Passion and Flood in "Far from the Madding Crowd"

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A READER OF *Far from the Madding Crowd* could hardly fail to note how often the events of the novel work against the concept of a peaceful pastoral that the title leads him to expect. The nature of Hardy's world is succinctly given in Ian Gregor's generic description "the realist version of pastoral" and in Corin's speech that Gregor quotes from *As You Like It*: "I know the more one sickens, the worse at ease he is; and that he that wants money, means, and content, is without good friends; that the property of rain is to wet, and fire to burn; that good pasture makes fat sheep; and that a great cause of the night is lack of the sun."[1] The description in the stanza from Gray's "Elegy" that gives the novel its title is less of a way of life for the figures in that world than of an ideal. Peaceful life has to be earned. Sometimes at hard price. From a statement that concludes the novel's penultimate chapter a reader gathers that Gabriel and Bathsheba have succeeded by binding themselves through a particular kind of love:

> Theirs was that substantial affection which arises (if any arises at all) 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. This good-fellowship — *camaraderie* —usually occurring through similarity of pursuits, is unfortunately seldom superadded to love between the sexes, because men and women associate, not in their labours, but in their pleasures merely.[2]

Ian Gregor has made a further observation about the passage. Though he does not deny the lovers' achievement, he registers

qualms about the aptness of the lines as a summary of the story, feeling that "in this speech . . . we can feel the pressure of the form of the novel, exerting itself *against* the story." A little further, he states: "Complacency, disdain, a dry judicial analysis, these are the tones of that speech and they don't reflect back happily on the passionate and exuberant life which so much of the novel has revealed."[3] Perhaps not. But Gregor omits the last sentence of the paragraph he quotes: "Where, however, happy circumstance permits its development, the compounded feeling proves itself to be the only love which is strong as death — that love which many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown, beside which the passion usually called by the name is evanescent as steam" (pp. 456-57).

This sentence makes a difference. It describes in metaphor the love Bathsheba and Gabriel have found. But in addition, as it draws on the Song of Solomon, it turns us back to the events of the novel and to the manner in which some of those events are presented. The analytical tone fades, and the sense of the natural world returns. We think of storm, stream, snow, of sheep-washing, of tears. The imagery of water reminds us of the passions of the novel, turns our glance back to some of those "moments of vision" so characteristically Hardyean that point up something about the world Hardy has created and the individuals who live in it.

What Hardy's use of the passage from the Song of Solomon calls our attention to is a distinction between passion and love. His source speaks of love's strengths, and Hardy adds to it the statement about passion's brevity. When a reader observes Bathsheba's lovers — Oak, Boldwood, and especially Troy — he sees dramatized the activities and effects of passion as well as of love. At the same time, he can note the variety of ways in which Hardy uses the imagery of water to describe the inner storm derived from passion and love, both the extent to which the three men weather the storm and their manner of doing it.[4]

Gabriel's ability to survive the stresses of love — the floods of passion, as it were — is suggested in the early description of his hut on Norcombe Hill as "a small Noah's Ark on a small Ararat, allowing the traditionary outlines and general form of the Ark which are followed by toy-makers" (p. 10). A simple resem-

blance noted in an effort to sketch Gabriel's hut more vividly, the reference to the Ark is not without import, if seen in the context of later events of the story. Granted, this Ark has come to rest. But linking Gabriel with the figure of Noah gives him some power of survival over the element so destructive to the efforts of others. Still another image, frequently noted by readers, suggests likewise Gabriel's ability to assimilate experiences of despair, something Boldwood is unable to do. After he loses his sheep,

> Oak raised his head, and wondering what he could do, listlessly surveyed the scene. By the outer margin of the pit was an oval pond, and over it hung the attentuated skeleton of a chrome-yellow moon, which had only a few days to last — the morning star dogging her on the left hand. The pool glittered like a dead man's eye, and as the world awoke a breeze blew, shaking and elongating the reflection of the moon without breaking it, and turning the image of the star to a phosphoric streak upon the water. All this Oak saw and remembered. (p. 41)

The picture is made striking through its grotesque features — "the attenuated skeleton," the "dogging" star, the "dead man's eye" — while the last sentence seals our impression that we have glimpsed Gabriel's inner world and noted the impact of the calamity upon him. But the way the verb "remembered" suggests that time goes on also shows us what a later passage tells: that in contrast to Boldwood Gabriel is not so stricken by calamity that he is rendered incapable. Out of the experience, he achieves "a dignified calm he had never before known, and that indifference to fate which, though it often makes a villain of a man, is the basis of his sublimity when it does not. And thus the abasement had been exaltation, and the loss gain" (p. 44).

