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**Desire and the Expressive Eye**

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*Le diagnostic de l'affect chez Thomas Hardy*

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# Desire and Impaired Eyesight: Thomas Hardy's Clinical Metaphors of Affect

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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.

- 1 Isabelle Gadoin stresses the reversibility of Hardy's moments of vision, fits of blindness rather than epiphanies. Part of this paradox is the haunting return of those moments, and the enmeshing of distance and desire first traced by J. Hillis Miller. George O. Marshall, as early as 1966, pointed to Hardy's obsession with eyes from *A Pair of Blue Eyes* onward. Following Hillis Miller, this has been unravelled in terms of the representation of desire: Rosemarie Morgan lays emphasis on the corporeality of Hardy's work while Annie Ramel stresses the subconscious forces at work in blind spots and red stains. Besides, Hardy's depiction of vision has often been analysed in terms of technological models, such as the diorama, the stroboscope or the telescope, by Matthew Campbell or Pamela Gossin for instance. Yet little has been said about his transposition of medical or physiological conditions to convey the shock of emotional blindness. Oliver Sacks reminds us that we see with our eyes, but we also see with our brains. Thomas Hardy might be said to anticipate neurological studies when he accounts for mental misvision in terms of clinical ophtalmological models. To delineate such metaphorical filters, we consider his drawing of spectacles upon a landscape as a first signal of this clinical gaze. We shall then study the process of seeing through, transposing models like X-Rays or the removal of cataract, in some of the poems<sup>1</sup> that were written after Emma's death. Finally,

we shall suggest that *Far from the Madding Crowd* offers a paradigm shift, using the configurations of impaired eyesight to break new fictional ground.

## 1. The strange case of the uncorrective glasses

- 2 Let us begin with one of Hardy's drawings, the iconic pair of spectacles oddly superimposed over the pastoral landscape, in the famous illustration of the poem "In a Eweleaze Near Weatherbury" (Hardy 2001, 70-71). At first glance, the incongruous glasses loom large against the backdrop of soft hills and sheep, and might suggest that our take on landscape is mediated by the cultural and the technological, either because we see through pictorial frames or because the Victorian age was fascinated by optical inventions, and ways of looking at the world differently. Kate Flint stresses the role of visual instruments that "together with the marvels of visual scale produced by the telescope and the increasingly domesticated microscope, served to challenge, at the level of popular perception, the quality of observations made by the unaided human eye" (Flint 5). However, if we consider the glasses as a visual device, Hardy's drawing remains puzzling, since as Zietlow points out, the glasses are clear, devoid of gleams of light, as if they had no lens and produced neither heightened nor distorted vision (Zietlow 4). In terms of technology, they bring nothing to the "unaided human eye". So that we must instead read the glasses not in terms of medical diagnosis (short-sightedness), but as a more abstract clinical metaphor, meant to diagnose a state of mind.
- 3 Thus the spectacles no longer refer to the poet's persona's short-sightedness, but to emotional myopia, forcing the reader/spectator to engage with visual disorientation. They hover in the air like a teasing *trompe-l'œil*<sup>2</sup>: we cannot ascertain whether we are meant to look at the landscape through the spectacles, or the opposite. Linda M. Shires notes the instability of "I" and "eyes": "maybe it is the present landscape that looks at us, the viewers, through lenses, rather than the reverse. If so, does the landscape mock us by asserting its presentness?" (Shires 142) The thing which stares back corresponds to the Lacanian "Object-gaze", materializing a lack or gap, the distance between the seeing and the seen, or the split between the eye and the gaze, that Annie Ramel locates at the heart of Hardy's writing. The reversible glasses represent the very act of seeing, with the eyes and with the brain or mind, that is to say through the fantasmatic, deceptively transparent filter of desire. With the spectacles, Hardy enhances the double bind of distance and desire that for J. Hillis Miller characterizes Hardy's work, or the tension between the scopic field and the fantasy-driven gaze that Ramel unravels.
- 4 The glasses thereby also stand for the transparent collage performed by memory, turning the landscape into a palimpsest, an old haunt where the spectral past and former love may still be glimpsed. For Laurence Estanove, it is because they are lensless, that the glasses' "form of visual redundancy" "create the uneasiness of an *unrealistic* perception", as we share the perspective of the speaker who lives in the past (Estanove 2013, n.p.). In "In a Eweleaze Near Weatherbury", the poet's persona conjures up a bygone dance<sup>3</sup>, while the present self feels both the same and essentially different – for separation induced change. For Linda M. Shires, the poem denies the consolation of nostalgia.<sup>4</sup> Vision means revision, revisiting the landscape that both revives and denies the past – as if the eweleaze contained and withdrew not the "ewe" but the "you" of the lost addressee; but it also means foresight, dreading the continuous erosion of time and forthcoming decay. With its little "chisel" (Hardy 2001, 70), a "Donne-like image" (Johnson 181), Time is

burrowing into the speaker's physical frame, love-making is replaced by this more intimate, lethal penetration, "heaping/ Quaintest pains for by-and-by" (71). The lensless spectacles connote a way of looking simultaneously at the landscape, at the past, and at the shadow of things to come, so that the poem does not describe the view but depicts the *perception* of the landscape as the receptacle of memory, the palimpsest of former intimacy. Simultaneously, the ability to gaze at the past through the present also allows the speaker to catch a bleak glimpse of the future. The spectacles, here, focus on the mind's eye as a prop that allows us, Janus-like, to look both ways.

