



The Sound of Silence in Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Far From the Madding Crowd

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Cet article montre comment le son chez Hardy aspire à n'être que silence, par exemple dans *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, où les impressions sonores sont souvent déplacées vers le registre visuel, et où Tess ne parvient pas à faire entendre sa voix – une voix qui semble étranglée, rentrée, coincée dans la gorge. Cet article s'interroge sur la voix dans *Far from the Madding Crowd*, sur le silence, sur le cri, sur l'aphonie passagère de l'héroïne. Prenant comme point de départ un travail de J. J. Lecercle sur la « violence du langage », il développe l'idée que la voix féminine chez Hardy est réprimée en tant qu'elle véhicule une jouissance incontrôlable, potentiellement dangereuse. Ce sont des bribes de cette jouissance que le texte hardyen nous donne à entendre, en faisant résonner lalangue, cette langue chargée de matière jubilatoire et sonore.

Hearing with one's eyes is what any reader of literature does: the “textual voice” is the silent voice which the reader fancies he can hear¹. But the reader of Hardy's fiction is made to use his visual imagination even in cases when he should be made to hear rather than see, because the characters remain silent when they should be speaking, or because the narrator/focaliser makes us hear what I have called “the sound of silence”. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, all sound aspires to the condition of silence. For instance, in the May-day dance scene at Marlott, nothing is said about the music to which the girls are dancing, we could almost fancy that the girls are dancing *in silence* (if one excepts the brief mention at the end of the previous chapter that “the faint notes of the band were the only human sounds audible within the rim of blue hill” (*Tess*, 17)). We are made to see Tess's red ribbon on her white dress, the heroine being the only one of the white company “who could boast of such a *pronounced* adornment” (20, my italic): though we are given a precise description of the girl's characteristic intonation in this chapter (21), *pronouncing* and *eloquence* are displaced from the register of hearing to that of seeing (“her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes added eloquence to colour and shape” (20)). In another dance-scene, at Trantridge, because all sounds are dampened by the carpet of *debris* of peat and hay tramped over by the dancers, the fiddles are “muted” and no sound of dancing is audible (66) – the focus is on the “mist of yellow radiance” stirred by the feet of the dancers. Should one infer from these examples that Hardy's writing relies on sight rather than sound as a privileged mode of perception? Of course not: Hardy the novelist is also a poet. For instance in the dance scene at Trantridge, while it is mostly visual impressions that are conveyed to us,

¹ The “textual voice” is a concept developed by Claude Maisonnat (Maisonnat, XX). As Jacques Rancière argues, “une œuvre littéraire est, pour celui qui sait y pénétrer, un riche séjour de silence”, “une expérience radicale du langage, vouée à la production d'un silence” (Rancière, 9).

we are made to hear, *in the silence of the literary text*, the obsessive repetition of the consonant /f/ (“forms”, “figure”, “footfalls”, “scroff”, “floating fusty debris”, “the muted fiddles feebly pushed”, “failing”, etc. (66-67)). We hear “the sound of silence”, the muted music raised by the turbulent feet of the dancers and its transposition in words, a soundlessness which impresses us “as a positive entity rather than as the mere negation of noise” (127). What can we make of this “sonorous silence”, wherein lies its special appeal?

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, as I have argued elsewhere (Ramel 2007, 97-113), we hardly ever hear the voice of “the soft and silent Tess” (*Tess* 151). Like Eustacia Vye in *The Return of the Native* (Gribble, 524-542), like Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Tess proves unable to tell her story when it would be vital for her to do so. When she finally breaks her silence and makes her confession to Angel, she is struck dumb as a horrible sense of Angel's view of her penetrates her: “Terror was upon her face as she saw it; her cheek was flaccid, and her mouth had almost the aspect of a round little hole” (*Tess*, 227). No cry resonates, but a silent cry forms on her lips, soundlessly, exactly as in Munch's *Scream* or Caravaggio's *Testa di Medusa*: the image of the mouth as a “round little hole” makes the failure of the voice visible, it shows a sound that remains “stuck in the throat”. This is characteristic of a novel in which the heroine's voice is always choked, throttled, silenced².