What these passages show is not only Gabriel's growing stoicism that Bathsheba comes to admire but also his ability to move through the stresses of passion, whether of love or of despair. Events are subsumed into the stream of experience. Not so with Boldwood. This man sees Bathsheba less as the humanly flawed creature that Gabriel does than as an Ideal. If a reader places each man against a hypothetical time-scale, Boldwood's life is not like Gabriel's flowing from the past into the future, but rather it

is fixed on some future time when his hope might be realized, his desire fulfilled.

Boldwood's tendency to move to extremes of passion, once aroused, is shown in references to water and its flooding or movement: "If an emotion possessed him at all, it ruled him; a feeling not mastering him was entirely latent. *Stagnant or rapid, it was never slow.* He was always hit mortally, or he was missed" (p. 137). ". . .Though it was possible to form guesses concerning his wild capabilities *from old floodmarks faintly visible, he had never been seen at the hightide which caused them*" (p. 138). "A man's body is as the shell, or the tablet, of his soul, as he is reserved or ingenuous, *overflowing* or self-contained" (p. 139). "The insulation of his heart by reserve during these many years, *without a channel of any kind of disposable emotion*, had worked its effect" (p. 139). "This . . . seemed to open *the sluices of feeling* that Boldwood had as yet kept closed" (p. 144). (Italics added.) But more interesting than these passages — these metaphors which link feeling with natural environment, which carry out the Biblical idea of flooding waters — are the references to a different condition of the element. They describe the cold February morning after Boldwood receives Bathsheba's valentine, a wintry condition in which movement is stilled.

The winter background described in this chapter carries no references to the floods and tides that characterized the momentum of earlier passions. Everything points toward obsession, toward emotions stopped and fixed, and toward dislocation. The valentine affects Boldwood as the potion does Tristan, removing from the farmer much of his control over himself. Significantly, the valentine with its "large red seal [that] became as a blot on the retina of his eye" sits upon a time-piece, "surmounted by a spread eagle," the valentine itself resting on the eagle's wings (p. 112). Flight is stilled: that is, time and its impact from this moment have little of their old meaning for Boldwood. He loses the ability to discipline time and with that the ability to discipline passion.[5] He is driven to live for the future, recognizing "the symmetry of his existence to be slowly getting distorted in the direction of an ideal passion. The disturbance was as the first floating weed to Columbus — the contemptibly little suggesting possibili-

ties of the infinitely great" (p. 112). The sender of the valentine is a "vision," "a misty shape," taking "form" only when Boldwood sleeps and dreams (p. 113).

Distortion, disturbance — these qualities are reflected in the same chapter in the strange way the light is cast off the snow, a "preternatural inversion of light and shade" (p. 115) that mirrors the dramatic upset in Boldwood's emotions. But important as well is what snow — moisture frozen, stilled — suggests. If flooding water is reflective of passion and its effects, then snow is an apt register of the effects of Boldwood's passion, of the heavy imprint the valentine and its two words "MARRY ME" set upon him. What is frozen does not change. Nor does Boldwood once his passions are seized. Consider the wintry landscape the man looks upon:

> Boldwood was listlessly noting how the frost had hardened and glazed the surface of the snow, till it shone in the red eastern light with the polish of marble; how, in some portions of the slope, withered grass-bents, encased in icicles, bristled through the smooth wan coverlet in the twisted and curved shapes of old Venetian glass; and how the footprints of a few birds, which had hopped over the snow whilst it lay in the state of soft fleece, were now frozen to a short permanency. (p. 115)

The birds' footprints, a detail both striking and characteristic of Hardy in its minuteness and particularity, show the reader Boldwood's emotional state. Though these are "frozen to a *short* permanency" while Boldwood's set of attitudes is much more enduring, the impact on his soul of the two words on the valentine is made vividly apparent.