## 2. Seeing through: mental X-Rays

- 5 In this 1890 poem published in 1898 in *Wessex Poems*, the glasses and the age-bitten bones do not simply recall the tradition of anamorphosis, they seem to hint at Hardy's intuitive grasp of medical imaging, as if longing to *see through*, something which came into existence in 1895 when Wilhelm Röntgen discovered that X-Rays could photograph bone structure. Similarly, "The House of Silence" turns memory into an X-Ray device, where the speaker's "visioning powers" can "pierce" the "screen" and access the past, whereas the child he is with can see no one:

"— Ah, that's because you do not bear  
The visioning powers of souls who dare  
To pierce the material screen. (Hardy 2001, 474)

- 6 For Jean-Jacques Lecercle, the house becomes "the vision of a vision" (Lecercle n.p.); the present is stripped to reveal the bare bones of the past, within the house of a mind.
- 7 Could this be a model we may use to engage with Hardy's depiction of regret? Poems like "At Castle Boterel" (Hardy 2001, 351-352) for instance, demonstrate the hallucinatory quality of persistent memory through a kind of cinematic model, since the speaker sees himself and the beloved walking up the slope, as if he were watching a film of the past<sup>5</sup>; in the end, the phantom figure dwindles in the distance, recalling a tracking shot. For Laurence Estanove, Hardy transmutes disenchantment into poetry<sup>6</sup>, while for Hillis Miller<sup>7</sup>, the cruel irony in such poems is that the past self is still within the present self, and the former self has betrayed the present self, by betraying the love that might have led to a better present (Miller 1991, 123). But before the filmic projection takes place in "At Castle Boterel", the poem may also be said to obey the logic of seeing through, as if the rain-drained present might be X-Rayed by the eye to exhume the living scenes of the past. The dimeter, "Distinctly yet" (Hardy 2001, 351), functions as a kind of lens, leading through the gap between stanzas and the run-on line to the close-up on the couple going uphill. The screen of rain is pierced, stripped like a curtain, to reveal the sunny past.
- 8 Yet perhaps the X-Ray model is not satisfactory, since in most of the striking poems written after Emma's death, the point is not simply to pierce through the layers of time and to see the past that was once contained in a place, but rather to see what one failed to see along the way, to peel back misunderstanding. Another clinical ophtalmological model may come closer, *i.e.* the removal of cataract.

### 3. Eyes couched of misvision

- 9 In the sequence of poems devoted to Emma's absence, X-Rays, the ability to see the past through the present, give way to the speaker's more specific, sudden ability to *see through* the years of dissent, to catch a glimpse of Emma, not as she was before her death, "changed from the one who was all to [him]", but "as at first, when our day was fair", as he puts in "The Voice" (Hardy 2001, 346). The eye is thus stripped of the cloudy, ugly present; the past is recalled with uncanny clarity. The clinical model, here, recalls the peeling off of cataract, as if death performed a kind of surgical operation, correcting sight and triggering an emotional anagnorisis.
- 10 The pain and danger entailed by the skilful removal of cataract was something Hardy was aware of. In 1882, on the Cobb in Lyme Regis, Hardy and his wife met "an old man who had undergone an operation for cataract" (Florence Hardy 200). The depiction of the 40-minute ordeal left a lasting impression on Hardy<sup>8</sup>, who later recorded it in the (auto)biography written under Florence Hardy's name:
- It was like a red-hot needle in yer eye whilst he was doing it. But he wasn't long about it. Oh no. If he had been long I couldn't ha' beared it. He wasn't a minute more than three quarters of an hour at the outside. When he had done one eye, 'a said, 'Now my man, you must make shift with that one, and be thankful you bain't left wi' narn.' So he didn't do the other. And I'm glad 'a didn't. I've saved half-crowns and half-crowns out of number in only wanting one glass to my spectacles.' (Florence Hardy 200)
- 11 The old man's tale gives a graphic account of what eye operations were like before local anesthesia, which medical research still refers to today<sup>9</sup>.
- 12 The cataract as a metaphor lies at the core of "The Spell of the Rose" (Hardy 2001 355-356)<sup>10</sup>, a poem uncharacteristically spoken in Emma's own voice. It deals with unfulfilled promises. A man never planted the rose bush he had promised his wife, and the marriage grew sour: "And misconceits raised horrid shows" (355). So that she was the one who planted roses at night, hoping to heal discord. But when the rose grew and the man remembered who the woman truly was, it was too late to tell her so – except if we read this poem as autobiographical, through the complex ventriloquy which enmeshes viewpoints and reverses the gaze here.
- 13 The poem plays on the Petrarchan rose as a symbol of life and love; but the most poignant image in the poem is not so much the rose as the clinical conceit, "Eyes couched of the mis-vision that blurred me –" (Hardy 2001, 356). Couching is a technical term that refers to the removal of the crystalline lens of the eye, to cut out the opacification or cataract that has developed. The hyphen ("mis-vision") and the dash at the end of the line may be graphic symptoms of the layer of opacity and of the cut removing it. Using a technical, medical term, Hardy turns reconciliation, or rather the acknowledgement of regret and remorse, into a physical act of surgery, which destroys "misconceits" (355) or "mis-vision" (356). What is removed is the moment when the marriage failed, when love fled. The disappointment of the husband is construed as an encroaching opacity which strips the female subject of her qualities, of her integrity, as he overlooks or turns a blind eye to her feelings and her needs. Misconceit may be defined as a kind of anamorphosis, dissolving beauty, turning love into deadly alienation; between vision and mis-vision lies the space of error and missed opportunity. The awareness of the partner's death, on the

other hand, is the razor or surgeon that cuts through the layer of cloudy prejudice, cleans the survivor's pupil, allowing him to retrieve the ability to see, though the object of the gaze is forever lost. The opaque, blinding sense of deceit and disappointment which literally shut the eye, is now "couched". What is restored, here, through this refreshing of the eye, is a purified, renewed and rejuvenated object for the gaze, an untainted object of desire, forever elusive and caught in a process of endless deferral.