Now if we turn to *Far from the Madding Crowd*, do we find that in that novel too all sound aspires to the condition of silence? Does Bathsheba, like Tess, fail to vent her grief when she finds she is a deserted woman? The answer is in the negative, for Bathsheba proves capable of expressing herself when necessary. On opening the coffin and discovering Fanny Robin “and child”, she utters a moan that reverberates in the silent room: “Bathsheba's head sank upon her bosom, and the breath which had been bated in suspense, curiosity, and interest, was exhaled now in the form of a whispered wail: 'Oh-h-h!' she said, and the silent room added length to her moan” (228). When Troy defies her and claims that Fanny is his true wife, “there arose from Bathsheba's lips a long, low cry of measureless despair and indignation, such a wail of anguish as had never before been heard within those old-inhabited walls” (231). Note that her cry expresses *indignation* as well as despair. Fanny Robin releases a cry when she recognizes Troy walking beside Bathsheba's gig (“she uttered an hysterical cry, and fell down” (201)), but a “dead silence” prevails in the scenes connected with her tragic plight: in the church where she fails to turn up to be married (92), on the road as she approaches Casterbridge (“there was not a sound of life save that acme and sublimation of all dismal sounds, the bark of a fox” (204)), during the journey from Casterbridge when her corpse is driven back to Weatherbury (“not a footstep or wheel was audible anywhere around, and the dead silence was broken only by a heavy particle falling from a tree through the evergreens and alighting with a smart rap upon the coffin of poor Fanny” (217)), in the room where she lies in her coffin (“the room was silent as a tomb” (229)). The close relationship between the scream and silence is a point made by Michel Poizat in a chapter entitled *le silence qui hurle* (“the screaming silence”). Poizat quotes Lacan: “*le cri fait gouffre où le silence se rue*” (“the scream is a gulf into which silence rushes” (Poizat, 130, my translation)). Silence, like the scream, is the blind spot where the word fails, where *logos* is cast off. Fanny's voice, which is melodious and attractive (“it was the low and dulcet note suggestive of romance” (43)), is pure musical substance, it is devoid of any efficiency in human verbal exchanges: like so many of Hardy's tragic characters, when a few words could save her, she makes the choice of silence. For instance she makes Gabriel promise to keep their encounter secret, thereby sealing her own fate.

So it seems that a relevant distinction in our study of silence is that between tragic and non-tragic characters. Boldwood's voice, like Tess's voice, is described as “husky” (*FFMC*, 286; *Tess*, 235), as a throttled voice that does not fully reverberate. In moments of climactic intensity, he speaks “in a hoarse whisper” (179), “in a hiss” (181), “in thin tones”, his voice sounding “far off and confined, as if from a dungeon” (289). The most striking passage is that in which Gabriel sees him riding away after hearing that Bathsheba and Troy are married. The terrible sorrow he feels is rendered by a description of perfect immobility and silence:

He saw the square figure sitting erect upon the horse, the head turned to neither side, the elbows steady by the hips, the brim of the hat level and undisturbed

² To be precise, I must add that there is one passage in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* where a cry is released by Tess: it is that focalised by Mrs Brooks just before Tess murders Alec. Mrs Brooks, listening at the door, hears “the murmur of unspeakable despair” (368) uttered by the young woman. In this scene, Mrs Brooks hears but does not see. It is as if sight and hearing were always disjointed in the novel.

in its onward glide, until the keen edges of Boldwood's shape sank by degrees over the hill. To one who knew the man and his story there was something more striking in this immobility than in a collapse. The clash of discord between mood and matter here was forced painfully home to the heart; and, as in laughter there are more dreadful phases than in tears, so was there in the steadiness of this agonized man an expression deeper than a cry. (185)