With Troy is most of the water imagery associated. As an alien to the community's way of life, having been away from it long enough to become a stranger, his connection with the forces of weather, and of water in particular, tends to be harsh in effect. As the man of greatest romantic flamboyance, the man who "was vulnerable only in the present," whose "outlook upon time was as a transient flash of the eye now and then" (p. 190), who views Bathsheba at their first meeting rather theatrically as "Beauty" (p. 186) — as the man caught like Don Juan by Woman, a kind of Ancient Mariner of sex — Troy is involved

in some of the novel's most striking scenes. They entail images and the accoutrements of water in a variety of forms.

Most involve his association with Fanny. When Fanny disappears, many think she has drowned. The gossip in Warren's Malthouse suggests it, and even Boldwood wonders.[6] That Fanny died in part because of a kind of outlaw passion is suggested in the description of the landscape through which her coffin is driven:

> Not a footstep or wheel was audible anywhere around, and the dead silence was broken only by a heavy particle falling from a tree through the evergreens and alighting with a smart rap upon the coffin of poor Fanny. The fog had by this time saturated the trees, and this was the first dropping of water from the overbrimming leaves. The hollow echo of its fall reminded the waggoner [Joseph Poorgrass] of the grim Leveller. Then hard by came down another drop, then two or three. Presently there was a continual tapping of these heavy drops upon the dead leaves, the road, and the travellers. The nearer boughs were beaded with the mist to the greyness of aged men, and the rusty-red leaves of the beeches were hung with similar drops, like diamonds on auburn hair. (p. 324)

The idea of saturation, the detail of "the overbrimming leaves," the reminder of "the grim Leveller," the aged greyness of the mist — within the larger framework of flood and flow, these are suggestive of a wearing-out, of the tag-ends of passion, the residue of violent act.

The nature of that act is suggestively revealed in two earlier scenes — the first when Fanny speaks to Troy from outside his barracks and the second when the water from the gargoyle's mouth washes the flowers from her grave. In the first, Fanny stands outside the building, Troy is within, and between them runs the river. The sound of the river echoes what one might consider responses to Fanny's plight:

> The river would have been seen by day to be of that deep smooth sort which races middle and sides with the same gliding precision, any irregularities of speed being immediately corrected by a small whirlpool. Nothing was heard in reply to the signal but the gurgle and cluck of one of these invisible wheels — together with a few small sounds which a sad man would have called moans, and a happy man laughter — caused by the flap-

> ping of the waters against trifling objects in other parts of the stream. (pp. 97-98)

The passage recalls a statement Hardy entered in his notebook in 1866: "*July* 13. A man's grief has a touch of the ludicrous unless it is so keen as to be awful."[7] The stream's sound registers the feelings of individuals on both sides of it — the distress Fanny feels and the pleasantries Troy shares with the soldiers. The pleasantry shows itself as "a low peal of laughter [from inside the building], which was hardly distinguishable from the gurgle of the tiny whirlpools outside" (p. 100). What is interesting is the way a reader begins to sense some other force within or behind the object, that vague and ambiguous universal force that takes a number of names throughout Hardy's work. When Boldwood looks at the birds' footprints embedded in the snow, the reader observes and draws connections set there by the author; the outer world, he gathers, matches Boldwood's inner world. But here Hardy pushes further. In the barracks scene, and more especially in the later churchyard scene, one finds more than the connection between character and surroundings. One senses that the object — stream or gargoyle — is either itself a judgemental force or a tool of some more abstract observer. The noise of the stream might be reminiscent, the narrator suggests, of moans or laughter, depending upon the auditor. A reader is invited to judge. But he is not a participant within that world as is the force that acts and comments finally. In the noise of the stream — moan or laughter — its presence is felt: dimly perhaps. But through the gargoyle in the churchyard scene, the presence acquires stronger impact, is given fuller definition.