- 14 The image is a key to the sequence of poems following Emma's death, a shock which is repeatedly construed as a kind of surgical removing of the painful, in-between years of dissent, so that the vision of the fresh girl (such as for instance the "Phantom Horsewoman" on the cliff; Hardy 2001, 353), returns with eerie clarity, "a phantom of his own figuring" (354). Here, through the polysemic "figuring", the object of the gaze is both a quickened memory, (a fantasy or figment of the imagination for the outsider who views the scene at one remove), and a poetic creation.
- 15 Though it is arguably best exemplified by the poems following Emma's death, Hardy's entire work explores mistiming and misvision, and it is necessary to look at fiction to have a better grasp of the process.

#### 4. From cataract to *gutta serena*

- 16 In the medical treatises of the first half of the nineteenth century, the cataract was often associated with its obverse, "gutta serena", a partial or total loss of vision where the eye was not opacified by a milky layer, but remained apparently clear and tranquil, or "serene"<sup>11</sup>. It was defined as follows, for instance, by Samuel Cooper in his 1807 textbook *The First Lines of the Practice of Surgery: Being an Elementary Work for Students and a Concise Book of Reference for Practice*:

GUTTA SERENA, OR AMAUROSIS.

A BLINDNESS, depending on a paralytic affection of the *retina* and optic nerve, is termed *gutta serena*, or *amaurosis*.

The disease is either *complete* or *incomplete*; *inveterate* or *recent*; *continued* or *periodical*. (Cooper 348)

- 17 The ophthalmoscope was invented in 1851, allowing the practitioner to cast light on the pupil, as if it were a hole giving direct access to the eye's interior; and the diagnosis of unfathomable *gutta serena* disappeared<sup>12</sup>. Yet Hardy uses the term in 1874 in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. One wonders whether the scientific name, amaurosis, coming from the Greek signifier connoting darkness, might also have pleased Hardy, since through fake etymology or homophony we might hear the Latin amor, with its misleading rose-tinted glasses. Be that as it may, the by then anachronistic medical term, "gutta serena" comes at the climax of the novel, concluding the paradigmatic play on warped vision. The distortion and restoration of optical systems lie at the heart of Thomas Hardy's novels, which all explore distorted perception, but *Far from the Madding Crowd* offers a particularly interesting case study in terms of the use of clinical metaphor, allowing writer and reader to explore modalities as "*complete* or *incomplete*; *inveterate* or *recent*; *continued* or *periodical*" to pick up Cooper's categories.
- 18 When commissioning the novel, Leslie Stephen, the editor of *Cornhill Magazine* had asked for a local pastoral, and Hardy duly invented his Wessex, but he also experimented with the paradigm of impaired vision, using the cluster of examples to play with genre (from

the comic to the tragic) and explore the split between the eye and the gaze, and the corporeality of error and desire.

- 19 At first, we might be tempted to think that impaired vision merely plays a comedic part in the novel. Barrie Bullen points out that the scene in which Gabriel peeps at Bathsheba's shape and hair from above, through the gaps in the shed's roof which spread radiant "streaks and dots of light" (Hardy 1986, 15)<sup>13</sup>, plays on chiaroscuro in the manner of Dutch paintings. The roof becomes an optical device, creating the flickering vision that kindles desire, but voyeurism (he sees her figure, but not her face, from above, as "Milton's Satan first saw Paradise", 16) is tinged with humour, as Gabriel, who followed the light of the hut, appears as silly as the newborn calf, that also mistakes the lantern for the moon<sup>14</sup>. Note the similarity between the animal in this scene and Gabriel towards the beginning of the chapter, suggesting that the young man is unused to desire, as fresh and clumsy as the calf:

Occupied thus, with eyes stretched afar, Oak gradually perceived that what he had previously taken to be a star low down behind the outskirts of the plantation was in reality no such thing. It was an artificial light, almost close at hand. (Hardy 1986, 15)

Beside her Oak now noticed a little calf about a day old, looking idiotically at the two women, which showed that it had not long been accustomed to the phenomenon of eyesight, and often turning to the lantern, which it apparently mistook for the moon, inherited instinct having as yet had little time for correction by experience. (16)

- 20 The comic play on eyesight culminates with Joseph Poorgrass's temporary optical condition, a fit of the "multiplying eye", that strikes him whenever he lingers at a public house: "All that's the matter with me is the affliction called the multiplying eye, and that's how it is I look double to you – I mean, you look double to me" (Hardy 1986, 222). Hinged on the dash, the sentence playfully loops back upon itself, to mimic double vision and drunken confusion. The "multiplying eye" masks the task at hand, driving the coffin to the churchyard. For Lecerle, the scene of inebriation is an instance of Hardy's "controlled bathos"<sup>15</sup>, enmeshing the grotesque and Fanny's melodramatic death and funeral.
- 21 Bathos, however, does not preclude pathos, and a more melancholy play on vision. The treatment of that death also plays upon seeing and not seeing. An unidentified coffin is passed onto a cart by a peculiar door opening four feet above the ground. The door is a metatextual metaphor for the ellipsis – we shift from Fanny crouching on the threshold of Casterbridge Union-house, after having dragged herself with the help of a stray dog, to the coffin being lowered. The landscape seems to take upon itself to compensate for this gap, disseminating the spectral presence of the absent woman and shrouding the scene with mist: "The air was an eye suddenly struck blind" (Hardy 1986, 217). The eye that has been struck blind is Fanny's, and the scene is a classic case of pathetic fallacy, as the mist swells in great atmospheric clouds which swallow the lane. In the silent, muffled landscape, the blurred trees become "spectre-like in their monochrome of grey" (217). The fog's condensation breeds rain-drops akin to tears, an immaterial expression of sorrow, as if both mourning the dead woman and expressing her pain: "The fog had by this time saturated the trees, and this was the first dropping of water from the overbrimming leaves" (217). "The hollow echo of its fall" (217) recalls Fanny's status as a fallen woman, and her continuous collapsing as she strove to reach shelter. The white substance of tearful mist, that turns the landscape into a blind eye, also brings to mind

implicitly the equivalent of a cataract, as the mist dissolves the “horizontal division between clearness and opacity” (217), embedding the horse and cart “in an elastic body of monotonous pallor throughout” (217).

