



## Thomas Hardy's Silences

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# EPI-REVEL

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L'article s'emploie à analyser les diverses formes du silence. Il propose un classement des différentes formes de silence : le silence linguistique (qui va du silence de l'infans au silence de la communion en passant par le silence comme signe), le silence esthétique (qui va du silence de l'ineffable au silence de la vision ou de l'intuition), le silence métaphysique (du silence des choses au silence de Dieu), le silence narratif (le récit fait naître un monde en l'arrachant au silence, pour l'y replonger sitôt la lecture terminée), et le silence temporel (ce qui est écrit est pris entre le silence de ce qui n'est plus et le silence de ce qui sera, entre la nostalgie et l'attente). La poésie de Hardy utilise essentiellement trois formes de silence : esthétique, temporelle et métaphysique. Dans *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy utilise presque toutes les formes du silence comme langage, mais très rarement le silence des choses, à l'inverse de *The Return of the Native*, où le silence de la Nature (dans la description de Egdon Heath au début du roman) sert de métaphore au silence de l'inexistence qui précède le récit. Encadré par le silence de l'inexistence narrative et le silence des choses, ou de Dieu, le langage de Hardy est le vecteur privilégié de la création d'un monde à partir du silence. S'agissant du style de Hardy, l'article reprend une distinction faite jadis entre suture et polyphonie, et conclut que le style de Hardy, plutôt que polyphonique, peut se définir comme la transmutation linguistique d'une multiplicité de silences.

## Introduction

Silence can be said in many different ways. You may have recognised an allusion to a famous passage in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (book Γ, chapter 2), "*to on legetai pollakôs*," "being can be said in many different ways." But replacing "being" with "silence" is not innocent. Aristotle's is a debatable but fundamentally straightforward philosophical thesis. Whereas maintaining that silence can be said in many different ways has the flavour of paradox. For in a sense silence, like everything else, *can* be said, there are words for it. But in another sense it cannot, or rather should not, be said, but only, if you pardon me the quasi-coinage, "silenced". And we must keep in mind that silence has a direct relationship with aesthetic experience, which has often been described, not least by Lyotard, as an

attempt to represent the un-representable, and thus to phrase the ineffable. I shall therefore attempt to phrase silence, and in many different ways.

We all know that there is more than one type of silence. We intuitively know that there is a total or absolute silence, the silence of things that are mute because they are not endowed with speech or any form of expression (this is not the silence of the ineffable, this is the silence of a world indifferent to human affairs as symbolized by the ability to speak), and a negative or relative silence, which marks the absence of speech, a form of speech that is mutely conveyed because it has been repressed, a silence that is a sign or a signal, an integral part of the linguistic exchange. For, as a famous psychoanalyst once said, “no speech remains without an answer, even if it is met with silence, provided there is a listener” (Lacan, 247). Silence so intended is either an answer or the request for an answer.

This second type of silence provides material for the writer, especially if he is a playwright or novelist: narratives use silence as a literary device and stage it. But if the writer is also a poet, perhaps he will be even more concerned with the first form of silence, as lyrical monologism, in contrast with narrative or dramatic polyphony, is often about affect and atmosphere, and about all that by definition cannot be said because it lies beyond the scope of speech. Only in poetry can the mute inglorious life of things come into being by being named. In this essay, I shall defend the thesis that Thomas Hardy’s work is deeply concerned with all the forms and types of silence. As a novelist, he stages them; as a poet, he develops a style that must be understood as a constant struggle against silence, which is the stuff that his poetry is made of.

## I. A garland of silences

I shall begin in an abstract and stipulative fashion, by positing a number of gradients along which the various forms of silence are distributed. Only in a second part will Hardy’s silences make my point more concrete.