That picture of arrested movement (like a freeze in a film), in total silence, is the equivalent of a cry. We *see* the cry, we hear the silent cry with our eyes. The scene is structurally similar to that in which we *do not hear* Tess's "insane dry voice of terror". The scene in which Boldwood tries to wrench from Bathsheba the promise that she will marry him in six years time shows him intent on getting Bathsheba's *word*, in which I overhear the desire to *silence* her: "But do give your word! [...] You owe it to me!" (286). It is as though the woman had to pay a debt, once and for all. Unlike the "symbolic debt", which is a debt of language that can never be paid, the payment demanded here would settle all accounts, and leave Bathsheba speechless: for once she had given her "word" she could only be dumb. Give me your word, Boldwood seems to be saying, and the rest shall be silence: "Say the word, dear one, and the subject shall be dismissed" (286). With Boldwood, all sound aspires to the condition of silence. Fortunately, Bathsheba will escape such a perverse "business compact", she will not fall a prey to symbolic violence.

For Bathsheba is a healthy country girl seeking her own good, not the worst – as Joseph Poorgrass remarks at the end, "it might have been worse" (308). And therefore she *will not* be silenced. After the discovery of Troy's treachery, and after hearing his cruel words ("you are nothing to me—nothing!" 231), she will not allow herself to be allotted that place where a woman is "nothing". She runs out of the room/tomb where Fanny is lying, and goes along the dark road, till she lies down upon some ferns in a thicket overhung by trees. The next morning, when she wakes up, the first signs of life reasserting itself are the chatter of birds and the voice of a ploughboy singing in onomatopoeia ("with my ra-ta-ta, and my rum-tum-tum!" (232)). Then she hears the voice of a school-boy trying to learn the Lord's Prayer (233). On discovering that she has spent the night on the brink of a "nursery of pestilences" (a swamp which is both magnificent and "malignant"), and on seeing Liddy approaching her from the other side of the swamp, she tries to warn her, but then her voice fails: "'O, Liddy!' she said, or attempted to say; but the words had only been framed by her lips; there came no sound. She had lost her voice by exposure to the clogged atmosphere all these hours of night" (233-234). The image of the dumb-struck girl attempting to form words on her lips cannot fail to remind us of Tess. But no tragic fate awaits Bathsheba³: she is only hushed temporarily, as she explains to Liddy. Silence is soon defeated, she recovers the faculty of speech. She will be able to make good use of language, when she fears losing Gabriel and goes to speak to him in his cottage – a rather bold action for a young woman in those days. And she will make her point with unflinching determination, insisting that it was "too soon" to think of marrying Gabriel, not "absurd" (302). Yet the scene on the brink of the swamp, immediately after the release of her "cry of measureless despair", has shown how close she was brought to that point where the cry becomes "the gulf into which silence rushes". Her aphonia was not so much caused by exposure to the damp as by a dangerous proximity to the silent abyss of tragedy.

Why then is the voice of Hardy's tragic characters hushed, choked, throttled? One answer is that the voice "stuck in the throat" is the victim of some kind of repression. Our colleague Jean-Jacques Lecercle, in an admirable article, argues that Tess is the object (as well as the subject) of "the violence of language". Violence, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, is "primarily linguistic". Starting from the "pedagogic violence" of Angel's teaching, he shows how Tess's "natural" language is "repressed by the articulate language of dominant culture" (Lecercle, 149), the "standard language" taught at school. Following Deleuze and Guattari, Lecercle speaks of a process of "deterritorialisation/reterritorialisation" (Lecercle, 151). Indeed the dialect still "on [Tess's] tongue", whose characteristic intonation could be approximately rendered by the syllable "UR" (*Tess*, 21), far from being a corruption of pure English, is "the rich *Ur-sprache* in which meaning is preserved"

³ Of course one might argue that the difference between Tess and Bathsheba is social: it is easier for the owner of a farm to be articulate than for a common peasant-girl. My point, however, is that the difference between the two heroines is due less to socio-economic factors than to a particular approach to the question of voice.