- 22 The dead eye and the sick eye are a motif in the novel. In this online number, Annie Ramel underlines the importance of the metallic moon Gabriel stares at, “the attenuated skeleton of a chrome-yellow moon” which reflects itself in the oval pond, “shaking and elongating” (Hardy 1986, 33) itself in the breeze, an anamorphic landscape which spells the death of love, following the slaughter of sheep. Struck by the young woman’s energy, Gabriel had constructed (as we saw in the scene of the hut) Bathsheba as the object of a partial gaze, moulding her to fit his idea of a woman and a wife. It is no wonder that the death of dreams should be marked by a reverse emblem of maimed vision, by a pathetic fallacy that projects visual distortion onto the landscape. The anamorphic moon inscribes death in the landscape, a symbol which befits the “pastoral tragedy” (30). The downfall is sudden. Gabriel is moved by the plight of the sheep: his first thought is for their agony. He has also lost his capital, and is suddenly stripped of his social status and hopes; this makes Bathsheba’s refusal final, since he can no longer afford to dream – he is no longer rich enough to consider marriage. The rippling moon, the image of the skeleton, convey this sense of shock. Gabriel is literally standing at the “outer margin of the pit” (33), while his star, Bathsheba, is but “a phosphorous streak upon the water” (30), a drowned fantasy. The pond glittering “like a dead man’s eye” may connote the flicker of suicidal temptation, an unspoken sensation that also leaves its traumatic persistent image upon the retina: “All this Oak saw and remembered” (33). For Annie Ramel, “[t]he effect of anamorphosis is precisely this: to give a ‘hollow’ form to the object-gaze, to make it somehow visible, yet to ‘extract’ it from our field of vision by placing it in a liminal position, on the edge of the painting, where it is indecipherable” (Ramel 2015, 89).
- 23 The dead eye of the moon, as object-gaze, gives a liminal shape to void. The scene soon veers to the evocation of the philosophical expectations of the calamitous dog responsible for the disaster. The dog is also mistaken, expecting congratulations whereas he is soon to be put down. Humour steers away from tragedy. The bleak moment reveals Gabriel’s ability to overcome his hopes, and to distance himself from that disembodied gaze. This may suggest that Gabriel dismisses, besides his plans, a partial and unsatisfactory vision of Bathsheba<sup>16</sup>. The dead eye, here, connotes the trauma of destitution, but it also strips Gabriel’s mind of mis-vision and objectification – we shall return to this.
- 24 For Isabelle Gadoin, the sick eye is not Oak’s but Boldwood’s, pierced by the words and the seal of the Valentine: as his gaze is magnetically drawn to the letter, “the large red seal [becomes] as a blot of blood on the retina of his eye” (Hardy 1986, 80). Not only is the text alluding to persistent image, but the blood-shot eyes must also be taken literally as a sign of optical damage, as the gaze is warped<sup>17</sup> beyond repair. The shift is more sudden than the slow encroaching of cataract; it corresponds to an 1821 medical explanation for *amaurosis*, as “a mass of coagulated blood so situated as to compress the optic nerves” (Stevenson v). The shock of the letter triggers a mental process which has a neurological and physical impact, akin to visual damage.
- 25 Boldwood gives himself up entirely to the scotomizing red spot on the retina, to the prism of misprision, misconceit and mis-vision. He turns a blind eye to the world; once kindled, his interest in Bathsheba (whom he had not noticed before) instantly grows into an obsession: “It is the red wax of the seal, together with the cryptic ‘marry me’ inscribed upon the Valentine sent by Bathsheba, that force him to literally *focus* his gaze on her,



with an intensity that is all the more acute as he had ignored her entirely up till then.” (Gadoin 2015, 157)<sup>18</sup> Searching the envelope in the morning, Boldwood finds nothing else in it – because there is nothing to find, Bathsheba meant nothing with the card. The joke which was meant to peter out turns into a traumatic trigger. In *Cranford*, Mrs Gaskell already used the Valentine as a misplaced jest with unforeseen consequences, but the sender was male and the victims female. Hardy's version is more daring, because it disturbs gendered boundaries. Bathsheba is the one doing the wooing and the mocking, playing with a fire which she cannot understand.

- 26 The scene is stressed by Hardy's signature play on red and white, and by the use of viewpoint to frame the scene, as Isabelle Gadoin's close pictorial analysis reveals: “it is the art of focalized description that suggests the desire that can be voiced neither by the text nor by the character”<sup>19</sup>. Once more, here, the landscape reflects the inscape of the soul. The Chapter's Impressionistic title, “Effect of the Letter – Sunrise” begins a pictorial evocation of the snow-covered scene, lit by a curiously oxymoronic red but “rayless” sun (Hardy 1986, 81), an objective correlative for Boldwood's devouring yet frigid passion. The eerie white light of the snow blurs the boundary between sky and earth, dissolving the horizon into a “preternatural inversion of light and shade” (81). Each detail stands out, etched in the mind, like the blades of grass turned into minute icicles, while the footprints of a bird – a light, ephemeral pattern upon the soft snow – are “now frozen to a short permanency” (82). Bathsheba's words, like the bird's trace, are now printed and frozen in Boldwood's consciousness, while the oxymoron, “short permanency”, suggests both the fixation of the mind and the unbearable dissolution of what once seemed solid, when illusion melts. The “wasting moon” that lingers in the early morning light is “greenish-yellow”, like “tarnished brass” (82), recalling the yellow moon of Gabriel's disaster, adding to the metallic tang a bitter sense of waste. During the previous night, the ominous moon had performed its secret ministry in Boldwood's bedroom: “His window admitted only a reflection of its rays, and the pale sheen had that reversed direction which snow gives, casting shadows in strange places, and putting lights where shadows had used to be” (81). Snow and moonlight turn the scene into a blank card, inverting shadows and lights, a photographic negative of what Boldwood's virgin world used to be. The light, here, is an objective correlative for a fantasy that takes hold of Boldwood's mind and wreaks havoc, turning his personality inside out like a glove which will not fit.
- 27 In this chapter, Boldwood is all eyes, staring at the letter, then at the landscape. The letter placed on the mirror, the strange imaginary feminine shape conjured up by the unknown handwriting, which almost turns into a woman's genuine hand, all connote the illusion that holds Boldwood in its grip, as he believes the words to be performative. Duplicated by the crimson rayless sun, the red seal stamps misconception – *i.e.* corroding misvision – upon Boldwood's eyes, “wide-spread and vacant” in the mirror before him (Hardy 1986, 81).
- 28 The magnetic pull of the letter smashes the balance of Boldwood's life, hence the mathematical image: the “symmetry of his existence” is “distorted in the direction of an ideal passion” (Hardy 1986, 80). The letter colours everything, just as it is itself compared to a crystal that absorbs the colours of its surroundings (80): the boundaries of the object of the gaze are blurred, just as the self has become vulnerable, contaminated or permeated by the letter. The image reveals the crystallization, not of love, but of obsession and error.

