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DESOLATION IN

FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

THOMAS HARDY'S WESSEX NOVELS are filled with characters who yearn for love as the infallible means of shattering their isolation—in William Faulkner's terms, "violating" their loneliness—only to find that passion intensifies their despair and narrows their perspectives. Eustacia Vye, standing in silhouette on the top of Rainbarrow amidst the vast and oppressive emptiness of Egdon Heath, voices the longing and the anguish felt by many of Hardy's great protagonists: "O deliver my heart from this fearful gloom and loneliness: send me great love from somewhere, else I shall die" (*The Return of the Native*, Bk, I, Ch. 7¹).

The insentience of the heath intensifies Eustacia's frustration, but Nature does not create her loneliness; it only exacerbates a condition which Hardy, anticipating the Existentialists, found inseparable from the human predicament itself. Such figures as Michael Henchard (*The Mayor of Casterbridge*, 1886) and Marty South (*The Woodlanders*, 1887) live amidst the bustle and vitality of rustic society, yet unfulfilled longing drives both of them into an isolation fully as excruciating as Eustacia's. Henchard perversely attempts to perpetuate his desolation even after death by demanding in his will that no man remember him; and at the conclusion of *The Woodlanders*, Marty South submerges her very personality in her grief for the dead Giles Winterborne. As she stands beside his grave she looks "almost like a being who had rejected with indifference the attribute of sex for the loftier quality of abstract humanism".

Among Hardy's early works, *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874)

contains an extraordinary powerful and detailed rendering of one of the novelist's major preoccupations—the paradoxically close relationship between human love and desolation. Although none of the characters of this early work has the heroic stature of Eustacia Vye or the Mayor of Casterbridge, their relationships with one another nevertheless reveal the depth of Hardy's insight into the nature of loneliness. Written from the omniscient point of view and constructed upon the familiar basis of interlocking love triangles, *Far From the Madding Crowd* contains no major technical innovations. Yet despite its conventional form, its thematic affinities with twentieth-century fiction are remarkable. Each of its five major characters—Bathsheba Everdene, Gabriel Oak, Farmer Boldwood, Fanny Robin, and Sergeant Troy—is trapped in his own desolation, preoccupied with loneliness and intensely attracted by passionate love as a means of ending that loneliness.

Had Hardy been a formal innovator rather than a traditionalist, he could easily have given *Far From the Madding Crowd* the centripetal structure of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* or even more appropriately, of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, the peculiarly lonely characters of which are isolated not only by their own unhappiness but by the individual monologues through which that unhappiness is articulated. Moreover, three of the major characters of *Far From the Madding Crowd*—Fanny Robin, Sergeant Troy, and Farmer Boldwood—end their lives in what Faulkner apparently regarded as two irrevocably “inviolable” extremes of loneliness—madness and death. In sum, Hardy's novel must be read in the context of its own Victorian traditions and appreciated upon the basis of its own formal conventions and techniques, but an awareness of its affinity with modern works can greatly enhance one's sense of its emotional power and artistic complexity. Recent critics have discussed its place in Hardy's version of the pastoral tradition—its dramatization of conflicting sets of values²—but they have largely ignored one of its central themes, equally prominent in Hardy's entire achievement: the tragedy of human isolation.

Like the speakers in *As I Lay Dying*, the major characters of *Far From the Madding Crowd* are not uniformly desolate. Instead, they compose a spectrum in which Hardy explores different kinds and degrees of loneliness. At one extreme of this thematic design stand Farmer Boldwood and the young maidservant, Fanny Robin, both of whom are ultimately destroyed by their search for love—one mentally, the other bodily. Often ignored in discussions

of the novel, Boldwood is one of Hardy's few wholly convincing male characters; his capacity for suffering makes him worthy of comparison with Michael Henchard. Unapproachable in his dignity and taciturnity, this "lonely and reserved man" is introduced as a recluse, an ascetic incongruously surrounded by the abundance and *bonhomie* of the pastoral world. His only respite from the staid oppressiveness of his parlour (which has the atmosphere of "a Puritan Sunday lasting all the week") is his equally comfortless stable: ". . . After looking to the feeding of his four-footed dependents the celibate would walk and meditate of an evening till the moon's rays streamed in through the cobwebbed windows, or total darkness enveloped the scene" (Ch. 18).