The **first gradient** is *linguistic*. It concerns the relationship between speech and silence. It goes from the silence that is sheer lack of speech, which means a lack of communication and shared meaning, the silence of *infantia*, to articulate speech as vector of communication and meaning, and it ends in another form of silence, the silence of communion, in which communication and meaning are achieved to the full. For we are all aware of situations, from religious epiphany to amorous ecstasy, in which silence is golden, that is when the deepest form of communication is achieved through silence. This gradient therefore, has three divisions: the two extremes are the realm of silence, only the middle region is the site of speech. But even this middle region is concerned with silence, as silence is sometimes a direct, and sometimes an explicit form of speech, and my first gradient produces a sub-gradient: between *infantia* and communion, there lie other silences, which are distributed according to their increasing contribution to the transmission of meaning. The lowest form is the silence of idiocy, the silence of a would-be speaker who has nothing to say – he could speak, since he is no longer *infans*, but he doesn’t: words fail him, or he prefers not to speak, through inability to express himself. If we move one step, we encounter the silence of impotent rage: the speaker no longer speaks, as he has been defeated in linguistic *agôn* and reduced to silence, a frequent situation in the plays of Harold Pinter. That speaker would dearly like to speak, to express himself, but he cannot, being hindered by the unfavourable turn the conversation has taken. One step further, and we encounter the silence that is an integral part of the conversational exchange. The speaker is no longer condemned to silence, she may but will not speak, and in not speaking she speaks. This is not the silence of defeat; it is a weapon in conversational tactics, a useful move in the dialogue: she is sulking, he pretends not to notice it; her silence demonstrates her contempt for him, he refuses to take such implicit demand into account. Another step further, and silence is staged; it is no longer merely heard or felt, it is expressed: we have reached the rhetoric of silence, the tropes of aposiopesis, of speech interrupted to oblige the hearer to take up responsibility for the end of the sentence, which has been understood but not expressed, and of preterition, where the speaker actually says what he claims he will be silent about. One last step further, and we are again immersed in real silence, but it is no longer the silence of idiocy: such is the silence of contemplation or introspection, where meaning is rich and abundant, in a form of speech that does not need expression, interior language or the *logos endiathetos* of the ancients, whether we take it to be a variety of articulate language or a form of mentalese.

So we have five types of silent speech, if I may say so: idiocy, mute impotent rage, a refusal to speak that induces a calculus of implicatures in the other speaker, tropes and contemplation/introspection or interior speech. These five silences are answered by five types of

speech: the flow of empty speech that found its philosophical dignity in Heidegger's concept of *Gerede*, garrulousness; the logorrhea of victorious speech, as in Pinter's plays (I am thinking of course of Goldberg in *The Birthday Party*); the uncertain speech which seeks to fill up the void created by the opponent's silence (this is the inverse of the preceding form of speech, also to be found in Pinter – I am thinking of *The Caretaker*); the counter-attack that exposes rhetorical silence for what it is, a form of speech, for instance by refusing to play the game of linguistic cooperation; and the anxious speech of a speaker who cannot bear the silence of his interlocutor and feels excluded by his silent contemplation ("a penny for your thought"). On this secondary gradient, silence is inseparable from speech in so far as it is itself speech. We have, therefore real silence at the two extremities of the gradient taken as a whole, and in the middle a variety of silences which all are forms of speech.

The **second gradient** is *aesthetic*. It goes from the silence of the ineffable, whether it be affect or atmosphere (a silence which, as its name indicates, is no mere absence of speech but a yearning towards speech, which only poetry will be able to translate into words) to the silence of vision or intuition, the aesthetic equivalent of the knowledge of the third type in Spinoza, which is reached through intellectual intuition. Between those two extremes, silence becomes, if not exactly words, at least a sign. As we all know, in music, silence is a sign. Not only is it noted, like any other note, but it is an integral part of the melody: I am thinking of the silence at the very end of the slow movement of Schubert's last but one piano sonata. Of course, by mentioning an aesthetic gradient, I seem to adopt a philosophy of art that is historically determined, and probably highly debatable (see Rancière). I mention it because this gradient is present, as we shall see, in Hardy's work. There is, therefore, a gradient of silences in which the silence of the ineffable is expressed, silently, in the signs of silence, the climax of which is the silence of intuition and poetic vision.

The **third gradient** is *metaphysical*. It takes us back to the intuitive contrast that was my point of departure. At one extremity, we find the absolute silence of the world of things, which do not speak, even if they sometimes signal to us (the Anglo-Saxon tradition of philosophy of language distinguishes between natural signs, like that threateningly black cloud that announces an imminent storm, and non-natural signs, the only signs that are intentional) (See Grice). And, as the philosopher said, the silence of such infinite space is a source of awe ("*le silence de ces espaces infinis m'effraie*"). At the other extremity we find the silence of God, who knows all through intuition and has no need of speech, except when he addresses his Word to humankind. As men are situated between God and the world of things, and articulate language was given them to name things in the name of God. This Adamic theory of the origin and function of articulate language that is deployed between two silences also concerns Hardy, even if we shall need a philosophical detour to illustrate it.