- 29 The scene corresponds to what Raymond Boudon calls “the art of self-persuasion”. Indeed, Boldwood is led astray by induction, drawing conclusions that seem self-evident: “The letter must have had an origin and a motive” (Hardy 1986, 80). Hardy draws attention to what Boudon calls the “*implicit statements*” contained by all argument, while the mind perceives only “*explicit statements*” (Boudon 66): perfectly acceptable empirical statements open a line of reasoning, based on a “general hypothesis”, regarded as self-evident and introduced in an unconscious way; all the following elements of the argument are valid, prompting the subject to endorse the conclusion in a seemingly logical way (67). Hardy shares the same intuition as cognitive psychology, dissecting emotional error. The *a priori* unconscious hypothesis is that all letters mean what they say; he is not aware that there may be a discrepancy between the motive and the letter, that the motive may be of “the smallest magnitude” does not “strike him as a possibility even” (Hardy 1986, 80): “It is foreign to a mystified condition of mind to realize of the mystifier that the processes of approving a course suggested by circumstance, and of striking out a course from inner impulse, would look the same in the result” (80). The contorted syntax stresses his inability to even conceive of a frivolous impulse. Drawn to Bathsheba as to a magnet, as if the letter constituted in itself a performative wedding ceremony, Boldwood seeks to confirm the message by indulging in votive writing in his turn: hence the “extraordinary collection of articles” later discovered in a locked closet – the series of parcels wrapped in paper containing muffs, dresses, jewels, which all bear the name “Bathsheba Boldwood” (294). Each label is a metonymic letter addressed to a fantasized Bathsheba, the wife of Boldwood. The labels are a votive offering, a performative ritual; the parcels that were supposed to be opened years later, after the delay imposed by widowhood, function less as wedding presents than as symptoms of obsession. The red blot, the layer of fantasy opacifying the eye, cannot be peeled back and healed in the case of Boldwood. The diseased eye remains blind. At the party, Boldwood simply cannot take in the sight of Troy, cannot recognize him; Bathsheba’s cry then triggers a violent reaction and a will to obliterate that sight, by impulsively seizing the gun and shooting. This dooms the blind Boldwood to disappear in his turn: he enters the prison to be seen no more, and the text shuts him off.
- 30 In the case of Bathsheba and Troy, mis-vision takes a different shape. In this case, desire is triggered neither by partial vision nor by a blind eye, but by sudden, then intermittent sight. As an unknown man is walking past the young woman in the fir plantation in the dark, his spur is caught in her dress. The encounter thus pulls them together, an unexpected moment of physical contact, but it is vision that crystallizes desire, when the man pulls open Bathsheba’s dark lantern, releasing the shutter which makes it possible to either mask or diffuse light:
- A hand seized the lantern, the door was opened, the rays burst out from their prison, and Bathsheba beheld her position with astonishment.  
The man to whom she was hooked was brilliant in brass and scarlet. (Hardy 1986, 127)
- 31 The alliteration (“brilliant”/ “brass”) enhances the sparkling shift from darkness to crimson and gold, displaying, unlike the aforementioned “tarnished brass” of the moon, a wondrous metamorphosis or “fairy transformation” (Hardy 1986, 127). The dark lantern becomes here a dramatic optical device, a magic lantern switching from shadows to bright light, from innocence to the projection of image and desire, from serendipity to a momentous encounter. The dark lantern is the instrument of the object-gaze, and

Bathsheba is literally “caught” by the gaze of the Other, by Troy’s “point-blank” eyes: “He caught a view of her face” (127).

- 32 The effect is confirmed by Troy’s wondrous “*aurora militaris*” (Hardy 1986, 145), a spellbinding performance in which the various cuts become a swift sound-and-light show which no film adaptation has so far been able to transcribe convincingly; catching the sun, the blade reflects the ubiquitous beams of light that surround Bathsheba, a circular motion that may draw inspiration from the phenakistiscope – Bathsheba stands motionless, her eye is the fixed point, the axis of a revolution performed by the swift circular movements of the blade, animating the initial postures into one swift smooth succession. The demonstration is turned into a kind of magic, almost electrical circuit – the intermittent flashes are “emitted” by the blade –, in a centripetal and centrifugal pull that taps into cosmic forces<sup>20</sup>:

These circling beams were accompanied by a keen rush that was almost a whistling – also springing from all sides of her at once. In short, she was enclosed in a firmament of light, and of sharp hisses, resembling a sky-full of meteors close at hand. (Hardy 1986, 144)