(Lecerclé, 151), a full, mellow, archaic, originary language, the language of ballads, folklore, story-telling, etc. – in other words what in Lacanian terms I would call *lalangue*, which is repressed by the dominant idiom, the official *la langue*⁴. One particular way in which it is silenced is the suppression of the phoneme /r/ in standard English: for the letter /r/, which is sounded in dialectal speech, where it is rolled in a way not unlike the Scottish /r/, becomes mute in English (in the English pronunciation of “d’Urberville”, for instance, the phoneme /r/ is lost). To people like myself, unacquainted with the Dorset traditional accent, a poem by Hardy makes this point clear: blackbirds all over Britain call “pretty dear!” when Spring returns, but in Wessex they sing “pret-ty de-urr!”, while in Middlesex the song turns into “pehty de-aw!” (“The Spring Call”⁵). There is indeed, as Lecerclé point out, “a striking parallel between Tess’s relation to language and Hardy’s” (153): for an effect of the violence of language is probably, for Hardy and for Tess, the suppression of that /r/ whose resonance must have been part of the rich musical texture of the “natural” language heard in infancy. What Hardy had to renounce when he was taught English at school, and when he started writing for an English public, was that primeval enjoyment derived from the vibratory substance of *lalangue*. Some trace of this lost *jouissance* is retained in the letter of his texts with the graphic and phonic pair “UR”, which is everywhere in his fiction: in the titles of his novels (*Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, *The Return of the Native*, *Jude the Obscure* – whose title was to have been “Hearts Insurgent”), and in his narratives. For instance the text of *The Return of the Native* plays insistently on “turn”, “return”, “burn”, “urn”, “earn”, “fern”, “furze” (Ramel, 2010), *Far from the Madding Crowd* repeats “ur” in “purl”, “gurgle”, “gargoyle”, “guttural”, “concurritur”, etc.

So I would venture that “UR” in Hardy’s texts is a vocal remainder from the lost substance of enjoyment called *lalangue*. It therefore relates to loss, the loss of the mother tongue, and the loss of the primary object of desire (the maternal object) resulting from symbolic castration. What makes such a hypothesis plausible is the connection Hardy makes between “ur” and “her”: in ‘The Spring Call’, “pret-ty de-urr!” rhymes with “her”. The same link is found in a letter he wrote to the French translator of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (who had some difficulty trying to translate the passage on Tess’s characteristic “UR”):

I think you could explain it by saying it was something like the UR in ‘hurler’ or ‘urgence’ ‘rhum’, much prolonged & deeper – though this would, after all, be obscure. In English the nearest approach I can think of is ‘urh’ (It is very noticeable in the word “her”, which the rustics pronounce ‘hurrr’). (Letter to Madeleine Rolland, 14 March 1921, Millgate & Purdy, vol. 6, 76)

Incidentally, Hardy associates “UR” with the French *hurler* – and therefore with silence if Michel Poizat’s logic is to be pursued. More central to my argument is the point Poizat makes on regional accents: they call back into existence something of the lost *jouissance*, thus producing a subversive effect in the signifying chain. He starts his demonstration by showing how the *cri pur* (“the pure cry”) of the new-born infant turns into the *cri pour* (a cry for someone, inscribed in the order of the signifier). What is lost in the process is the material quality of the cry, the pure sound-effect devoid of meaning or intentionality. The infant is somewhat dispossessed of its cry. That lost object, he argues, is nothing but the Freudian object which Lacan has called *objet petit a*, declined in the acoustic

⁴ “Lalangue sert à de toutes autres choses qu’à la communication. C’est ce que l’expérience de l’inconscient nous a montré, en tant qu’il est fait de lalangue, cette lalangue dont vous savez que je l’écris en un seul mot, pour désigner ce qui est notre affaire à chacun, lalangue dite maternelle, et pas pour rien dite ainsi” (Lacan 126).

⁵ “Down Wessex way, when spring’s a-shine / The blackbird’s ‘pret-ty de-urr!’ / In Wessex accents marked as mine / Is heard afar and near. He flutes it strong, as if in song / No R’s of feebler tone/ Than his appear in ‘pretty dear’, / Have blackbirds ever known.

