



## *Far From the Madding Crowd* : The Rest is Silence

Perquin Jean-Charles

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# EPI-REVEL

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Jean-Charles Perquin

Jean-Charles PERQUIN est maître de conférences au département d'anglais de l'Université Lyon 2. Il a consacré son doctorat à la poésie victorienne, notamment à la genèse du monologue dramatique chez Robert Browning. Depuis, il consacre ses recherches et ses travaux principalement à la littérature britannique du XIXème siècle.

La lecture de *Far from the Madding Crowd* nous donne à voir que le silence n'est ni un thème ni un problème dans le roman de Thomas Hardy, mais plutôt une structure globale qui permet au récit et à ses personnages de se déployer. Gabriel Oak passe du rôle d'amoureux discret à celui d'amoureux silencieux, en acceptant, à la fin du chapitre quatre, de taire son amour rejeté, et ainsi de rejoindre le silence narratif dont la trajectoire va jusqu'au mariage discret de Gabriel avec Bathsheba, au dernier chapitre. L'ensemble du roman s'articule autour de ce qui, réduit au silence, ne peut se taire, tout en ne parvenant pas à se dire clairement.

The question of silence in a work of literature may sound like a flat contradiction in terms, especially in a novel, since there can be no literature without language and language is by definition conceived as the contrary of silence. The problem here has more to do with the very possibility of silence in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and the question of the meaning of silence in the novel. Indeed, silence intensely means in literature, as much as in music. In other words, there can be no music without silence as there can be no language without silence; silence is part of language as it is part of music. I would like to see how Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* is structured by these very principles and how the question of silence is the core of the novel and a fundamental organizing principle in both the plot and its narration. Silence is not only the background cloth against which characters and events are placed, it is the prerequisite condition of everyone's existence.

First of all, in the course of the diegesis in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, we cannot but realize the circular nature of the narrative, which begins with the description of 'Farmer Oak', and which ends on his long-awaited marriage with Bathsheba Everdene. This is the general structure of the whole novel and it defines the space in which the plot can be developed: this is a very interesting element since this development clearly rests on silence. First of all, the description of Gabriel Oak himself is one of a silent, discreet, inward-looking character. What is more, in the first chapter, the introduction of Gabriel is itself very hesitating, if not indirect. Indeed, every time Gabriel is described, the narrative voice itself repeats, rephrases, and reformulates the initial description. It justifies the repetitions of such expressions as "that is", "or, to state", "in other words", "in short" in four pages only (7-11). We cannot only account for it with the simple use of humour or derision, i.e. Hardy's staging the introduction of an anti-hero. Gabriel is no anti-hero. It is the enduring, silent nature of his patience and love that makes him a hero in Hardy's fiction. In a way, Gabriel Oak's rebuffed love for Bathsheba by Bathsheba herself determines and causes the silence in which he is caught for the major part of the novel.

The very beginning of the novel, if not the very first chapter, gives us the key to this global narrative structure: Gabriel is constantly described and re-described by the narrator, as if the initial descriptions were not enough, as if they silenced elements that could not remain forgotten. Then, Gabriel is confronted with Bathsheba for the first time and in this fundamental encounter, he is just the silent observer of what is called "an incident" in the title of the chapter. Gabriel sees a "spring waggon" (9), a woman on top of it, and a waggoner; Gabriel is here the silent beholder of a scene whose narrative importance is structurally fundamental since it is going to determine the plot which stages their relationships throughout the whole novel. There is one sentence in this chapter which

precisely stages this silent observation and thus announces the rest of the novel: “What possessed her to indulge in such a performance in the sight of the sparrows, blackbirds, and *unperceived farmer* who were alone its spectators” (9, emphasis added). She is looking at her image with open self-satisfaction, we readers have the description of the young woman introduced as “the girl of the summit” and who immediately becomes “the handsome girl” (9), and suddenly we realise that what we see is what Gabriel discreetly and silently observes. This introductory scene plays an essential role, since it gives us the image of Gabriel’s role and posture in the whole novel – the silent rebuffed lover waiting for his time to come.

