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## Blank Letters and Ensnared Eyes in *Far from the Madding Crowd*

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# Blank Letters and Ensnared Eyes in *Far from the Madding Crowd*

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

This article is being published jointly by FATHOM and the *Hardy Review* as part of a collaborative work.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This article was kindly translated by Catherine Lanone.

- 1 It might seem something of a paradox to put words on paper, or dribble ink on a white sheet, while claiming that all meaning rests on white spaces or blanks... Yet the blanks and gaps on the page draw the eye and allow language to make sense, by building and signalling the various signifying units. Thence proceeds all discourse, as readers must leap from word to word, from sentence to sentence, or from one idea to the next: “interruption is what allows the flow of words, intermittence breeds becoming”, says Maurice Blanchot (Blanchot 1964, 870), the thinker whose very name and work make him the tutelary figure of all reflexion on textual white space<sup>1</sup>. Blanks indeed play a fundamental part in all communication, for without them there can be no understanding and no exchange, be it written or oral: “even the most coherent of speeches splinters when shifting from one speaker to the next. Each switch entails an interruption [...]; such discontinuity ensures the continuity of communication”, Blanchot claims (870). In dialogues especially, each speaker’s own silences or blanks may be pregnant with meaning. But written texts widen this signifying gap, by creating visual intervals that materialize the distinctions which in spoken dialogue could only be heard or surmised.

Even the narrow space between letters beckons, like a sign in itself, endowed with its own definite function, since it allows the eye to make sense of words and sentences.

- 2 Should we shift from alphabetical letters to epistolary letters, blanks carve their own visual spaces which become even more meaningful. Letters travel within the diegetic world of the novel, they bridge gaps by crossing concrete, measurable distances, linking different geographic spaces. They also they add a graphic dimension within the text, as embedded visual spaces of their own, framed by blanks or a white *parergon* (Derrida 1978, Part I), prompting repetition, when written and then read. Finally, letters create a metatextual *mise en abyme* that prompts the actual reader to reflect upon the fictional writer and reader of a letter, as well as on the way the whole text or novel works. Epistolary letters thus use blanks to make sense, as do alphabetical letters and words, but they expand on this to use white space as an emotional clue, a creative visual device, a way of prompting a self-reflexive meditation on the scripser, and on the way the message has been voiced or constructed.
- 3 However, it is the very opposite that occurs in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, with the mocking, desultory Valentine which the mischievous Bathsheba sends in a moment of boredom and defiance to her neighbour, the confirmed bachelor Farmer Boldwood: its playful, elliptic and teasing “marry me” will wreak havoc rather than allow any construction of meaning, ensnaring Boldwood’s eye rather than delivering any sense (Hardy 1986, 80).

## The unreadable card

- 4 The card received by the solitary Boldwood creates an unfathomable blank space, that of the utmost lack of understanding. In bewilderment, Boldwood’s empty gaze, bleached out of expression, stares blankly at the snow-covered scene outside his parlour, a scene that itself appears as a petrified, marmoreal and meaningless landscape: “[Boldwood’s] eyes were wide-spread and vacant” (Hardy 1986, 81)<sup>2</sup>; “[he] 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” (82). Although it fails to reach a firm conclusion, Boldwood’s analysis of the situation follows an irreproachable logic, in spite of his perplexity: “The letter must have an origin and a motive [...] Somebody’s—some *woman’s* hand had travelled softly over the paper bearing his name; her unrevealed eyes had watched every curve as she formed it; her brain had seen him in imagination the while” (80). Yet the argument only leads to another blank, when its three piercing questions are cut short by stumbling reflexion – or repressed desire: “Why should she have imagined him? Her mouth – were the lips red or pale, plump or creased? – had curved itself to a certain expression as the pen went on – the corners had moved with their natural tremulousness: what had been the expression?” (80). In Boldwood’s rational mind, as in Roman Jakobson’s linguistic theory, communication relies upon at least four definite factors: the sender, the receiver, the message and the code. But in this scene, all of these prove deficient: 1) the *sender*, Bathsheba, remains unknown; 2) the *receiver* is only addressed as “Mr Boldwood, farmer”, so that his identity shrinks to mere social status, his personality being erased; furthermore, the complete ellipsis of the addressee in the imperative form “marry me”, as well as the strangely undefined “*me*” that fails to present itself as a subject, coming as it does in the grammatical position of the verb complement, all negate, conceal or mask the real subjects: in this message, there neither is an active “I” nor a