Yet they pipe ‘prattie deerh!’ I glean, / Beneath a Scottish sky, / And ‘pehty de-aw!’ amid the treen / Of Middlesex or nigh [...]

Well: I’ll say what the listening birds / Say, hearing ‘pret-ty de-urr!’ — / However strangers sound such words, / That’s how we sound them here. Yes, in this clime at pairing time, / As soon as eyes can see her / At dawn of day, the proper way / To call is ‘pret-ty de-urr!’” (Thomas Hardy, ‘The Spring Call’).

register as the object-voice⁶. Being a lost object, it is both a void (“a vacuum sucking other objects into its place (Kay, 56)), and a primary object of *jouissance* (Poizat, 147). Therefore, by resurrecting the “skeleton” of vocal materiality, regional accents bring forth the object-voice:

The accent tends to cause the resurgence of vocal materiality, of the object-voice as such, inasmuch as we have seen it to be an object of *jouissance* and as that intrusion of enjoyment in language subverts the signifying effect of the spoken words⁷.

From that we can infer that the “UR” sound characteristic of Tess's intonation is the intrusion in her language of the dangerous, potentially subversive, object-voice.

Perhaps that is the reason why Tess's *voice* has to be repressed: not because of the *meaning* she might convey, but because the feminine voice is the paramount source of danger, posing the threat of an invasion of uncontrollable *jouissance*. For as opera-lovers know very well, it is mostly the feminine voice that carries in its inflections some remainder of the forbidden enjoyment. As Mladen Dolar argues,

the voice without sense is self-evidently equated with femininity, whereas the text, the instance of signification, is in this simple paradigmatic opposition on the side of masculinity [...]. The voice beyond words is a sensuous play of sensuality, it possesses a dangerously attractive force, although in itself it is empty and frivolous. The dichotomy of voice and logos is already in place. (Dolar, 43)

Mladen Dolar asserts that “the voice is boundless, warrantless, and – no coincidence – on the side of woman” (Dolar, 50-51). “What is at stake is an enjoyment beyond the signifier, something that opens the perspective of the Lacanian problem of feminine enjoyment” (Dolar, 50). To that an important point has to be added: whenever the lost object-voice is resurrected, it can only tend, asymptotically, towards silence (Poizat, 148). It can only aspire to the condition of silence, because in its pure form, the irretrievable, impossible, inaudible object-voice is nothing but silence:

The voice qua object is precisely what is “stuck in the throat,” what cannot burst out, unchain itself and thus enter the dimension of subjectivity. It is by no accident that, in his Four Fundamental Concepts, Lacan determines the object small *a* as the bone which got stuck in the subject's throat: if the exemplary case of the gaze qua object is a blind man's eyes, i.e. eyes which do not see [...]; then the exemplary case of the voice qua object is a voice which remains silent, i.e., which we do not hear. (Zizek, 117)

Therefore Tess's throttled voice, the voice “stuck in her throat”, is precisely what causes its appeal to the reader, and to Hardy. Her silent cry is not only the result of repression, but also a source of unspeakable enjoyment. In the Bacchic scene at Chaseborough, the carpet of peat and hay which covers the ground and mutes all sound is both a metaphor for repression and the means used to approach the pure, unattainable silence of the vocal object. Perhaps that is the reason why Tess has to be hanged: because there is something indomitable and dangerous in her voice, something that has to be hushed if the phallic order is to be preserved. Such might well be the function of the executioner's rope: to eject the object “stuck in her throat”. Silencing Tess's voice would then serve a double purpose: to silence the disturbing object-voice, and to make it audible in the silence of the literary text.