But this Adamic theory is also reflected in a **fourth gradient**, a *narrative* gradient. For every narrative calls a world into being, that is what narrative is about, and this world, which is often expressed at considerable length (for historical reasons, in the case of Hardy, it usually takes three volumes to express it), is created, wrested out of the silence of inexistence to which it returns, when the book has been read and the narrative is concluded. Before the *incipit* of the novel, Tess has no existence, and neither have the d'Urbervilles, or the vale of Blackmoor; after the *excipit*, she no longer exists, the President of the novelists having ended his sport with her. Narrative speech establishes itself within and against the silence of inexistence, which is its material, even as the void, in Platonist philosophy, is the material out of which being emerges; and it negotiates at due length its return to silence. I am not the first critic to insist on the importance of the first and last words of a novel: their cardinal importance in the novels of Hardy is notorious, witness the case of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

To these four gradients, I would like to add a **fifth gradient**, a *temporal* gradient. For anything that is said is, again, caught between two silences, the silence of what has been said and is no longer being said, and the silence of what has not been said yet but may or will be said. Which suggests (and again I am not particularly original in saying this) that literature is concerned (importantly so) with memory and nostalgia (as we all know the remembrance of things past takes many a tome), but also with hope and expectation, whether in Utopian longing or in despair (critical consensus has it that in the case of Hardy the second type of expectation is prevalent).

There is one thing that is striking in all these gradients – their ternary structure, in which a form of speech, or of sign, is framed between two types of silence: silence – speech – silence. We can therefore understand why silence is important for literature, if we consider that literature, the art of language, negotiates those gradients, produces speech out of the material of silence, and takes it to the higher form of silence that is its goal. I shall now attempt to demonstrate this proposition by reading Hardy.

## II. The three silences in Hardy's poetry

Among the nine hundred and fifty poems in Hardy's *oeuvre*, three have the word 'silence' in their title or first line: numbers 849 ('Silences'), 412 ('The Last Signal': "Silently I footed by an uphill road") and 413 ('The House of Silence') (Hardy 1976, 865, 473, 474). Three poems, therefore, that stress the importance of silence by making it their explicit theme.

'Silences' comes from *Winter Words*, Hardy's last collection of poems, which was published posthumously. The poem has five stanzas. The first two introduce a first type of silence, the silence of speechless nature. Perhaps I should say the silence of things, as such silence is not cosmic silence, but the silence of a world inhabited by living beings: the silence of the wood when the wind has ceased, the silence of the church belfry after the last vibration of the bell. And it is also the silence of death, in the pond where someone has drowned:

And there's the silence of a lonely pond  
Where a man was drowned,  
Nor nigh nor yond  
A newt, frog, toad, to make the merest sound.

We remember the drowning of Wildeva and Eustacia Vye in *The Return of the Native*; and we remember that their clandestine meetings were announced by the dropping of a pebble into the pond to imitate a frog jumping. The silence of things tends to become a human silence, the silence of death and of what follows.

The two following stanzas deal with a human form of silence: the silence of houses that are now empty but used to be filled with the sounds of life, in the childhood of the poet who remembers them. For houses, too, meet their death, because their owners die, and roofs, beams and windows have a soul (*"Objets inanimés, avez-vous donc une âme/Qui s'attache à notre âme"* (Lamartine, 159)):

Roof, rafters, panes  
Look absent-thoughted, tranced, or locked in prayer.

You have recognized Hardy's inimitable poetic style, with its mixture of concrete references and coinages.

The last stanza expresses the impossibility of giving voice again to a past now silent with the silence of the grave ("a torpor like a tomb's"). The silence of a dead past, which is also the silence of grief in the present, and the silence of a future without hope – the poem distributes silences along the temporal gradient, but it also alludes, albeit briefly, to the primeval silence of the metaphysical gradient. But such silences have a paradoxical flavour, as they are occasions for poetic speech: the poet says what silence cannot utter, thus demonstrating that silence is the stuff of poetry, what speech must be wrested from, for the brief interval of a few stanzas, before speech returns for good to the silence from which it had emerged (where it appears that what I said about the narrative gradient of silence also concerns poetry).