“you”, neither truly identified sender nor receiver. Finally, 3) the two-word *message* remains cryptic; and ultimately, 4) the linguistic *code* itself is transgressed, since the Valentine, which should have implied an intimate message unveiling or indirectly adumbrating someone’s feelings, here appears as an unexpected speech-act, premised upon performative power. The whole communicative system is emptied out by blanks which suspend or thwart meaning, but which also carve a corresponding blank or void within Boldwood himself.

- 5 Whichever level we consider – whether the sender, the addressee, the code or the actual message – the card remains a blank which does not bode well, and which can only belong to the realm of broken relationships, such as hopeless proposals, illicit liaisons, divorce or fatal separation. Far from building up communication, it perverts or parodies it. The paradoxical blank of that letter that splits rather than connects beings might be defined as a “*hymen*” in Derrida’s sense, that thin tissue which simultaneously unites and divides, opens and protects, the blank that both opposes and calls for penetration,

perpetrating the act of what *comes in*, consummates, and sows confusion between both partners, but also, conversely, unconsummated marriage, the vaginal wall, the virginal screen of the hymen which remains in-between inside and outside, desire and fulfilment, penetration and memory – the suspense of perpetual allusion. (Derrida 1972, 382, translation Catherine Lanone)

- 6 As a coded address supposed to express love, the Valentine would seem to call for intimate union through its injunction to marry; but it does this within a situation of utter disjunction, where one of the two partners remains carefully in hiding – which subverts this fiery “Marry me” into an icy “Noli me Tangere”... This innermost discrepancy between utterance and deed does not open the white space of tacit understanding, beyond words, but the blank space of undecipherable ambiguity, born of the disjunction between text and context.
- 7 Far from weaving the organic unity of texts, letters / missives in Hardy’s world nearly always signify division, both in terms of diegesis – they divide characters rather than bridge gaps and silences – and in terms of the visual space of the novel itself, since they flicker in and out of the page, glimpsed only in haunting fragments. They do not foster the shock of surprise and revelation that shapes coherent detective or sensation fiction, the timely reprieve of melodrama that still worked in Hardy’s earliest novels like *Desperate Remedies* (1871), where the writer still abode by conventional forms and the protagonist’s past surfaced thanks to a two-page letter that acted as a will – an alibi of a letter, disclosing the doings of a character.
- 8 Bathsheba’s letter, on the contrary, suspends revelation. Whereas letters often bring a *dénouement* in novels, here it is used to trigger the plot: will Boldwood ever find out who sent him the Valentine, will he ever marry the bold young woman? This is another alibi of a letter, in the etymological sense this time, a floating signifier which remains *elsewhere*, which always lies where it should not, in the wrong place at the wrong time, like the letters which Tess attempts to send to Angel, but which disappear under the carpet or remain by the side of a kitchen table, waiting for the return of the prodigal husband, lost in the Brazilian jungle. Such are the blank letters that remain unread, or not read in time. Weaving but a parody of communication, those stray letters wander as much as the characters do. Thus Tess’s desperate plea for help circulates via Emminster and Angel’s father’s vicarage, before reaching him in Brazil – it then prompts his belated return and steers his search for her, only to bring her downfall. Stray letters are part of Hardy’s

broken web of communication, of half-delivered messages and misread clues, as characters keep gazing at each other or spying through keyholes, eavesdropping or peering from behind thick curtains or over garden walls, with a keen, frustrated or leering eye, like the devilish Alec d'Urberville.