Boldwood makes himself a hermit not because he is sullen or misanthropical but because he is unaware of the complexity of his own nature: he is both intensely passionate and intensely reserved. To borrow the metaphor of Edred Fitzpiers in *The Woodlanders*, the solitary farmer is "charged with emotive fluid like a Leyden jar with electric". In the light of Hardy's distaste for Henry James' work, it is peculiarly ironical that he should have created in the lonely Boldwood one of James' tragic types—the sensitive middle-aged man whose belated experience of love profoundly alters his entire life.³

The "steady flow" of Boldwood's outwardly tranquil existence is utterly disordered by his fascination with Bathsheba Everdene. When he receives her thoughtless valentine, he suddenly perceives the extent of his desolation; and in his urgency to obliterate circumstances which he has hitherto accepted, he loses all sense of proportion. Instead of expanding his universe, love paradoxically constricts it. It not only robs him of dignity (he wears in Bathsheba's eyes "the sorry look of a grand bird without the feathers that make it grand" (Ch. 23)), but it makes him a monomaniac. He becomes obsessed by a woman whose strongest sentiment for him cannot go beyond esteem: "I want you for my wife—so wildly that no other feeling can abide in me" (Ch. 19). Like the deranged speaker in Tennyson's "Maud", Boldwood comes to view reality itself in terms of a single emotion; and when his love is frustrated by Bathsheba's marriage to Troy, his entire universe is shattered. In the violence of his despair he murders his rival, but he has already destroyed himself. The man who is pardoned and imprisoned for life at the conclusion of the novel is not Boldwood but an irresponsible, anonymous creature.

In Boldwood's case love destroys the mind; in that of his young *protégée*, Fanny Robin, it destroys the body. The farmer's life closes in the loneliness of insanity; the life of the rustic maiden, in the loneliness of death.

Although she is a much less complex figure than Hardy's other rustic heroines (notably Tess Durbeyfield and Grace Melbury), her acutely solitary suffering makes her one of the most touching and memorable characters in the Wessex novels. Following her surrender to the cavalier Troy, Fanny becomes an exile from the little world of Weatherbury, wandering between Casterbridge and Melchester in the vain hope that her seducer will marry her. The reader actually sees very little of Fanny, but her few appearances in the novel are made extraordinarily vivid by her almost unrelieved solitude. Until she collapses on the steps of Casterbridge Union, she is almost never presented in the context of human society. When Gabriel Oak accidentally encounters her on his way to Warren's Malthouse, she is standing in the dark churchyard, her "thinly-clad" figure half-hidden by an ancient tree. The "penumbra" of her "great sadness" is pierced fleetingly when the shepherd touches her hand. Similarly, when she holds her pitiful colloquy with her lover near Melchester Barracks, she remains outside in the snow and darkness, separated from the soldiers by the river. The natural setting, like the churchyard of the earlier scene, becomes a powerful means of emphasizing her helplessness and isolation. Against the vast snowy expanse of Melchester Moor, the girl becomes a "blurred spot", a "form" whose identity is obliterated by the "colourless background" against which it moves.

Fanny's excruciating and chronic isolation culminates in her almost superhuman efforts to reach Casterbridge Union without assistance. As she drags herself along Casterbridge Highway, accompanied only by a mysteriously benevolent dog, her sense of abandonment is heightened by tokens of the absent human society of which she stands in such great need. The distant lights of the town, the faggot-makers' piles of chips, even the milestones, are emblems of the human world which is both mockingly present and agonizingly remote. Moreover, human society deserts Fanny in death as well as in life. The driver of her funeral *cortège*, the weak-minded Joseph Poorgrass, leaves the dead girl alone in the eerie, foggy wood while he becomes mawkishly drunk in the Buck's Head Inn. In one sense, Fanny Robin is a purely conventional figure, the seduced maiden ubiquitous in Victorian fiction. Her terrible isolation, however, gives her a larger significance: it makes her an unforgettable image of suffering humanity. King Lear raging on the heath has greater richness as a symbol than Hardy's deserted maiden, but literature contains few figures more utterly forlorn than Fanny Robin on Casterbridge Highway.