- 33 The initial radiance that glowed into streaks from the crevices of the roof of the hut (through which Gabriel peeped at Bathsheba), and which died in a single phosphorous elongated streak in the oval pond, is now mocked and magnified by the tremendous, electrifying performance. The ironic pun, however, signals the gap between *aurora borealis* and *aurora militaris*, since the performance has nothing to do with the sky, and suggests that Troy’s love may well be a Trojan horse, a way of entering the fortress of Bathsheba’s life, only to defeat her, leaving her wrecked by debts, doubts, and the pain of having been deceived.
- 34 The antithesis of this “*aurora militaris*” comes with the intermittent flashes of light during the storm scene. Hardy multiplies the single shift allowed by the dark lantern in the scene of first encounter between Troy and Bathsheba. Hardy uses lightning to switch light on and off, creating an effect which comes close to today’s stroboscopy. Brilliant phosphorescent flashes of light seem to etch or to photograph – literally to write with light – the landscape: “Every hedge, bush and tree was as distinct as in a line engraving. [...] A poplar in the immediate foreground was like an ink stroke on burnished tin. Then the picture vanished [...]” (Hardy 1986, 192). Just as the lantern illuminated and drew in the background the “[g]igantic shadows [...] distorted and mangled upon the tree trunks” (128) of Troy and Bathsheba in the fir plantation, Gabriel is struck by his and Bathsheba’s elongated, but not misshapen, shadow: “Every knot in every straw was visible. On the slope in front of him appeared two human shapes, black as jet. The rick lost its sheen – the shapes vanished.” (193) Whereas Troy’s crimson and brass uniform dazed and dazzled, here the stroboscopic storm detaches every single detail of the ricks and the landscape, in a kind of hyper-realistic flash composed of multiple close-ups. The cosmic show rewrites Troy’s performance as a kind of macabre dance in the sky, mingling danger with magnificent beauty:
- It sprang from east, west, north, south, and was a perfect dance of death. The forms of skeletons appeared in the air, shaped with blue fire for bones – dancing, leaping, striding, racing around, and mingling altogether in unparalleled confusion.” (Hardy 1986, 193-194)
- 35 The echo with Troy’s swordsmanship is unmistakable, but this time, Gabriel resists the show, fighting to save the ricks, using his ricking-rod to create a makeshift “lightning-conductor” (Hardy 1986, 192). The sublime, blinding light of lightning is partially

domesticated, while physical closeness is allowed between Oak and Bathsheba, allowing energy to circulate in the circuit of their connected bodies, as she clutches his sleeve or he grasps her arm. The stroboscopic play on light and darkness also removes misvision, and allows Bathsheba to reassess Oak as a man.

36 The resolution of the plot also plays upon cuts, to create a kind of proto-cinematic montage which brings together a kaleidoscope of simultaneous moments, like a textual magic lantern. The narrative structure grants the reader a “multiplying eye” that allows him/her to follow what the title of the chapter calls the converging courses of the main characters. Bathsheba, Boldwood, all dressed up for their parts, the beautiful widow, the aging suitor, and the melodramatic performer cloaked in travelling coat and cap, concealing his features; in the next chapter, “*Concurritur – Horae Momento*” (Hardy 1986, 282), the episodic vignettes merge into a single sequence, dramatizing Troy’s return and the subsequent murder.

37 Interestingly enough, the moment of revelation disturbs Bathsheba’s eyes; it may be considered that the opening of the coffin, forcing her to discover the body of her husband’s former mistress and baby, began to clear the metaphoric blind fog shrouding Fanny, couching Bathsheba’s own eyes of her misconception regarding Troy. But the image only literally appears in the final confrontation, where the shock of his reappearance stuns Bathsheba into “a state of mental *gutta serena*”, the “antique medical term” which the footnote in the Norton edition translates as “a kind of blindness that is unaccompanied by any apparent change in the eye itself” (Hardy 1986, 289). The eye infection is used as a metaphor for her sudden incapacity to think, her paralysis or blankness. Whereas Boldwood’s impaired vision is continued and complete, however, Bathsheba’s *gutta serena* is recent and incomplete, to use Cooper’s distinction<sup>21</sup>. The momentary blindness, the tragic moment also reopen Bathsheba’s eyes in a flash, so that when she recovers she happens to see clearly what should be done and said, and her simple call for a surgeon “had somehow the effect of setting the distorted images of each mind present into focus” (291).

38

39 Thus we have seen the part played by Hardy’s appropriation of medical terms to build his own model of emotional error, cognitive blindness, desire and belated anagnorisis. The playful spectacles lead to the more complex figuration of blind spots, in a kind of endless deferral of desire. Whereas at times the mental cataract can be removed and the eyes couched of misvision, a striking opposition remains between the catharsis of temporary blindness or *gutta serena*, and the incurable damaged sight of obsession. Hardy’s complex study of perception, and of the traumatic impact of the desire triggered by the letter, or of the murder of Troy rewiring Bathsheba’s mind, anticipates neurological discoveries. The optical system becomes more complex in novels like *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*<sup>22</sup>. Incidentally, the name itself might be connected with ophthalmology. A 1926 article published in *The British Journal of Ophtalmology* by R.R. James recalls that while the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries were “the heyday of ophthalmic quackery”, a certain Dawbigney Turberville from Salisbury actually helped people recover from blindness<sup>23</sup> and was “not only a properly qualified medical man<sup>24</sup>, but also a member of an ancient English family”, going back to the days of King John<sup>25</sup>. James conjectures that “The name would appear to have been adapted by Thomas Hardy in his ‘Tess of the d’Urbervilles’” (James 465). Be that as it may, in *Tess*, however, the image of the cataract seems to be reversed when Angel sees Tess, after the confession, as a duplicate of herself,

“another woman in her shape”, as if his eyes had been couched of misvision; yet this no longer corresponds to a release, but on the contrary to a sudden hoodwinking, as Angel adopts the blind gaze of social constructs and fails to see Tess, as an individual, the woman standing before him, and not a type.