- 9 Geographic, spatial and temporal diegetic distance merely stresses the emotional distance between characters that are already divorced by their cryptic or invisible letters, whether Bathsheba and Boldwood, or Tess and Angel. In Hardy's world, such human relationships are crippled both by the denial of touch and by the blank or white space of separation, as Hillis Miller recalls in *Distance and Desire*, quoting from Hardy's journal: "Love lives on propinquity but dies of contact" (Miller 1970, 134). And such a death is no mere metaphor, since in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, death does come in the end, when Boldwood murders Bathsheba's husband or Tess is hanged: Boldwood enters jail and vanishes from the text, just as, after a gap or ellipsis, the black flag floats over the prison of Wintonchester and Tess is seen no more...
- 10 Thus division strikes home: Bathsheba, who impulsively sent the Valentine, is torn between the thoughtless impulse of teasing youth and the rational mindset of the respectable land-owner she has by now become; while Boldwood knows not what to think, divided against himself, spurred by the card's glaring message, "feeling uneasy and dissatisfied *with himself* for his nervous excitability" (Hardy 1986, 81). Torn from the other by the fantasmatic white space of the letter—the symptom of shattered or rather impossible communication—but also unhinged, as if split from his former self, the character remains stunned, bewildered, "dis-located" as Hillis Miller puts it, that is to say denied his or her proper place, elsewhere, astray, as if looking for his own self. Hillis Miller draws upon Kafka's letters to Milena to dwell on this paradoxical sense of estrangement through epistolary connection:
- Writing is a dis-location, in the sense that it moves the soul of the writer outside of himself, over there, somewhere else. Far from being a form of communication, the writing of a letter dispossesses both the writer and the receiver of themselves. Writing creates a new phantom written self and a phantom receiver of that writing. There is correspondence all right, but it is between two entirely phantasmagorical or fantastic persons, ghosts raised by the hand that writes. Writing calls phantoms into being. (Miller 1990, 172)
- 11 Bathsheba herself is such a spectral woman in white, created by the nearly blank card, eerily blurred by fantasmatic distance, while her original flesh-and-blood self is turned into a chimerical fantasy, supplanted by the written surplus of a thoughtless note which itself acquires a compelling, resilient presence, a reversal in keeping with Derridean *deferral*:
- The vision of the woman writing, as a *supplement* to the words written, had no individuality. She was a misty shape, and well might she be, considering that her original was at that moment sound asleep and oblivious of all love and letter-writing under the sky. Whenever Boldwood dozed she took a form, and comparatively ceased to be a vision: when he awoke, there was the letter justifying the dream. (Hardy 1986, 81, emphasis added)
- 12 At the other end of the spectrum, dazed by the total suspension of sense, the proud Boldwood also begins to vanish, like a broken heap of spectral features: "He caught sight of his reflected features, wan in expression, and insubstantial in form" (Hardy 1986, 81). Like a ghost desperately seeking its missing reflexion in a mirror, his "phantom self" longs for substance, his image barely discernible in the glass before him.