Very interestingly, the introduction scene is even more telling: the “handsome girl” (9) is in a dominating position, on top of the furniture carried by the wagon, which already illustrates the final remark by the gatekeeper after the initial incident that led Gabriel to offer the money she did not intend to give – “beating people down” (9). On top of the furniture, she is surrounded by silent symbols of her behaviour in the novel, both at that moment in the narrative and in the rest of the novel: there is a “caged canary” (9), the cage being itself referred to as “its prison” 6 lines later. There is also a “cat in a willow basket” that “affectionately surveyed the small birds around” (9). Bathsheba is precisely the woman who refused to be considered a prey or a silent victim and she reproaches Gabriel for not being able to tame her, i.e. not being a predator like the cat waiting to catch its little victims. She refuses to be the Victorian victim of her male contemporaries, hence the castrating rebuff she addresses Gabriel when he dares to declare his love to her. In other words, his love is brutally silenced by the loved woman and the direct consequence of such a humiliation was aptly described by James Wright with the following sentence: “shortly after his failure he begins to blend with the landscape in his silent devotion to the heroine” (Wright, 378).

This is precisely what defines Gabriel in the novel: he never totally disappears but he becomes the narrative background brutally silenced by Bathsheba in the fourth chapter when she answers his naïve love with the adjective “ridiculous” (30). As we all know, the narrative in a novel utterly depends on the narrative voice it originates in; when this voice stops speaking the narrative itself joins the silent background it dissolves in. The relative silence of Gabriel’s patient submission to time and circumstances rejects him in the background of the novel from the moment when Bathsheba rejects his love and until she accepts to marry him, at the end of the novel. As a consequence, the whole structure of the novel rests on the question and meaning of silence. Silenced love bids its time in the background and this is particularly the silence of frustration that determines and guarantees both Boldwood’s ludicrous madness and fury and the honest satisfaction of Gabriel’s patient love. Echoing the initial descriptions of Gabriel in the very first chapter, in which every element given by the narrator is immediately rephrased and corrected by another element supposed to tell more and more precisely what the character looks like and what he believes in, Bathsheba’s role and appearance are ironically and obliquely presented as witnessed by Gabriel, whereas he had almost been already forgotten in his silent observation of the whole scene of the incident of the wagon.

He is even and incidentally referred to as the “unperceived farmer” (9) at that moment, although his name had been already introduced and repeated several times, and also obliquely echoed by the “oak settle” on top of the wagon where the “girl on the summit”, very soon rephrased as “the handsome girl”, was idly seated, while she was herself engrossed by her own image in the mirror carried by the wagon. This silent scene is all the more interesting as she watches her own image while she is herself looked at by farmer oak. This short introductory scene summarises the whole plot, itself being echoed by what is staged on the wagon at that moment of the diegesis. As James Wright noticed, in this scene as well as in the whole novel, Gabriel Oak willingly fades in the background, he accepts his ancillary, hence silent, position. We should remember the very end of chapter four, when he abruptly and naïvely proposes marriage to Bathsheba. Again, in a very telling passage, she slights his offer and humiliates him: “‘No—no—I cannot. Don’t press me any more—don’t. I don’t love you—so ’twould be ridiculous,’ she said, with a laugh.” (30) The last words of this chapter are to be noticed and remembered: “‘Very well,’ said Oak firmly, with the bearing of one who was going to give his days and nights to *Ecclesiastes* forever. ‘Then I’ll ask you no more’” (30). At this point, Gabriel accepts his patient role and condition in the narrative; he indeed accepts to fade in the silent background of a plot in which Boldwood and Troy will very soon hold the stage until the end of the novel.

The reference to *Ecclesiastes* is particularly relevant since the repeated word that determines the sorrow and resignation of the preacher in the Bible is precisely “Vanity”, which is also the very last word of the first chapter of *Far from the Maddening Crowd*. In the Bible, the preacher, after realising

that fearing God and obeying his Commandments are his only necessary behaviour in life, accepts to submit to a rule and circumstance he first obliquely rejected by devoting himself to vain activities and practices that eventually led him to nothing but more misery and sorrow. Clearly, the reference to *Ecclesiastes* at the very end of chapter four is not only a gratuitous suggestion of Gabriel's resignation and sorrow; it also determines his silent obedience and his accepting to be literally silenced by Bathsheba's most humiliating rebuff. "I'll ask you no more" ends chapter four and announces his blending with the landscape, both physically and metaphorically. His proposal of marriage suddenly becomes the question never to be asked again, in other words a taboo that is all the more essential as it is both silenced and constantly present in the plot of the novel. It is of course totally impossible to mention it and at the same time the silenced feelings cannot be forgotten for good. This forced and accepted silence on the part of Gabriel works exactly like repression in psychoanalytical theory: what is repressed cannot be let out of the voluntary oblivion it was imprisoned in and at the same time, what has been wilfully silenced cannot accept to remain silent forever (Laplanche et Pontalis, 392-396). This silent tension, at the heart of the concept of repression, immediately becomes the narrative or structural tension of the whole novel. In other words, Gabriel is now torn between his promise to remain silent and the narrative necessity to achieve a decent resolution to that apparently unrequited love.