Fanny Robin and Farmer Boldwood occupy one extreme of the novel's

spectrum of lonely characters; they are both engagingly sensitive figures whose experience of love is disastrous. Their thematic opposite is Sergeant Troy, the quasi-diabolical "outsider" whose sudden appearance in Weatherbury both disturbs and corrupts the pastoral world.⁴ His experience of passion ends like Fanny's in the extreme solitude of death; but in his lifetime he is so self-conceited and complacent that he cannot really appreciate his essential loneliness. The other major characters in the novel are lonely partly because they perceive the inadequacies of their own selves; in contrast, Troy is not only satisfied with, but intrigued by, his own personality. He "had felt, in his transient way, hundreds of times, that he could not envy other people their condition, because the possession of that condition would have necessitated a different personality, when he desired no other than his own" (Ch. 46).

Yet not withstanding his shallowness and *nonchalance*, Troy's fate suggests that loneliness as an abstraction is not wholly subjective; a character need not comprehend the full implications of his condition in order to be apprehended by the reader as a shockingly desolate being. As he plants his flowers on Fanny's grave, Troy is fully as isolated from human sympathy as any of his three victims—his sweetheart, his rival, and his wife. Through a characteristic use of *chiaroscuro*, Hardy presents him as the pathetically weak and helpless adversary of vast and indifferent cosmic forces.

It was a cloudy, muggy, and very dark night, and the rays from Troy's lantern spread into the two old yews with a strange illuminating power, flickering, as it seemed, up to the black ceiling of cloud above. He felt a large drop of rain upon the back of his hand, and presently one came and entered one of the holes of the lantern, whereupon the candle sputtered and went out. (Ch. 45)

This memorable image of desolate and impotent humanity is strengthened by the succeeding picture of Troy as he leaves the scene of his sentimental gesture. Like the snow-covered moor, the sea which he approaches near Budmouth becomes an oppressively vast backdrop which drains the individual human personality of its vitality: "Nothing moved in sky, land or sea, except a frill of milkwhite foam along the nearer angles of the shore, shreds of which licked the contiguous stones like tongues" (Ch. 47). In sum, although Troy lacks the imagination and the sensitivity to fully appreciate his own plight, he is nevertheless a vital aspect of the novel's thematic design. As the victim of Boldwood's insane jealousy, he enters the permanently inviolable extreme of loneliness—death—and is thus destroyed by forces which he himself ironically sets in motion.

Between the two extremes of conscious and almost unconscious suf-

fering represented by Boldwood, Fanny Robin, and Sergeant Troy, stand two characters for whom passion and desolation ultimately become creative rather than destructive forces. Like Boldwood and Fanny, Gabriel Oak and Bathsheba Everdene are closely associated with the values and traditions of the pastoral world, but both possess a capacity for endurance, a strength of will, which is lacking in their rustic counterparts. Rather than corroding their energies, their loneliness becomes a source of strength. Gabriel tending his flock on Norcombe Hill is fully as isolated physically as Eustacia Vye on the summit of Rainbarrow (the shepherd's solitary hut is likened to "a small Noah's Ark on a small Arrarat"), but the vastness of the surrounding natural world is for him majestic rather than terrifying:

To persons standing alone on a hill during a clear midnight such as this, the roll of the world eastward is almost a palpable movement. The sensation may be caused by the panoramic glide of the stars past earthly objects . . . or by the solitude; but whatever be its origin, the impression of riding along is vivid and abiding. The poetry of motion is a phrase much in use, and to enjoy the epic form of that gratification it is necessary to stand on a hill at a small hour of the night, and, having first expanded with a sense of difference from the mass of civilized mankind, who are dreamwapt and disregardful of all such proceedings at this time, long and quietly watch your stately progress through the stars. After such a nocturnal reconnoitre it is hard to get back to earth, and to believe that the consciousness of such majestic speeding is derived from a tiny human frame. (Ch. 2)

This opening image of the solitary shepherd is expanded in several of the most memorable scenes of the novel. Like Fanny Robin, Gabriel is often set off from the human context by the intensity of his conflict with the natural world. At the scene of the fire in Bathsheba's corn-lot he climbs to the top of the burning rick while the other rustics rush about below him in confusion and terror. Both his courage and his isolation are re-emphasized in the companion scene of the great storm, when once again he saves Bathsheba's crop almost single-handed while his fellow-workers, debauched by Troy, snore unconsciously in the barn. In essence, Gabriel's isolation in the face of hostile nature helps to reveal the great strength and dignity which are masked by his undistinguished exterior.