## From readable to visible signs?

- 13 The letter, as a *readable* text, revealing or calling for a union, is hereby replaced by the letter as a *visible* signifier. Departing from the linguistic code, where the blanks within the sentences might be construed into meaning, it is redirected to circulate as a *semiotic* code, where the white space beckons and opens up. And just as Tess must look for her own letter beneath the carpet of Angel's room, the reader must decipher meaning by focusing on this clear and original *visual* signifier in order to retrieve what lies beneath the blank. This scene from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* seems to materialize the definition Hardy gives of fiction, where meaning must be inferred from a network of images that lies within the thick carpet of words, a striking metaphor which echoes Henry James's image of the "figure in the carpet" (1896). Hardy thus writes: "As, in looking at a carpet, by following one colour a certain pattern is suggested, by following another colour, another; so in life the seer should watch that pattern among general things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe, and describe that alone" (Millgate 158). The message of the letter may well be a blank which does not make any sense, but the letter weaves a meaningful web of *relations* between the protagonists. In Boldwood's house, the Valentine is not so much a text as a material thing, lost among an assemblage of furniture and decorative objects clearly meant to create a reality effect: "At dusk on the evening of Saint Valentine's Day Boldwood sat down at supper as usual, by a beaming fire of aged logs. Upon the mantleshef before him was a time-piece, surmounted by a spread-eagle, and upon the eagle's wings was the letter Bathsheba had sent" (Hardy 1986, 79-80). This object, artfully displayed, then starts signalling to Boldwood, though not as a clearly readable text but as a beautiful multi-faceted surface ambiguously reflecting everything that surrounds it: "The pert injunction was like those crystal substances, which, colourless themselves, assume the tone of objects about them" (80). Explicitly, the letter starts blending with the objects around it, like a mere emanation, a shifting reflection hovering on the brink of materiality and devoid of intrinsic significance.
- 14 Thus Hardy makes us *see* the letter instead of reading it; he turns it into an object-gaze or a semiotic object rather than a text, a reversal that harks back to the pictorial paradigm shift initiated by Rembrandt or Vermeer. Breaking away from the realistic obsession of the likes of Van Eyck or other early Flemish painters intent on making us read the words or minutely painted micro-texts in their canvases, Vermeer loved to show characters poring over letters, books, atlases, etc. – yet nowhere are words precisely readable in his paintings: it is mostly blank letters that work as strictly visual eye-catchers rather than linguistic signs, in *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (c.1657, Dresde, Gemäldegalerie), in *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (c.1663, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum), in *Mistress and Maid* (c.1667, New York, Frick Collection), or in *Love Letter* (c.1669-1670, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum). From that angle, it is rather interesting to note that Vermeer treated music scores in nearly the same figurative way as written letters, for instance in *The Concert* (1658-1660, Boston, Isabella Gardner Museum) or in *Girl Interrupted in Her Music* (1660-1661, New York, Frick Collection). The viewer is offered no pretence of writing or scribbling, as the missives held by the characters most of the time appear only as pure white spots. Only rarely do we see the back of a love letter, with its little round seal.
- 15 Ironically enough, Rembrandt had painted a melancholy *Bathsheba* (1654, Paris, Louvre museum) even before Vermeer specialised in intimate paintings of women-readers. In the

Louvre version of that famous biblical subject, Bathsheba is not seen at her bath – when King David spies on her and falls in love with her – but at the moment when she receives from him a letter asking her to come to him and thus betray her husband – an interesting reversal of Hardy’s scene, and of the love triangle in the novel. In Rembrandt’s canvas, Bathsheba no longer gazes at the letter, with its scarlet seal upon a piece of paper that hardly seems to show any written trace. In the painted tradition, these unread or unreadable letters do not serve to bridge geographic distance but are fused within a domestic scene, mingling with the shades of white of private possessions, from baskets of linen set on spotless floors to lace bonnets or shimmering pearls, all connoting immaculate intimacy and the stronghold of inviolate virginity. Ironically enough, Bathsheba Everdene’s letter no longer exposes a girl to the gaze, but catches Boldwood in the very stronghold of his room, of his own self, amidst military metaphors – like the eagle on the mantelpiece – and the endless pattern of reflections created by the *mise en abyme* of window and mirror. The melodramatic letter that was supposed to heal the narrative into a seamless whole now becomes an abyss, carving its void within Boldwood’s innermost thoughts. The unreadable gnaws at the invisible core of the self.