'The Last Signal' was published in *Moments of Vision*, and the text has two subtitles, a date, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1886, and a dedication, 'A memory of William Barnes.' We know the influence Barnes exerted on Hardy's poetic formation, and how important he was for his interest in dialect. The poem remembers the burial of Barnes, a ceremony which Hardy attended. As the poem opens, Hardy is walking towards the cemetery, alone in the countryside. His eye is attracted by a ray of sunlight reflected on Barnes's coffin, which can be seen in the distance, thus sending the poet a last signal of farewell. This is of course a typical Hardy scene: on Egdon Heath, characters are often seen in the distance, outlined on the horizon, and they watch one another from that distance. The burial scene here is seen from the same distance from which Hardy once saw a hanging in Dorchester jail, an episode which is the origin of the last page of *Tess*. The main effect of this distant gaze is to make the scene a purely visual and therefore silent one:

SILENTLY I footed by an uphill road  
That led from my abode to a spot yew-boughed;  
Yellowly the sun sloped low down to westward,  
And dark was the east with cloud.  
Then, amid the shadow of that livid sad east,  
Where the light was least, and a gate stood wide,  
Something flashed the fire of the sun that was facing it  
Like a brief blaze on that side.

The convention according to which the first word of the poem, “silently,” is printed in capital letters gives this silence even more weight, as it does not merely denote the absence of speech (the poet is on his own, lost in meditation and grief), but a cosmic silence, the silence of nature, as no noise is noted, which contrasts with the extreme precision of spatial notations, about the landscape, but also about the four directions that map the world: the poet is walking eastwards, and since night is falling, this side of the world is dominated by night rather than by the hope of resurrection; the burial scene, east of him, has the colour of death (“the livid east scene”); the sun is dying in the west, and a last ray, the last signal, is sent westwards by the reflecting coffin towards the poet’s eye. This silent signal, this silence which *is* a signal (“*as with a wave of his hand*”), which is not a form of speech but of communion, is also a cosmic, or metaphysical silence – the silence of things – and a temporal silence, the silence of recent death. There is no paradox here: the poet notes, translates and repeats what the light of the sun silently says. The silence of the meditating poet is answered by the silence of the dead poet who beyond the grave sends him his signal, but also by the silence of the dying day, of a world that revolves on its axis, indifferent to humankind’s puny pursuits: all this is expressed by the initial adverb of the poem – an atmosphere, a feeling that are ineffable, seen, felt and thought but never said and yet which are phrased, or rather which ought not to be sayable and yet are said, as representing the unrepresentable, for such is the specific task of the work of art. This poem, and also its immediate successor, ‘The House of Silence’, are perfect illustrations of the title of the collection in which they were published, as they do inscribe “moments of vision,” which are, of course, silent.

There are four stanzas to ‘The House of Silence’. In the first one the poet addresses a child, who answers in the first half of the second stanza. The rest of the poem is a kind of lesson, which is also an *ars poetica*, uttered by the poet.

So there is a house, and a silent one at that, as nobody is ever seen in or near it – nobody lives there, which is a source of wonder to the child: “‘That is a quiet place – / That house in the trees with the shady lawn’.” The task of the poet is to turn the child’s mere wonder into awe. This he does by evoking the usual childish terror, a ghost (“A phantom abides there, the last of its race”). But this evocation soon becomes vision, and the house a silent allegory: the house has a soul and the resident ghost is a poet, whose silent visions silently and invisibly animate the house:

Morning, noon, and night,  
Mid those funereal shades that seem  
The uncanny scenery of a dream,  
Figures dance to a mind with sight,  
And music and laughter like floods of light  
Make all the precincts gleam.  
‘It is a poet’s bower,  
Through which there pass, in fleet arrays,  
Long teams of all the years and days,  
Of joys and sorrows, of earth and heaven,  
That meet mankind in ages seven,  
An aion in an hour.’