Only his unexpected poverty separates Gabriel from social equality with Boldwood: at the time preceding the loss of his flock he is fast becoming "Farmer Oak". The affinity between these two dignified and extraordinarily complex rustics is further emphasized by their passion for the same woman.

Like Boldwood pacing in his stable, Gabriel tending his flock is a kind of hermit (although by necessity rather than by choice), and he too regards love as the infallible means of "violating" his loneliness. His tranquil solitude on Norcombe Hill is troubled by the light from Bathsheba's lantern; and like Boldwood when he receives the valentine, he becomes fully aware of the extent of his isolation only when it is ruffled by an influence from without:

To find themselves utterly alone at night where company is desirable and expected makes some people fearful; but a case more trying by far to the nerves is to discover some mysterious companionship when intuition, sensation, memory, analogy, testimony, probability, induction—every kind of evidence in the logician's list—have united to persuade consciousness that it is quite in isolation. (Ch. 2)

The crucial distinction between the two men is revealed through their different responses to the same profoundly disturbing influence. Whereas Boldwood's perspective is distorted and his sense of proportion utterly shattered by his disappointment, Gabriel's capacity to view events objectively is enlarged by the frustration of his hopes. Love remains only one facet of his life; it does not become the centre of his universe. ". . . Among the multitude of interests by which he was surrounded, those which affected his personal well-being were not the most absorbing and important in his eyes" (Ch. 43). The chapter following Gabriel's fight to save the ricks, significantly entitled "Rain—One Solitary Meets Another", makes even clearer the difference between the two lonely men. Boldwood can see nothing outside his crushing despair; in contrast, Gabriel not only perceives the disconcerting alteration which his rival has undergone, but unselfishly tries to console him: "I thought my mistress would have married you". "Inured rather than subdued" by misfortune, Gabriel can dare to court the widowed Bathsheba by a stratagem open only to the wholly self-possessed—feigned indifference.

The heroine of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, a woman whose beauty and charm decisively influence the lives of three very different men, becomes a complex and moving figure only after her own life has been touched by the loneliness which she either exacerbates or generates in four other people. In the wilful Bathsheba, the virtues of independence and rectitude become a quality which is both more complex and less admirable than in Gabriel, a kind of pride which William Butler Yeats called "arrogant purity": ". . . She had never, by look, word, or sign, encouraged a man to approach her . . . she had felt herself sufficient to herself; and had in the independence of her girlish heart fancied there was a certain degradation in renouncing the simplicity of

a maiden existence to become the humbler half of an indifferent matrimonial whole" (Ch. 41). Although Bathsheba's Elizabethan farmhouse is as staid and quiet as Boldwood's parlor, the novelty of her position as a lady-farmer makes her too self-assured to feel loneliness: she sends the fatal valentine to Boldwood not because she is desolate but because she is bored.

Her response to Troy is still less the result of a prolonged and thoughtful yearning: as the powerful scene of the sword-exercise shows, her love for the handsome soldier is grounded in physical desire. As Bathsheba herself perceives, she loves him against her will. Yet her despairing reaction to Troy's infidelity reveals one of Hardy's most subtle psychological insights: the power of love to create desolation does not depend upon the depth or the reciprocity of that love. Like Gabriel, Bathsheba recognizes the full extent of her solitude only after it has been "violated" by another human personality. Moreover, once having been drawn out of her isolation by even the shallowest kind of love, she finds that she cannot return to her previously self-contained way of life: she "was lonely and miserable now; not lonelier than she had been before her marriage, but her loneliness then was to that of the present time as the solitude of a mountain is to the solitude of a cave" (Ch. 43).

The destructiveness of passionate love makes the spirited Bathsheba the counterpart of the self-effacing Fanny Robin. Hardy draws attention to their affinity not only through explicit comment ("The sadness of Fanny Robin's fate did not make Bathsheba's glorious, although she was the Esther to this poor Vashti") but through a symbolical use of the natural setting. Following her bitter altercation with Troy over his relationship with the dead girl, Bathsheba spends a night outdoors—the scenic counterpart of Fanny's ordeal on Casterbridge Highway. A revulsion from passionate love thus drives both women into temporary estrangement from the human world. But Bathsheba's resilience and essential sanity make her seclusion short-lived. In an overtly symbolic scene, she welcomes the reappearance of human society in the form of her faithful maid, Liddy Smallbury. "Bathsheba's heart bounded with gratitude in the thought that she was not altogether deserted. . . ." "She never forgot that transient little picture of Liddy crossing the swamp to her there in the morning light" (Ch. 44).