## The unseen

- 16 The mesmerizing white spaces of Bathsheba’s nearly blank card reverse all the characteristics of reading. To begin with, Boldwood reads it in his mind rather than with his eyes, since he keeps repeating and pondering over a text which lies too far for him to actually see it: “as he ate and drank he still read in fancy the words thereon, although they were too remote for his sight” (Hardy 1986, 80). He stares at the envelope while eating his supper, ingesting words rather than food, as if switching the material against the textual, literalizing signifiers. The word no longer springs from the white piece of paper through the regulated, intentional act of reading, but sears his eyes like a painfully penetrating weapon, prints its own trace or scar within the helpless character’s flesh and mind: “Here the bachelor’s gaze was continually fastening itself, till the large red seal became as a blot of blood on the retina of his eye” (80). Obviously, such a seal no longer declares and fixes the identity of the sender of a letter, as does the stamp which prints on wax any sort of revealing sign or emblem: it becomes the red stain covering or concealing the origin of the letter, while the narrative voice itself seems to stutter and stumble upon the consonants of the phrase “blot of blood.” Curiously enough, Boldwood is contemplating the letter from the wrong side – the side of the missive showing not the address but the seal. And, as if logically depending on this, everything in the scene seems strangely reversed, with the landscape itself appearing to be upset, literally turned upside down. At that point the emphasis in the passage has shifted from the textual to the visual, or rather from the readable to the invisible or unseen:

The moon shone to-night, and its light was not of a customary kind. His window admitted only a reflection of its rays, and the pale sheen had that *reversed direction* which snow gives, coming upward and lighting up his ceiling in an unnatural way, casting shadows in strange places, and putting light where shadows had used to be. (Hardy 1986, 81; emphasis added)

There was here too, that before-mentioned *preternatural inversion* of light and shade that attends the prospect when the garish brightness: commonly in the sky is found on the earth, and the shades of earth are in the sky. (81, emphasis added)



- 17 Just as the incandescent seal seems to invade the white rectangle of the envelope, the stain of live blood seems to encroach upon the white of the contemplative eye; the white hearth blazes red; and the immaculate snow is set ablaze by a vivid light: a host of vivid images endlessly repeat the shift from the readable to the visible, from the dead word to the living sign, from the linguistic to the semiotic. This highly visual shift is intensely pictorial, and comes very close to the French Impressionists' attempt to pierce through the surface of things and to reconfigure the visual as a mental, chromatic impression. In Claude Monet's *Snow near Honfleur*<sup>3</sup> for instance, the contrast between the shining light of the snow-bound ground and the faint grey of the sky seems to correspond to that "preternatural inversion of light and shade" that is blinding Boldwood; and Monet's signature mingles with the shrubs' shadows on the snow, as if to blend words and things. Similarly, in *The Cart, or Snow-covered road at Honfleur*<sup>4</sup>, or in *The Break-up of the Ice at Vétheuil*<sup>5</sup>, the wind blows and bends the boughs of the trees but also, it seems, the very letters of the painter's signature.
- 18 In the intensely pictorial scene that stretches before Boldwood's eyes, a scene set under the oxymoronic sign of a fire burning white, the whole landscape seems to be reversed, things become their obverse, and one can no longer read or decipher frontal messages: "When Boldwood went to bed he placed the valentine in the corner of the looking-glass. He was conscious of its presence even when his back was turned upon it." The letter itself functions like the obverse of a narrative, substituting an image for a text, displacing the very notion of addressor and addressee – and this may well be because the scene itself rewrites and subverts, or literally reverses, the text of the Bible (2 Samuel 11): in the biblical narrative, David, having fallen in love with Bathsheba, manoeuvres so that Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, will be sent to his death in perilous battle. Bathsheba, who knows nothing of the wrongful plot, weeps for her beloved husband. Conversely, in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Bathsheba becomes the almighty one who sends the letter that will lead the warrior – Boldwood – to his doom. Overturning the text, Hardy reverses the traditional gender roles, giving the woman frightening agency. As for Boldwood, he is literally upset, and everything in the scene seems to follow a neat pattern of inversions: when seeing his own reflection in the mirror, he cannot recognize it; he wakes up at night, being unable to sleep; and when he watches the sky at dawn, it is not the image of the break of light, but that of a weird sort of crepuscular noon, which is evoked. Nothing is as it seems, and one is reminded of Monet's preternatural snow scenes in which the ground is rendered by blue spots and lines, whereas the sky is painted with touches of muddy brown... "Then the dawn drew on. The full power of the clear heaven was not equal to that of a cloudy sky at noon, when Boldwood arose and dressed himself". The character is now the opposite of everything he had been up to that point, as Boldwood, a steady, sturdy, hardy man. He feels Bathsheba's presence behind him, haunting him, although he himself had shunned her in the church of Weatherbury – just as, in a continued play on inversions, she will turn a cold shoulder to his repeated proposals. The white light of the text delineates his reverse, unknown inner self, like a photographic negative.
- 19 Thus the overwhelming white space of the nearly blank card does not actually deny meaning, quite the contrary; beneath the seal, the blank envelope seems to call for some kind of inscription, it reveals itself as the potential space for some new, inverted kind of relationship, while the snow-bound landscape becomes the map of the unseen, as if signalling repression, pointing obscurely to feelings that Boldwood can neither articulate



