beholder is struck by the evil potential of the creature and seized with intense horror. But the most unsettling thing in Hardy’s text is the stone head coming to life and uttering “a gurgling sound” in wet weather (for after all the chapter is about a “gurgyle” and its doings), letting out a sardonic laughter which reverberates throughout the novel, and in the whole of Hardy’s work, echoing man’s sense of his own insignificance in the hands of a cruel Fate. What is made to resonate here is the void of a universe where no God cares for the fall of a sparrow – and worse still, the laughter of an active persecutor. Despite such sombre echoes, *Far from the Madding Crowd* remains in the eyes of most readers an overall rather light pastoral romance and it is as such that it received the original success which came to launch Hardy’s career as a

popular novelist. Yet as trite as the figure of the gargoyle may seem, its presence in the novel nonetheless planted the seeds of the darker stories to come, pointing at the universal character of Hardy's writing.

- 9 The contrasting tones of Hardy's novel examined by **Laurence Estanove** in "Some Thoughts on *Far from the Madding Crowd* and its Adaptations", aptly rounding off the discussion by echoing back to the "generic instability" analysed in the issue's opening essay. As the author notes, the 2015 adaptation of *Far from the Madding Crowd* by filmmaker Thomas Vinterberg raises the question of the novel's modernity: why is Hardy's first successful novel the most frequently adapted of all Hardy's novels? The novel's "evasiveness" may allow for "a wide range of artistic possibilities", and thus account for the diversity of the numerous adaptations of the novel – four films, a TV adaptation, a graphic novel later made into a film, an opera, and sundry amateur productions. Indeed Hardy's early novel achieves a blending of genres, mixing pastoralism with moments of pure tragedy. That balance between the comic and the tragic is duly transposed in the modern adaptations, which waver between harmonious pastoralism (with characters "of constancy" like Gabriel Oak) and discordance, "a sense of uncertainty", of "change and chancefulness" (in Hardy's own words) – for disruption and the ensuing tragedy seem inevitable. The tension between order and disorder, faithfully reflected in all the adaptations, bears witness to "the ache of modernism" Tess and Angel felt in their own time, and which the modern readers or viewers may find relevant to their own experience.
- 10 In addition to the selection of essays on *Far from the Madding Crowd*, this issue features the French translation by **Françoise Baud** and **Éric Christen** of Hardy's "In a Eweleaze Near Weatherbury", recalling the setting of that particular novel, and ends with **Oindrila Ghosh's** "Raising Doubts? The Victorian Maternal Ideal and 'Unnatural' Mothers in Thomas Hardy's Short Stories" which offers further reflexion on Hardy's subversive treatment of female figures, thus echoing back to the opening essay on Fanny Robin.

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NOTES

1. The expression was first used by Virginia Woolf in her *Common Reader*, vol.2 (London: Hogarth Press, 1932), and later taken up by Roger Ebbatson as a title to his study on Hardy (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).