This structure does not only determine Gabriel's behaviour towards Bathsheba and his love for her. It also establishes the whole functioning of the plot in the novel: now that Gabriel has been humiliated and rejected by the loved object, he has to silently conquer the woman he was the first to see and observe in the novel. Because of his promise and resolution, Gabriel has to achieve his goal both patiently and silently: the love story at stake in the novel has now to be a silent one, in the background of both Boldwood's laughable madness and Troy's pseudo-chivalrous achievements. Interestingly enough, these very tension and structure already appear in the title of the novel, borrowed from a well-known poem by Thomas Gray, published in 1751 and entitled "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard". The whole title of Thomas Hardy's novel is thus given and explained in the nineteenth stanza:

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,  
 Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;  
 Along the cool sequester'd vale of life  
 They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

This stanza repeats the motif of the whole poem, the gently melancholy elegy celebrating the graves of humble, unknown villagers who suffered in silence and who now are silenced forever in their graves. It repeats the "silent dust" of the eleventh stanza and constantly opposes the noise, the sound and the fury of big cities and important people. The poem that thus inspired Thomas Hardy did not only give it its title, it also inspired the motif of silence, if not silent resignation, something to be also and originally found in *Ecclesiastes*, so aptly quoted at the very end of chapter four after Gabriel's love and proposal of marriage have been so cruelly slighted and rejected by Bathsheba. Their way is "noiseless", their lives are humble, an adjective whose etymology is all the more relevant to Hardy's novel as the earth it refers to (humus) perfectly fits the peasantry that constitutes the main part of the novel's characters and context. Because of their dominated position in the social scale, something Thomas Hardy partly neglected at a time when farmers and labourers were in a difficult situation, they were socially silenced in a social system that had not been designed for them. At the end of the fourth chapter, when he makes his proposal of marriage, Gabriel is perfectly aware of the situation and his uncomfortable position, since he admits: "You speak like a lady—all the parish notice it, and your uncle at Weatherbury is, I've heard, a large farmer—much larger than ever I shall be" (30).

The end of that sentence itself justifies Gabriel's humble silence and patience forever: "much larger than ever I shall be" implies there is no hope, no other possibility than silence. The very last sentence uttered by Gabriel at the end of chapter four might even be read as a distant echo to dying Hamlet's final words at the end of the eponymous tragedy: "The rest is silence". This then comes full circle with the reference to the vanity Gabriel attributes to Bathsheba the very first time he sees her, in the first chapter of the novel, and the vanity that is of course the key word in *Ecclesiastes* to which Gabriel was doomed to give his "days and nights", according to the narrator, which is all the more ironical at this point of the novel as the second paragraph of the first chapter of the novel showed him as a man whose religious practice could be seriously questioned: "[...] he went to church, but yawned privately by the time the congregation reached the Nicene creed, and thought of what there would be for dinner when he meant to be listening to the sermon" (7). Again, what characterises Gabriel is

clearly his silent patience and discretion in all circumstances, which does not initially help him conquer Bathsheba's heart, but which determines his role and position in the novel in which he is nonetheless the patient, silent, and discreet hero, or rather the protagonist. Indeed a hero is a prominent figure whose extraordinary valour depends on his great strength, courage, and noble deeds. A hero cannot be silent in the long run.