Before examining the scene, however, I wish to consider a paragraph describing the landscape outside the barracks, for the description sets the relationship of Fanny and Troy in a perspective that illuminates the gargoyle's activity and Troy's failure because of it. The passage reads as follows:

> This climax of the series [of changes brought by winter] had been reached to-night on the aforesaid moor, and for the first time in the season its irregularities were forms without features; suggestive of anything, proclaiming nothing, and without more character than that of being the limit of something else — the

> lowest layer of a firmament of snow. From this chaotic skyful of crowding flakes the mead and moor momentarily received additional clothing, only to appear momentarily more naked thereby. The vast arch of cloud above was strangely low, and formed as it were the roof of a large dark cavern, gradually sinking in upon its floor; for the instinctive thought was that the snow lining the heavens and that encrusting the earth would soon unite into one mass without any intervening stratum of air at all. (p. 96)

Two items in this description are suggestive. The first is the curious echo of Genesis in the phrase "forms without features," an echo that turns the moor on which Fanny stands into a kind of void like that out of which the world was created — "anything," "nothing" — a part of that firmament, this one "a *firmament* of snow."[8] Chaos awaits the Word. Or as in a second creation myth, recounted by Hesiod, Chaos awaits Love. A reader can hardly be unaware of the sexually suggestive diction — "climax," "clothing," "naked," "unite." The selection of words reminds one of the union of Earth and Heaven, after Earth and Love had themselves created Heaven as an abode for the gods, especially if one notes other imagery in the passage.[9] The low arch of clouds, like the roof of a cavern sinking upon its floor, "the snow lining the heavens and that encrusting the earth" merging the heaven and earth "into one mass" — these images imply sexual union.

Both myths, one suggesting chaos, the other creation, point to the relationship between the two lovers. Fanny expects Love and the resolution that a declaration of love might bring, manifesting itself in legal union — hence, order, the bonding of a family. Seeking that union, she has made her journey. And fails to find it. She has also created in Frank Troy a lover, but one who is not what she believes him to be, as evidenced by his behaviour, the laughter of the soldiers, the chuckling "gurgle" of the river. He is no human counterpart to the Heaven that will make Earth fertile. When Fanny lies in her grave, his efforts at restitution are mocked.

The narrator finds an "element of absurdity" in Troy's graveside gardening, however carefully the flowers are set out, referring to "the futility of these romantic doings," noting with a kind of awkward pedantry that Troy's "idiosyncracies" have both

English and French qualities in them (p. 358). There is more to the act than romance and nationality, however. The description of the gargoyle, as Gregor points out, draws upon Ruskin's description of the grotesque, an art form characterized by qualities of both the ludicrous and the terrible.[10] Describing the gargoyle's features with such adjectives as "hideous," "horrible," "wrinkled," mixing attributes of such creatures as dragon and man, animal and fiend, describing the flow of water as being "vomited," Hardy emphasizes the quality of the terrible, the sense of the dreadfulness of the universe that weighs upon the artist of the grotesque. Here some force — numinous and ironic and powerful — seems to work against Troy, the torrent of water "from the gargoyle's jaws" directing "its vengeance into the grave" (p. 362). The leering grin of the gargoyle reminds us of the earlier laughter in the "gurgle" of the stream outside the barracks. Through the water it spills from its mouth, it comments on Troy's passion, on its irresponsible nature, and on its destructiveness.

Troy's flowers are a memorial to Fanny, a register of his sorrow. But for the reader they are more than that. If after union with Heaven, Earth brought forth mountains and streams and, one assumes, the verdure covering them, Troy's planting becomes an effort on his part to do through artifice what was not done through compassionate act. His union with Fanny has not been creative; it has brought forth hardship and death. Troy's are efforts to repair, to make abundant, but he does it alone — and fails. He brings flowers to plant not for the moment, but — untypical of him — for time to come: "There were bundles of snowdrop, hyacinth and crocus bulbs, violets and double daisies, *which were to bloom in early spring*, and of carnations, pinks, picotees, lilies of the valley, forget-me-not, summer's farewell, meadow-saffron and others, *for the later seasons of the year* (p. 358). (Italics added.) He has tried to beautify the earth. But when Troy returns to the graveyard the following morning to find the flowers "washed clean out of the ground," lying "roots upwards" (p. 363), the reader recognizes how this man of the present has been denied the lost future to which he tried to pay respect. In addition to this manifestation of "the wreck the stream had made" (p. 363) is another: "The pool upon the

grave had soaked away into the ground, and in its place was a hollow" (p. 363). The image is of barrenness, not just of the grave, but also, by implication, of the womb, of posterity, for Fanny's dead child is buried with her. Troy has not simply been denied any possibility of mitigating or eluding grief. Providence has not simply "jeered" (p. 365). It has mocked him with its image of the consequences of passion.