The mere proximity of human nature can console Bathsheba at such an extraordinary crisis as her night of anguish near the miasmatic swamp, but it is powerless to "violate" the prolonged isolation which ensues upon the death of Troy and the imprisonment of Boldwood. Near the conclusion of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, the partially inadvertent cause of so much desolation

becomes herself one of the most isolated figures in the novel. Chapter 56, entitled "Beauty in Loneliness", presents the chastened Bathsheba in self-immolating seclusion, refusing even the companionship of her faithful maid-servant. "She remained alone now for the greater part of her time, and stayed in the house, or at furthest went into the garden. She shunned everyone, even Liddy, and could be brought to make no confidences, and to ask for no sympathy" (Ch. 56). Yet despite her bitter experiences as the wife of Troy, she cannot succeed in renouncing love. Paradoxically, the loneliness brought about by passion leads Bathsheba into a second romantic involvement, this time with the faithful Gabriel Oak. Like the second courtship between Grace Melbury and Fitzpiers in *The Woodlanders*, this development would be a mere repetition of a previous entanglement, were it not for one crucial difference. Thoughtless passion has very little to do with Bathsheba's humbling herself to Gabriel. She turns to him not because she is swayed against her will by desire, but because she is utterly alone.

So desolate was Bathsheba this evening, that in an absolute hunger for love and sympathy, and miserable in that she appeared to have outlived the only true friendship she had ever owned, she put on her bonnet and cloak and went down to Oak's house just after sunset. . . . (Ch. 56)

At the conclusion of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, the prolonged loneliness of the two survivors among the major characters is dispelled by the most intimate form of human companionship, marriage; and passion is largely disarmed through the admixture of "good-fellowship—*camaraderie*" (Ch. 56). Bathsheba and Gabriel share an emotion which Hardy considered rare: "that substantial affection which arises . . . when the two who are thrown together begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other's character, and not the best till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality". Yet as many readers have observed, the closing scene of the novel is far from sanguine. Joseph Poorgrass's reflections upon the union of Bathsheba and her devoted shepherd strike an appropriately bittersweet note:

. . . I wish him joy o' her; though I were once or twice upon saying to-day with holy Hosea, in my scripture manner, which is my second nature, 'Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone'. but since 'tis as 'tis, why, it might have been worse, and I feel my thanks accordingly. (Ch. 57)

In sum, for all its conventionality, the conclusion of the novel does not belie the power and significance of its themes. What remains in the reader's mind after the book is closed is not a vision of matrimonial bliss, but five

indelible images of loneliness and despair—the impoverished Gabriel Oak staring fixidly at “the attenuated skeleton of a chrome-yellow moon” (Ch. 5); Fanny Robin dragging herself along Casterbridge Highway; Farmer Boldwood “walking about the hills and downs of Weatherbury like an unhappy shade in the mournful fields by Acheron” (Ch. 34); Troy planting his flowers on Fanny’s grave; Bathsheba crouched in the darkness near the miasmatic swamp. It is in part this multifarious exploration of human isolation which makes *Far From the Madding Crowd* one of Hardy’s finest achievements.

NOTES

1. All references are to the Wessex Edition of Hardy’s novels (London: Macmillan and Co., Inc., 1912).
2. Cf. Howard Babb, “Setting and Theme in *Far From the Madding Crowd*”, *ELH*, 30, 147-61; and Richard C. Carpenter, “The Mirror and the Sword: Imagery in *Far From the Madding Crowd*”, *NCF*, 18, 331-45.
3. Hardy was annoyed by James’ “ponderously warm manner of saying nothing in infinite sentences”, an eccentricity which he found in his fiction as well as in his conversation. “Reading H. James’ *Reverberator*. After this kind of work one feels inclined to be purposely careless in detail. The great novels of the future will certainly not concern themselves with the minutiae of manners. . . . James’ subjects are those one could be interested in at moments when there is nothing larger to think of”. (Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy* [St. Martin’s Press, 1965], 181, 211.)
4. J. O. Bailey, “Hardy’s Mephistophelian Visitants”, *PMLA*, 58 (1946), 1146-1183.