nor understand, the unknown subconscious. The obscure, the unsaid, the erased, best reveal his personality.

- 20 This projection of a troubled state of consciousness – which neither the character nor the narrative voice seem willing to unravel – over the blank screen of the virgin landscape, seems less a case of pathetic fallacy than an intuitive form of internal focalization, as defined by Gérard Genette in *Figures III*. This use of “point-of-view narration,” Genette explains, implies “in its purest forms, that the focaliser should not be described, or even designated from the outside, and that his/her perceptions or thoughts should not be analyzed by the narrator” (Genette 1972, 209). In reality, the vision of the snowfield is attributed to Boldwood right before the description of the field of snow starts: “He descended the stairs and went out towards the gate of a field to the east, leaning over which he paused and looked around” (Hardy 1986, 81). The gate is the threshold which signals a pause, while the character becomes all eyes, his panoramic gaze taking in the whole of the landscape. At that point, the scene still seems factual and objective, a picturesque composition with its expected topographical landmarks, clearly positioned and named:

It was one of the usual slow sunrises of this time of the year, and the sky, pure violet in the zenith, was leaden to the northward, and murky to the east where, over the snowy down or ewe-lease on Weatherbury Upper Farm, and apparently resting upon the ridge, the only half of the sun yet visible burnt rayless, like a red and flameless fire shining over a white hearthstone. The whole effect resembled sunset as childhood resembles age. (Hardy 1986, 81)

- 21 Yet however cold the style, however frozen the landscape, affect simmers beneath, as betrayed by the adverb “apparently,” by the repetition of the verb “to resemble,” by the implicit metaphors in the adjectives “leaden” and “murky,” and by the image of fire, pointing to the character’s unspeakable, deeply-buried emotion. Boldwood is literally placed before a blank slate of snow, an empty field overwritten with tiny traces, over which he unconsciously projects his state of mind, seeking to decipher both, as it were, while the narrative voice becomes less and less insistent, less and less intrusive:

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 while it lay in the state of a soft fleece, were now frozen to a short permanency. (Hardy 1986, 82)

- 22 Some meaning slowly crystallises in those metaphors, chiselled as delicately as Venetian glass. But it hardly pierces through the softly shimmering “fleece” of snow as yet: what the whole passage metaphorises is the slow and incredibly brittle emergence of some sort of sign, as light as birds’ footprints. Once more, Monet’s snow-fields come to mind, particularly the canvas of a field watched by a solitary magpie<sup>6</sup> posted, like Boldwood, by one of these five-barred gates so typical of Hardy’s Wessex. Diffracted by anaphora (“how”) or atomized by modifiers connoting the minute and the rare (“some”, “few”), the scene gives us something to see that words cannot fully say: the vague sign of some fire smouldering under an appearance of inert frigidity.