Such vision is more than a vision: it is the vision of a vision, and it is explicit, perhaps too much so, but then the child must be able to understand – that is why it is phrased in the traditional terms of a fairy world, of the fairy ball which is also the dance of memories. The temporal gradient of silence is dominant in the poem: if silence is the very stuff of literature, it is because the remembrance of things past is the privileged object of the literary text. But this silence is not only the silence of memory, but also of imagination, of vision (and here we may remember that Hardy’s is a visual form of art, that architecture is the art of space and that the architect turned novelist constantly refers to paintings, from Dutch landscape painters to “mad Turner” and his visions). Therefore, the aesthetic gradient of silence, which goes from the ineffable to vision and intuition, is also at work in the poem, where it mingles with the first.

Silence is the stuff poetry is made of, as it is the medium of poetic imagination, of vision and of memory. The poem feeds on the silence it interrupts. In such a conception of poetry, which belongs to a traditional Romantic aesthetic, and perhaps also to the tradition of the elegy, with its well-known *topoi*, the aesthetic, temporal and metaphysical gradients are the privileged forms silence takes. And such are indeed the privileged forms it takes in Hardy’s poetry. I leave aside the critical problem posed by the survival of a Romantic form of poetry in the modernist age (*Winter Words* was published in 1929, *Moments of Vision* in 1917). And in order to avoid the usual negative judgments this poetry

attracts (my three poems are not part of the three dozen poems deemed “great” in Hardy), I shall turn to the novels and wonder what happens to the linguistic and narrative gradients of silence in Hardy’s work.

### III. Silence in Hardy’s novels

Let me begin with two scenes in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. We are in chapter 22. Gabriel Oak, still suffering from the pangs of unrequited love, is shearing sheep. Bathsheba stands next to him and watches him. She fills the silence in this apparent *tête à tête* with her babble:

So the chatter was all on her side. There is a loquacity that tells nothing,  
which was Bathsheba’s, and there is silence which says much: that was Gabriel’s.  
(115)

I think you will agree that this passage provides us with a definition of silence as a form of speech, in contrast with the garrulousness of excessive speech, which did not have to wait for the eminent philosopher to be defined as babble. But Gabriel’s silence is not the silence that is the opposite of *Gerede*, that is the silence of idiocy, it is the inverse of it, which reveals the babble of speech for what it is, a void: it is the silence of contemplation (of the loved object), of (amorous) imagination, the silence which is an unsaid form of speech because ordinary speech cannot express the intensity of the affect. We must note here the skill with which the novelist achieves his effect: Gabriel’s silence *is* speech, a love song silently addressed to Bathsheba, made explicit through the skilful movements of shearing (when, a few pages later, Bathsheba leaves Gabriel to walk with Boldwood, who is about to declare himself, Gabriel misses and wounds the ewe he was shearing). Such silence expresses an affect that is too intense to be phrased, but it is not yet the silence of communion, which needs two participants, and in this scene Hardy wishes us to be aware of the non communion of the protagonists, as this is no real *tête à tête*. One chatters, the other is silent; one worships, the other speaks in order to ignore the love she cannot yet accept.

And since Boldwood has appeared on the scene and is soon to declare his love for the second time, I shall come back to the first declaration, in chapter 19. You remember the occasion: after receiving the valentine, the authorship of which has been disclosed to him, Boldwood has changed from indifference to passionate attraction, and he decides to take advantage of the sheep washing ceremony to ask for Bathsheba’s hand. She guesses what he is about to say, and tries to avoid him by walking away from the scene, but he comes in hot pursuit and hails her – and we have another definition of the silence that is speech:

‘Miss Everdene!’ said the farmer.  
She trembled, turned, and said ‘Good morning.’ His tone was too utterly  
removed from all she had expected as a beginning. It was lowness and quiet  
accentuated: an emphasis of deep meanings. Silence has sometimes a remarkable  
power of showing itself as the disembodied soul of feeling wandering without its  
carcase, and it is then more impressive than speech. In the same way, to say a little is  
often to tell more than to say a great deal. Boldwood told everything in that word.  
(100)

Here silence is an exaggeration of laconic speech, whose capacity to express affect it exacerbates. The opposite of babble is not only the silence of communion, but the laconic betraying of passion. The metaphor of the “carcase,” usually employed to describe the relationship between body and soul, and one of the *topoi* of the elegiac tradition, here is used for a characterisation of silence, the medium in which the soul, as site of affects, is moving.