Instead of that, Gabriel is just the main figure in the plot, what is more, a silent figure who accepts to silence his love for the woman he was mortified by at the end of the fourth chapter. Interestingly enough, Gabriel's resignation to silence at the end of chapter four, after Bathsheba laughed at his marriage proposal, is clearly echoed by her final instructions concerning their marriage at the beginning of chapter fifty-seven: "The most private, secret, plainest wedding that it is possible to have" (304). The words are Bathsheba's and they strangely mirror Gabriel's humility at the beginning of the novel, when he saw her for the first time, noticed her apparent vanity, and silently fell in love with her (something that is only silently suggested). The silent resignation at the end of the novel both echoes Hamlet's final words when he breathed his last and also announces Ludwig Wittgenstein's major theme in his famous *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, that is "What one cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein, 89), what his colleague and friend Frank Ramsey is rumoured to have rephrased humorously with the following quip: "What we can't say we can't say, and we can't whistle it either." Very far from the happy end of the global plot articulated on the impossible love story between poor silent Gabriel and vain buoyant Bathsheba, the final declaration by Joseph Poorgrass at the end of the last chapter of the novel sounds like a surprising epilogue, if not a pretty ironical conclusion to what should be the traditional Victorian resolution to a complex thwarted love story: "But since 'tis as 'tis, why, it might have been worse" (308).

Again, beyond the apparent simplicity of such a down-to-earth statement concerning the pseudo-happy end of their longstanding problematic relationship, this sentence strongly contrasts with the rustic simplicity of the background characters in *Far from the Madding Crowd*: Liddy, Joseph Poorgrass, Coggan and Cainy Ball for instance. Their roles in the diegesis were not simply those of second-rate characters giving the major figures their cues. As is clear from the very title of the novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and of course from the direct reference to the famous elegy by Thomas Gray, the simple, the rustic, the unsophisticated, the humble, and the modest are given pride of place by the novelist against the chaos of both city life and ephemeral passion. There are numerous instances of this opposition and the narrator's blatant preference for silent meditation and patient endurance. This is clearly what distinguishes Gabriel from Sergeant Troy for instance. The dashing soldier cannot wait, cannot rest or stay still: his life is one of noise and fury, as opposed to the patient toil and modest honesty that characterise Farmer Oak's life. When Gabriel patiently accepted to blend with the background of the novel by giving up his early position as Bathsheba's "ridiculous" suitor, as she brutally and mortifyingly termed him at the end of chapter four, he consequently stopped being a central figure and a major character both in the diegesis and in Bathsheba's life, as opposed to Sergeant Troy, whose introduction in chapter twenty five is one of noisy carelessness:

He was a man to whom memories were an incumbrance, and anticipations a superfluity. Simply feeling, considering, and caring for what was before his eyes, he was vulnerable only in the present. His outlook upon time was as a transient flash of the eye now and then: that projection of consciousness into days gone by and to come, which makes the past a synonym for the pathetic and the future a word for circumspection, was foreign to Troy. With him the past was yesterday; the future, to-morrow; never, the day after. (130)

Beyond the moral judgment any reader could pass on such a character, especially at the end of the novel, when his life has eventually proved one of fruitless agitation and irresponsible chaos (remember Fanny's pregnancy and Bathsheba's marriage), there is in the narrator's voice a blatant affection for the nobility of silent meditation and patient endurance. Francis Troy's constant agitation and barren activity illustrate the chasm between his life and Gabriel's; the sergeant's life was dedicated to action and battle, he never looked back and the sound and the fury (Shakespeare again) of his existence only veiled the vanity of the social spectacle he staged in front of everybody's eyes in the vicinity, hence the reference to Corinthians (131) as opposed to Gabriel's interest in Ecclesiastes at the end of chapter four.

This contrast is not just an incident in the novel; it is indeed more of a global resonance in the whole structure of the book, since it was already echoed just after Gabriel's marriage proposal, if not declaration of love, was rebuked by Bathsheba. As the narrator goes at the beginning of chapter five,

“the more emphatic the renunciation the less absolute its character” (page 30); again, as the proverb goes, still waters run deep, and Gabriel’s silence says much. This leitmotiv is even clearly formulated and repeated in the twenty-second chapter: “There is a loquacity that tells nothing, which was Bathsheba’s; and there is a silence which says much: that was Gabriel’s” (p.115). In other words and throughout the whole novel, Gabriel is on the side of silent toil and quiet patience whereas the world around him suffers from the fruitless agitation it generates. At the same time, Gabriel’s silence means intensely and efficiently and his silence is part of the poetic justice to be found in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. That poetic justice, if any, is itself complex, as Joseph Poorgrass strangely claims in the very last sentence of the novel, “it might have been worse” (page 308), in other words, if the rest is silence, and if what cannot be said cannot be said, the end of the novel illustrates the fact that something cannot be said and must remain silent, just the way the novel goes, from its beginning to its end, according to its very title.

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