## Dawning desire

- 23 What Boldwood sees unbeknownst to his conscious mind, when he gazes at the pristine whiteness of the landscape, is his own reflection. In this subversive moment which substitutes the figuration of a state of mind for the objective perception of the world, the burning secret which Boldwood will not, or cannot confess, even to himself, starts showing through its immaculate cover of innocence. Indeed, the colour white which suffuses the landscape bristles with the energy of something emerging but not yet entirely revealed, still hovering between vulnerable virginity – recalling Tess’s “feminine tissue [...] blank as snow yet” – and the potential sterility of unrequited passion, buried and denied.
- 24 Such a landscape, at one and the same time pointing and erasing signs, however, does not only reflect Boldwood’s blank mind. It also manifests the absence, or lack, of the necessary Other, the female counterpart, Bathsheba. It becomes clearer and clearer that the spectral, shimmering light haunting the surface connotes the flickering presence of desire, troping the presence / absence of the idealized female image, and hinting at the depth of possible passion beneath the frozen surface. But in this layer of white, pale as marble yet bristling with concretions, the visual also flirts with the tactile and optic and haptic merge with synaesthetic intensity, as if the pale skin of the desired body offered itself to some timid sense of touch, in utmost proximity and infinite distance.
- 25 Indeed, Boldwood’s emotional experience of space rests on an incomplete inter-subjective model: by definition a Valentine is never signed, and Bathsheba withholds her own offer by not inscribing her name. Never actually oriented by the compass of some reciprocal gaze, Boldwood’s field of perception remains blank. The desired other remains absent, that is to say alien, unknowable as well as unreachable. Disoriented, deprived of the human landmarks that might help to survey life itself, Boldwood remains dispossessed, distanced from the living world, separated by the very concrete and significant obstacle of the barrier on which he is leaning. Unable to reach self-definition through someone else’s eyes, he can no longer identify his own self, becomes an abstract white shape, the spectral victim of what Barthes calls that “panic-stricken suspension of language, the blank erasure of codes, the white rupture that stops the inner narrative that constitutes our own self” (Barthes 97).
- 26 Painting the *perception* of the landscape rather than the landscape itself, Hardy lets us glimpse the inscape of a being who strives to define himself in relation to another – but a fantasmatic, unresponsive, absent other – with a hitherto unknown passion, buried beneath layers of outside impassive coldness, like the “red light” simmering beneath the frozen marble of the white landscape. What surfaces, beneath the delicate bits of grass piercing the snow, like some mysterious handwriting, whose message is precisely the blank inversion of the snow-bound plain, is a new, hitherto unforeseen Boldwood. That inversion of narration and description reaches beyond words, to offer a visual, significant form, showing rather than telling, corresponding to Blanchot’s superb definition of writing:
- To write at the edge of the book, outside the book.  
This writing outside language: a writing that would be a kind of originary manner rendering impossible any object (either present or absent) of language. (Blanchot 1993, 427)

- 27 This blank is not that of deconstructive nihilism, but that of a potentially new language, that of a new birth, or a new understanding of life and death, connoted perhaps by the oxymoron “short permanency.” This white scene may signify nothing explicitly, yet it resonates with infinite meaning deep inside the character’s self. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art – and Painting in Particular*, the painter Wassily Kandinsky considers the echoing wonder of the colour white:

White [was] often considered as no colour (a theory largely due to the Impressionists, who saw no white in nature [...]).

This world is too far above us for us to perceive its various sounds. A great silence, like an impenetrable wall, shrouds its life from our understanding. White, therefore, has this harmony of absolute silence, which works upon the deepest of our psyches and, works like many pauses in music that break the melody without ever interrupting it. It is not a dead silence, but one pregnant with possibilities. It sounds as a silence that might all of a sudden yield some meaning. White has the appeal of the nothingness that is before birth, of the world in the ice age. (Kandinsky 39, translation slightly revised)