In this novel, the word “silence” is mostly used to denote the absence of speech (thus Troy, in chapter 34, entitled ‘The Trickster’, when he tricks Boldwood into listening to his talk with Bathsheba, demands silence). Silence, as we saw in the two passages I quoted, denotes a hyperbolic form of speech. It also denotes the impossibility of speech, as in chapter 3, when Bathsheba saves the life of Gabriel Oak overcome by the fumes in his hut, and he is unable to express his feelings (“He wished she knew his impressions, but he would as soon have thought of carrying an odour in a net as of attempting to convey the intangibilities of his feeling in the coarse meshes of language. So he remained silent” (21)). In this novel, Hardy used the entire gradient of silence as speech, or of silent speech. And since the rustic chorus is singularly garrulous, since feelings of love are rarely reciprocated and Nature provides a frame for the action but is not a direct participant, we shall not encounter the silence of idiocy, the silence of communion and only rarely the silence of things. But there are at least two scenes in which Nature makes itself silently heard: the night scene in which a

dying Fanny Robin, on the point of giving birth, walks in pain and distress, in the silent night, towards the Casterbridge workhouse, leaning on the only charitable creature she has met, a stray dog; and the scene of death, when, at night again, Bathsheba kneels in front of the open coffin of Fanny Robin and her baby and prays. Such silence is not exactly the silence of things, of an indifferent Nature which ignores the futile exertions of humankind, but rather the silence of humankind that is indifferent to the suffering of its weaker members and leaves sympathy to the animals (we remember that the dog who has taken Fanny up to the workhouse is stoned away in lieu of thanks). 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 (221).

What we have in such scenes is the silence of melodrama or of tragedy, even if *Far from the Madding Crowd* is not one of the Hardy novels usually called “tragic”. And truly, if we read *The Return of the Native* in search of occurrences of the word “silence”, we will not be disappointed: there are fourteen occurrences of the word. In eight of those, silence is a sign or signal. Thus, the word is found as early as the opening page, when Eustacia’s grandfather, Captain Vye, meets Diggory Venn on the road, and he would like a good chat with the reddleman, who remains silent, reluctant as he is to disclose the presence in his cart of Tamsin, who has just failed to marry Wildeve. Or again, during the first meeting of Clym with Eustacia, who is dressed up as a man to play the Turkish Knight in the mummer’s play, he would like to know more of this person whom he has guessed to be a woman, but she opposes her silence to his inquisitiveness.

But silence in this tragic novel has three specific characteristics, absent from the previous novel. The first is that some occurrences of the word this time explicitly refer to that other form of silence which is the silence of Nature, since Egdon Heath is a full character in the novel, perhaps even, if we follow the critical consensus, the true protagonist. Thus, in the third chapter, the bonfires “tinctured the silent bosom of the clouds above them and lit up their ephemeral caves” (Hardy 1974, 44). And the many descriptions of nature combine auditory notations of natural noises, such as the chirping of birds or the rustling of the furze, with the notation of silence as the specific noise, or rather voice, of Nature:

They were the mummied heath-bells of the past summer, originally tender and purple, now washed colourless by Michaelmas rains, and dried to dead skins by October suns. So low was the individual sound from these that a combination of hundreds only just emerged from silence, and the myriads of the whole declivity reached the woman’s ear but as a shrivelled and intermittent recitative. (Hardy 1974, 81)

Whoever has walked this kind of landscape will feel at home in that description.

The second characteristic is the strategic distribution of the occurrences of the word “silence”: they tend to occur at turning points of the narrative. Thus, the word is found, as we saw, in the *incipit*, or in the first meeting between Eustacia and Clym. But it is also found in the eleventh and last chapter of the first book, during the first meeting we are allowed to witness between Eustacia and Wildeve. And it is found in the scenes when Clym breaks with his mother, Eustacia with Mrs Yeobright, or Eustacia with Clym. Lastly, we find the word in the tragic climaxes of the plot, when Mrs Yeobright dies, or Eustacia leaves her grandfather’s house for the last time, to keep her appointment with Wildeve and with death.