Troy's love, like Boldwood's, has been quenched or drowned by the irrational qualities of passion; it is a kind of love that in both cases not only fails to survive but also causes death, disrupting what might be the projected calm of a "cool, sequester'd vale." The love that "many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown" is the love that both Gabriel and Bathsheba attain. The calm that can be achieved "far from the madding crowd" knows many disruptions. Yet the two lovers in the end achieve its refuge — from stress caused by unruly emotions, from incidents struck by human vagaries.

By associating water in its various forms with passion — its qualities, its effects — Hardy not only strengthens the traditional tie between region and inhabitants but he also registers the complexities and intermingling of nature and the world of the emotions. He idealizes neither. He shows error and calamity. But he also shows strength. And in Gabriel Oak and that character's "realist" devotion to Bathsheba, and in Bathsheba's growth in her awareness of his good qualities, Hardy has shown "the substantial affection" that can be developed into a "love which is strong as death."

NOTES

[1] *The Great Web: The Form of Hardy's Major Fiction* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), p. 50. Other critics have used different terms. For example, in Chapter 6 of *The Pastoral Novel* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), Michael Squires finds in the novel "a modified version of traditional pastoral in which the manner and the underlying attitudes of pastoral are present but in which real details of rural life form the substance of the work" (p. 125); in "*Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Woodlanders*: Hardy's Grotesque Pastorals," *English Literature in Transition*, 17 (1974), 147-58, Charles E. May argues that the novel is a "distortion" of pastoral, creating a "totally estranged world of the absurd and the grotesque" (p. 155).

[2] Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1962), p. 456. Further citations within the text are to this edition.

[3] Gregor, p. 74.

[4] Howard Babb, "Setting and Theme in *Far from the Madding Crowd*," *ELH*, 30 (1963), 147-61, discusses ways in which Hardy relates "his characters to setting" (p. 150), commenting among others on the barracks scene and the scene describing Boldwood with Bathsheba's valentine. My focus, however, is on water imagery. This concern derives less from exact parallels in the novel with the Biblical passages — waters quenching, floods drowning — than from the general associations of love and passion with water that the passage seems to invite.

[5] I draw on comments about Tristan and later Don Juan from W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (1962; rpt. New York: Vintage-Knopf, 1968), especially from the sections "Balaam and His Ass" and "The Prince's Dog."

[6] According to Jacob Smallbury: "I met Farmer Boldwood, . . . and I went with him and two of his men, and dragged Newmill Pond, but we found nothing" (p. 87).

[7] Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928* (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1962), p. 55.

[8] Note Ruskin's description of the term in Part V, "Of Mountain Beauty," in *Modern Painters*, IV, Vol. VI of *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), 112-13.

[9] I can not point to any direct borrowing in translation. C. A. Elton's translation, *Hesiod* (London: George Routledge and Sons, n.d.), reads:

> Earth first produced the Heaven; whose starry cope
> Like to herself immense, might compass her
> On every side, and be to blessed gods
> A mansion unremoved for aye. (p. 102)

The later passage where she lies with Heaven so her sons can avenge her is more explicitly sexual:

> Vast Heaven came down from high,
> And with him brought the gloominess of night
> On all beneath: desiring Earth's embrace,
> He lean'd above her, and lay now diffused
> In his immensity. (pp. 104-05)

Other translations like the prose translation of A. W. Mair and the recent one of Richmond Lattimore echo the same sense of union one finds in Hardy's paragraph.

I am indebted to Miss Sharon Werbicki for first calling my attention to this parallel with myth.

[10] *The Stones of Venice*, III, Vol. XI of *The Works of John Ruskin*, p. 166. Gregor's reference appears on p. 61, though it points to Ruskin's discussion in *Modern Painters*.