- 40 The ironic reversal corresponds to Hardy's own more tragic outlook in the later novels. This pessimistic equilibrium might be exemplified by “The Blinded Bird”, a poem which was published in *Moments of Vision*. It allows us to come full circle as the red-hot needle (“Blinded ere yet a-wing/By the red-hot needle thou”; Hardy 2001, 446) seems to echo the old man's account of his operation; yet the needle is no longer used to remove the cloud of cataract, but to blind a helpless bird. Like the pheasants in *Tess*, the bird calls for compassion<sup>26</sup>. The poem, with its fragile echo (the opening and closing lines of each stanza are identical) must be read in terms of animal studies, since it is an outcry against the custom of blinding birds in the mistaken belief that it makes them sing better. A protest against Vikensport (making singing bullfinches compete), the poem echoes the New Testament: the bird is “alive ensepulchered”, but “endureth all things” and sings, divine. The image resonates with contemporary politics and the slaughter of World War One, bringing to mind the blinded soldiers enmeshed in wire; it reads as a comment on cruelty and on both the animal and the human conditions, including the poet's; it celebrates resilience, and opposes song to the pain of the unbearable:

Resenting not such wrong,  
Thy grievous pain forgot,  
Eternal dark thy lot,  
Groping thy whole life long,  
After thy stab of fire;  
Enjailed in pitiless wire;  
Resenting not such wrong! (Hardy 2001, 446)

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## NOTES

1. Due to the sheer number of Hardy's poems, all selection is bound to remain frustrating, as J. Hillis Miller points out: "All attempts that I know of to reduce Hardy's poetry to manageable size by section are unsuccessful, including of course my own here discussing only a handful of Hardy's poems." (Miller in Wolfreys, 140)
2. The drawing may be read as a kind of visual experimentation (the incongruous object seems to foreshadow Magritte's visual conundrums and surreal landscapes); it signals the preoccupation with age and vision, and it becomes the floating symptom of mistaken desire, and/ or a model of perception.
3. The poem plays on Petrarchan *topoi* – the woman's beauty, blazons or sculpture – but those elements are displaced ironically: the woman is partly allegorical and the true betrayal is Beauty's.
4. The discontinuous evolution of the self lies at the core of "Wessex Heights", as J. Hillis Miller stresses, where the baffled speaker is only the "strange continuator" of his former selves that pursue him, with "weird detective ways", the "chrysalis" of the present. (Miller 319)
5. The model may be proto-cinematic; like a phenakistiscope, the eye endlessly replays the couple's ascent. For Matthew Campbell, "rote" means "a mechanical wheel-like movement", enhancing the "dissonance" and the "restlessness" of meter (Campbell 221). Time's "mindless rote" may also suggest the phenakistiscope, but also adds an irreversible separation as a single silhouette remains behind, recording separation.
6. For an in-depth study of Hardy's nuanced exploration of disillusionment, see Laurence Estanove's PhD thesis.
7. See Hillis Miller's analysis of repetition in "Wessex Heights", which may apply to all the Emma poems.
8. Perhaps the interest had been kindled earlier on. Indeed, in the 1860s, Horace Moule gave Thomas Hardy a copy of Jabez Hoggs' 1853 *Experimental and Natural Philosophy*, which contains a passage on ocular perception that includes the cataract. Hoggs was the editor of the *Journal of British Ophthalmology* and had written an essay on cataracts (see Sherman 63).
9. See, for instance, Brendan T. Finucane's book, where the passage is quoted (Finucane 4). Ether could not be used for eye operations, because of side effects; the breakthrough came in 1884, when ophthalmologist Carl Koller, after listening to Freud's enthusiastic evocation of cocaine, realized that it could numb the eye and provide local anesthesia.
10. Emma did plant a rose bush that Hardy tended after her death; he felt that she would have been pleased with his efforts to care for the garden.
11. It was also, in a way, a literary disease, since Milton had been diagnosed with "gutta serena", a mysterious disease with no visible cause, mentioned in the famous line: "So thick a drop serene hath quench'd their orbs" (Milton 161).
12. This might entail a new reading of the way in which Angel delves into the depth of Tess's eyes: "his plumbed the deepness of her ever-varying pupils, with their radiating fibrils of blue, and black, and gray, and violet" (Hardy 1965, 143) not so much as the phallic imagery discerned by Penny Boumelha, but as a reverse ophthalmological diagnosis, with an ironic twist, since Angel is the one who is blind, whereas Tess's pupils open up the rainbow of her "pure" soul. This subtle use of eye imagery contrasts with the more conventional literal and symbolic near-sightedness of

Angel's brothers: "They were both somewhat short-sighted, and when it was the custom to wear a single eyeglass and string they wore a single eyeglass and string; when it was the custom to wear a double glass they wore a double glass; when it was the custom to wear spectacles they wore spectacles straightaway, all without reference to their particular defect of vision." (134)

13. The novel creates a pattern of echoes and contrasts. At the fair, Troy also peeps at Bathsheba through a hole in the tent, and sees her sitting like a queen and facing him unbeknownst. Similarly, the storm scene, during which Gabriel and Bathsheba stand on the same ladder and strive to protect the ricks, rewrites the bee scene, in which a grotesquely dressed Troy climbs the ladder to help Bathsheba.

14. This may also recall the comical performance of the rude mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

15. "This silence, which is the silence of death, is duly called a 'dead silence' when Joseph Poorgrass takes the coffin back to Weatherbury, which he does not reach, as Hardy's controlled bathos soon turns this scene of tragedy into a comic scene of rustic inebriation." (Lecerle n.p.)

16. Though he cannot know this yet, when they later meet as mistress and bailiff – on more equal gendered, if not social, terms –, they may get closer and step beyond the limits of the gaze.

17. "Contrary to the soldier's eye, that reach full mark 'point-blank', at first Bodwood's eyes only perceive female figures as distant stars, shadowy presences, or constellations evolving in erratic motions." "Contrairement aux yeux du soldat qui atteignent leur cible en plein cœur, 'point-blank', les yeux de Boldwood ne voient d'abord les figures féminines que comme astres lointains, présences nébuleuses, constellations aux mouvements erratiques." (Gadoin 2010, 157) Translation mine.