Such an analysis opens up perspectives of interpretation for Hardy's fiction. Indeed a major characteristic of Hardy's prose is the fascination for muffled sounds, for a delicately-poised state of quasi audibility, in which silence is not “the mere negation of noise” but “a positive entity”. To make audible the inaudible object-voice is the prime impulse at work in Hardy's writing, a creative force that gives his prose its special resonance. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* too, sounds are dull, subdued: Gabriel's footsteps are deadened by the soft grass he is treading (43); so are the notes of his flute: “the tune was not floating unhindered into the open air: it seemed muffled in some way, and was altogether too curtailed in power to spread high or wide” (12-13). The ring of the sheep-bells has more mellowness than clearness, “owing to an increasing growth of surrounding wool” (14). Fanny trying to throw lumps of snow at Troy's window only causes “dull blows” to resonate, because the sound is heard “with difficulty in the fluffy atmosphere” (70). The dead-drunk men snoring in the barn emit “a

⁶ The vocal object is one of the two objects Lacan added to Freud's partial objects, the other one being the object-gaze.

⁷ My translation. “L'accent tend à faire ressurgir la matérialité vocale, l'objet-voix comme tel, en tant qu'il est comme on l'a vu objet de *jouissance* et que cette intrusion de la *jouissance* dans le langage subvertit l'effet de signification des paroles prononcées” (Poizat, 147).

subdued roar like London from a distance" (189). While Gabriel works to save Bathsheba's ricks, nothing is heard save "the dull thud of the beetle which drove in the spars, and the rustle of thatch in the interval" (191). Special mention should be made of the verb "to rustle": "the rustle of a woman's dress," writes Robert Gittings, "had enormous sexual meaning for Hardy" (Gitting, 59), no doubt because it carried reminiscences from his childhood⁸. "I heard you rustling through the fern before I saw you" (143) are Troy's words when Bathsheba reaches him in "the hollow amid the ferns". As Bathsheba was approaching the place, "a soft brushing-by of garments might have been heard" as she walked among the ferns, "their soft, feathery arms caressing her up to her shoulders" (142). The subdued voice is not always loaded with sensuous pleasure, it may also be the spectral, disturbing voice, neither human nor inhuman, which cannot be attributed to a subject and floats in an intermediate domain, akin to Michel Chion's "acousmatic voice"⁹. No doubt *jouissance* has its dark side, the side of horror. Words like "gurgle", "hiss", or "hoarse" are used for human voices: as for instance the "gurgle" of Troy's derisive laughter (181), the "hiss" of Boldwood's reply to Troy (183), the "hoarse laugh" of Troy (92). But the same words are used for inanimate things: the sound of a mill-pond "tricking hoarsely through a hatch, and suggesting gloomy possibilities of drowning" (165), the "sharp hisses" that encircle Bathsheba during the sword exercise (144), the "gurgling and snorting sound" of the gurgyle, the creature which in dry weather laughed "voicelessly" (241). Water in Hardy's novels is often endowed with a human voice, as it "roars", "purls", or "gurgles". So is the wind, "the shrivelled voice of the heath" in *The Return of the Native* (70), or the gusts blowing on Norcombe hill in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which filter through the trees as through a strainer and sound like a voice "stuck in the throat": "To-night these trees sheltered the southern slope from the keenest blasts, which smote the wood and floundered through it with a sound as of grumbling, or gushed over its crowning boughs in a weakened moan" (11). The novel, like so many novels by Hardy, offers us "a rich sojourn in the abode of silence" (Rancière, 9, my translation).

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⁸ The rustle of a woman's dress brought back to his memory the public execution of a woman in Dorchester which he attended as a child: "He never forgot the rustle of the thin black gown the woman was wearing as she was led forth by the warders" (*The Sketch* 1904, quoted by Gittings, 59). Another experience in early childhood, noted by Hardy in his *Life*, is "the thrilling 'frou-frou' of [Mrs Julia Augusta Martin's] four grey silk flounces when she had used to bend over him, and when they brushed against the font as she entered church on Sundays" (*Life*, 104-105). So we can understand why "rustle" is loaded with such affect in Hardy's texts.

⁹ The *voix acousmatique* in the cinema is "the voice that transgresses the boundary inside/outside, since it belongs neither to diegetic reality nor to the external voice accompaniment, but lurks in the in-between space, like a mysterious foreign body which disintegrates from within the consistency of 'reality'" (Zizek, 120).

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