- 28 Kandinsky’s evocation of the echoing capacity of white unravels the expressive potential of an infinite “wall of white,” held in mysterious suspense, whose unreadable silence voices the promise of a new birth. This silent, secret layer of white, hovering between immanence and the imminent destruction of equilibrium, corresponds to the white surface of Bathsheba’s letter, and to the blank space of the landscape. The perception of the scene says nothing, as if masking the unspeakable event – the birth of erotic desire and blood-red passion – beneath layers of whiteness. Internal focalization betrays the birth to self and other, the sudden arousal of bold, or rather mad, desire. Interestingly, Boldwood’s irrational access to life and desire occurs through vision, not speech. Focalization lets us glimpse what narrative discourse could not tell, like the other side of a card, a sheet of paper or an envelope, what cannot be laid down or scripted black on white. The mute letter triggers the plot, with its visual impact, more powerfully than narrative comment might, for it preserves all the potential of suspense. Seeing Boldwood gazing at the blank space of letter and landscape, opens up the possibility of a figurative event, in the troubled space of “I” and eye.

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## NOTES

1. The name "Blanchot" indeed recalls the word "blanc", meaning "white" in French.
2. All the references to the novel henceforward will refer to that particular chapter.
3. Claude Monet (1840-1926), *Environs de Honfleur, neige*, around 1867, oil on canvas, 81 cm x 102 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre.
4. Claude Monet, *La charrette. Route sous la neige à Honfleur*, around 1867, oil on canvas, 65 cm x 92,5, Paris, Musée d'Orsay.
5. Claude Monet, *La débâcle près de Vétheuil*, oil on canvas, 1880, 65 x 93 cm, Musée du Louvre.
6. See Claude Monet, *La Pie*, 1868-1869, 89cm x 130 cm, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay.

## ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on just one scene in *Far from the Madding Crowd*: that of Boldwood's bewildered reception of Bathsheba's Valentine. Far from showing us an "expressive eye," the passage does the opposite, since it shows an immaculate, yet unreadable, landscape of snow stretching out before Boldwood's blank gaze, his dazed eyes. Yet this scene which deploys in so many different ways the image of the unreadable and the invisible uses the narrative technique of internal focalization to make the reader "see" through the text itself what lies beneath the surface: the birth of unavowed, unsaid, repressed, desire.

Cet article se concentre sur la scène de *Far from the Madding Crowd* où Boldwood, interloqué, reçoit la carte de la saint Valentin envoyée par Bathsheba, par plaisanterie et goût du défi. C'est alors l'inverse d'un « œil expressif » que le passage met en scène : sous le regard hagard et vide de Boldwood s'étend un paysage de neige immaculé, mystérieux, illisible. Mais c'est bien le désir que

fait sentir cette scène, par le biais de stratégies de focalisation interne. Car au-delà, ou en-deça, des métaphores démultipliées de l'illisible et de l'invisible, le lecteur est conduit à saisir ce qui se cache sous la surface du texte : la naissance de l'émotion que le personnage de Boldwood lui-même ne peut se figurer, celle du désir, non-dit, inavoué, refoulé.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** blanc, désir, dislocation, focalisation, inconscient, inversions, lettre, paradoxe, répression, sémiotique, communication (théorie)

**Keywords:** gaze, communication theory, desire, dislocation, focalisation, inversions, letter, paradox, repression, semiotics, unconscious, white

**oeuvre citée** *Far from the Madding Crowd*

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Isabelle Gadoin is Professor at the University of Poitiers, where she teaches English literature and text-and-image studies. Her thesis was entitled “Structures spatiales dans les romans de ‘Caractère et d’Environnement’ de Thomas Hardy: espace représenté et espace représentant” (University Paris 3 – Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1993); she has been one of the promoters of Hardy studies in France, and was one of the founding members of FATHOM (French Association for Thomas Hardy Studies). Her research bears on the question of space and visual structures in the work of Thomas Hardy, and more globally on visual perception and the relationships between text and image in literary works. In 2010 she published *Far from the Madding Crowd: Thomas Hardy, entre convention et subversion*.