18. "C'est le sceau de cire rouge marqué des deux mots cryptiques 'marry me', sur la carte de la Saint-Valentin envoyée par Bathsheba, qui va l'obliger très littéralement à focaliser son regard, avec une acuité aussi intense que son indifférence avait jusque là été complète." Translation mine.

19. "C'est l'art de la description focalisée qui permet de suggérer le désir que le texte – pas plus que le personnage – ne saurait dire." (Gadoin 158) Translation mine.

20. This offers an epiphanic version of the scintillating scotoma caused by migraine.

21. Stevenson, surgeon-oculist to the Duke of York and a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, mentions the same alternative as being a characteristic of amaurosis, "temporary suspension or total annihilation." (Stevenson iii)

22. See note 13.

23. He performed operations of the cataract, and was asked to attend Queen Anne and high society, including Samuel Pepys (he is mentioned in Pepys's diary); he also nursed the poor free. He cured Walter Pope, a Professor of astronomy at Gresham College London, who left a detailed account in 1697: "It was he who twice rescued me from blindness, which without his aid had been unavoidable, when both my eyes were so bad, that with the best I could not perceive a letter in a book, nor my hand with the other, and grew worse every day." (Pope in James, 466). Pope described him as a true artist of a doctor, capable of curing not only the cataract, but other ailments: "for the cure of which, if curable, for there are several sorts of cataracts incurable, consists wholly in this, viz., in knowing when the connate cataract is fit to be couched, in having a steady hand, and skill to perform that operation, to be able to prevent, or at least, remove the pains which usually follow, and sometimes kill the patient; but to reduce fallen and inverted eyelids, to their proper place and tone, to cure inveterate ulcers, and inflammations of a blackish colour, requires a consummate artist." (448)

24. Turberville studied in Oriel College, Oxford. Incidentally, James quotes letters by Dawbigny Turberville that describe cases very similar to those studied by Oliver Sacks, such as



achromatopsia and the scintillating scotoma of migraines: “A maid, 22 or 23 years old, came to me from Banbury, who could see very well but no colour beside black and white. She had such scintillations by night with the appearance of bulls, bears, etc., as terrified her very much [...]” (Turberville in James, 470). He also mentions treating *gutta serena* with leeches.

25. “Turberville was born in 1612 of an old-English family, ‘there being in the church of Beer only the tombs of no less than fifteen knights of that name, as I have been credibly informed, but I have not seen them.’” (James 466) James is still quoting Pope, who devoted a whole chapter to Turberville; and James compares Parson Tringham’s account to the actual genealogy of Turberville.

26. This is a recurrent theme in Hardy’s work (Jude first encounters trouble when he refrains from chasing away the birds that come to eat the seeds he was supposed to look after). When, in 1924, he attended the centenary celebration of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Hardy spoke on behalf of birds. Daniel Karlin points out that the blinding of birds “was banned in 1920 [...] following a campaign by blinded war veterans.” (Karlin 63) Regarding the importance of the motif of birds in Hardy’s work, and his sympathy towards animals, see Anna West’s *Thomas Hardy and Animals*.

## ABSTRACTS

This paper considers the clinical terms used by Thomas Hardy to build a model of misvision and missed opportunity. The glasses laid on the landscape in one of Hardy’s iconic drawings seem to materialize the object-gaze, and may also be read as a representation of his appropriation of the medical gaze. He transposes ophthalmological conditions (the cataract, *gutta serena*) or technological tools (X-Rays) to engage with the corporeal, as well as mental, nature of desire and its misdirections, or to explore the haunting ability to strip the present, and see the past with its compelling hallucinatory presence. Drawing upon the readings of J. Hillis Miller, Linda M. Shires and Rosemarie Morgan, as well as Annie Ramel, Laurence Estanove and Isabelle Gadoin, this paper considers the mediation of the gaze and its paradoxical remediation through an operation that all but shatters the self, a process that shapes the poems written after Emma’s death. It then takes *Far from the Madding Crowd* as its central case study. The novel proves a landmark in Hardy’s writing career, as he experiments with visual modalities to diagnose misdirected desire and emotional flaws, the “phantom[s] of his own figuring” that he dramatizes as physiological flaws in the eye, thereby foreshadowing today’s neurological and trauma studies.

C’est l’écart entre l’œil et le regard qui fascine Thomas Hardy, et c’est le diagnostic clinique du trouble visuel qui rend compte de l’aveuglement du désir. On se souvient de cette paire de lunettes incongrue qui flotte sur le paysage dans l’une des illustrations des poèmes, dévoyant la perspective, matérialisant le regard du locuteur ou du lecteur, mais aussi désignant l’objet-regard, le fantôme qui fausse le point de vue. Dans les poèmes, l’acuité du locuteur découpe le présent aux rayons X, pour permettre la résurgence d’un passé qui ne passe pas. En s’inspirant des lectures de J. Hillis Miller, Linda M. Shires et de Rosemarie Morgan, mais aussi d’Annie Ramel, de Laurence Estanove et d’Isabelle Gadoin, cet article propose d’explorer la façon dont la métaphore optique fonctionne à la manière des lunettes du dessin dans la fiction, notamment dans *Far from the Madding Crowd*. L’œil dysfonctionne, du kaléidoscope de l’ivresse à la projection de la mort dans le paysage ; le diagnostic clinique “*gutta serena*” montre à quel point Hardy

s'approprié l'idiome médical pour rendre compte de la pathologie du désir, entre confusion et frustration, comme s'il préfigurait les études du traumatisme et la lecture de cas neurologique d'aujourd'hui.

## INDEX

**oeuvre citée** In a Eweleaze Near Weatherbury, House of Silence (The), At Castle Boterel, Phantom-Horsewoman (The), Spell of the Rose (The), Blinded Bird (The), Far from the Madding Crowd

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