The third characteristic is that the presence of silence is felt, and focused upon, even if the word is not uttered. There are scenes in the novel the meaningful centre of which is a silence that is left unsaid, by the characters, with the tragic consequences that the inevitable misunderstandings will entail, but also, more importantly, by the author, who wishes to contrast the futile endeavours of humankind with the indifference of Nature. We have witnessed such a scene in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the tribulations of Fanny Robin and the episode of the dog. But in *The Return of the Native* silence is explicitly ascribed to such contrast. Here are two such scenes. At the very end of chapter two of the last section of the novel, Clym, blindly raging like a modern Oedipus, curses his wife for having caused the death of his mother: Hardy duly notes the “vast impassivity” of Nature, which keeps a silence that is totally indifferent to his ravings (342-3). And the most striking of those scenes is the famous scenes of the heath croppers, the ponies that are the oldest inhabitants of the heath, who silently surround Wildeve and Venn, as they play for Mrs Yeobright’s forty guineas in the light of glow-worms:

‘O, there they are again – damn them!’ cried Wildeve, looking up. The heath-croppers had returned noiselessly, and were looking on with erect heads just



as before, their timid eyes fixed upon the scene, as if they were wondering what mankind and candle-light could have to do in these haunts at this untoward hour.  
(255)

This is Hardy's primal scene of silence. But it involves two silences. There is, of course, the silence of Nature, the silence of night on the heath, of the dumb animals; but there is also the silence of the two men, engaged in a contest which, retrospectively will turn out to have been a fight to the death, with no other noise than the falling of the only die (the other five have been thrown away by Wildeve in a fit of rage because he was losing) and Wildeve's rare exclamations of dismay, as the throw of the die repeatedly goes against him – such silence, as we saw is a substitute for and an extreme form of speech.

So, Hardy's two silences may be contrasted on the linguistic and the metaphysical gradients. But so far I have dealt with narrative silence as a theme, as staged by the narrative and as ascribed either to Nature or to the characters. But when I evoked the narrative gradient, I alluded to another form of silence, the silence of the novelist, whose text and fictional world are wrested out of the silence of inexistence (the novelist does not rest before he reaches the seventh sentence, which means that the *incipit* is a moment of creation by the word) and who negotiates their return to inexistence once the last sentence has been written (Tess is not the only one to die in the *excipit*: so does the novel and the teleological urge that moves the plot forward is an example of the death drive).

If indeed we read the opening and closing pages of *The Return of the Native*, we realize that the novel opens within the silent realm of Nature ('A Face on which Time makes but little Impression' is the title of the first chapter, and the first paragraph gives us an admirable description of sunset over the heath, when the light of day still brightens the sky whereas the heath is already immersed in night): the words of the text are therefore wrested out of silence, as the silence of Nature is a metaphor of the silence of inexistence. And the closing pages of the novel are devoted to the speeches that are Clym's new vocation, and avocation (the title of the last chapter alludes to this) since, as we know, he has decided to spend his life preaching the good word to rustics who are indifferent but charitably inclined. Clym's babblings are contrasted with the silence of the heath. Human speech is allowed between the two silences of narrative inexistence that precede and follow the text of the novel; and if we decide that this narrative gradient is a metaphor of the metaphysical gradient, we note that speech is framed by the silence of Nature, the silence of things, and the silence of an indifferent and absent God. This seems to be straight out of the theory of language proposed by a young Walter Benjamin, at a time when German metaphysics and Jewish mysticism were more important to him than the materialist dialectic. Allow me to give you a brief summary of that theory of language.

His is a conception of a hierarchy of languages, from the silent language of God to the inarticulate language of things. In between one finds the articulate language of humankind, which, because of its position in the Great Chain of Language, is endowed with contradictory characteristics. On the one hand, it has inherited from God and His higher language the power of naming, thus being able to intercede between creation and creator by translating the mute language of anonymous beings into a higher language, where they receive proper names (the giving of proper names is the point where man is closest to God). On the other hand, as a result of the linguistic version of the Fall, the language of humankind has declined into the formulation of judgements (the judgement is the word that formulates a sentence, in both senses of the term). This is where language, as an instrument of judgement and communication, is furthest from God. Translation, therefore, is the name of the human language game, and it has two contradictory effects: by naming it intercedes, by communicating it betrays (on Benjamin's theory of language, see Roberts, 145).

Speech in Hardy, framed as it is between the twin silences of narrative inexistence, or of the silence of things, and the silence of God, is a passage, both transition and translation, from one silence to the other. Its function is to call the silent void into being: the outstanding value of literary or poetic language is that it is the privileged vector of that creation of a world out of silence. What I am saying is that silence in Hardy is a question of style.

## IV. Hardy's style

We all remember the traditional criticisms of poor little Thomas Hardy's style: "He made a style out of stylelessness," "It is on the face of it so bad, yet it achieves its aim so unmistakably," "His style touches sublimity without ever having passed through the stages of being good." You have recognized Henry James, F.R. Leavis, Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot (see Elliott, 13-19). Such critical judgements say little about Hardy's style and a lot about the short-sightedness of the truly great. But we must

acknowledge there was provocation, as they express a confused awareness of what is a stylistic problem, the quaintness and quirkiness of Hardy's style, its chaotic aspect, which goes without warning from the elevated to the colloquial, from the elaborate to the familiar, from the standard to the local dialect, a style characterized by Hardy's extraordinary ability to revive archaic words or meanings and to coin the new words he needs. There is a whole book to be written on Hardy's contribution to the *OED* and on his relationship to Gilbert Murray, whom he knew. And this book has in fact been written, by Dennis Taylor.

When, a long time ago, I attempted to account for Hardy's style, it was in terms of the opposition between suture and polyphony. Allow me to rehearse that analysis:

For an author who finds himself in Hardy's position, a position of linguistic plurality and contradiction, of potential stylistic violence, there are two solutions, suture and polyphony. Suture, a psychoanalytic concept, means the weaving together at all cost of the various threads of the text into a unified whole – an obsessive activity, a case of paranoid repression. A 'polished' style, as approved by Dr Johnson and his disciples, is the result of suture: all contradictions, all dialectal variations are erased in the perfection of a unified text. [...] The other choice, a more difficult one, is to let violence erupt on the surface of the text, to follow the lines of flight it indicates, to let the minor voices engage in their babble/Babel, in other words not to erase the contradictions from the text. To describe this choice, we can borrow Bakhtin's term, 'polyphony'. And this is indeed Hardy's choice: he accepts the violence of an unstable language as an integral part of his style, he lets the different languages within him speak out and contradict one another. (Lecerle, 22)

I do not wish to renege on that analysis in terms of polyphony, stylistic contradiction and the violence of style. But I would like to add something to it by suggesting that the violence of style in Hardy is not so much a reflection of a kind of linguistic schizophrenia (to pastiche what he says about Tess, he spoke educated English when he took himself seriously as a novelist, and dialect when he let himself go) as of a struggle to wrest speech from silence, to produce a form of speech that is adequate to the silence from which it emerges and towards which it is directed.

Dennis Taylor gives a close reading of one of Hardy's best known poems, *Neutral Tones* ("We stood by a pond that winter day / And the sun was white, as though chidden of God, / And a few leaves lay on the starving sod; / – They had fallen from an ash, and were gray") (Taylor, 275-6). The poem, which will remind a French reader of Verlaine ("*Dans un vieux parc solitaire et glace*", "*Deux spectres ont évoqué le passé*") uses the *topos* of the evocation of a long gone passion between two people who no longer feel anything and consequently can no longer speak to each other ("The smile on your face was the deadest thing / Alive enough to have strength to die"). The old words of love have become so many riddles ("Our tedious riddles of years ago"). Taylor's reading of the text is mostly lexical – hence its interest: according to him, the poem plays on the contrast between archaic and contemporary words and meanings. Thus, in "keen lessons that love deceives, / And wrings with wrongs", the poet is playing on the etymology of "wrong", a word originally formed on the past participle of "wring"; and Taylor also notes the play on the archaic and modern meanings of the preposition "of" in "chidden of God" and "riddles of years ago". In this non exchange between two former lovers who can no longer communicate and are immured in silence, the intensity of an affect that persists even if its contents have changed is expressed by the words of the poem, wrested out of the silence to which they are condemned, in the asperities of diction, in the archaisms and convoluted plays on meaning. There is no real polyphony here, rather a wrestling with language that refuses the smoothness of suture. To phrase it in the terms of my gradients of silence, Hardy's style combines the narrative gradient (poetic speech is violently wrested out of a silence to which it eventually returns), the aesthetic gradient (poetic speech is a passage, an in-between moment the silences of the ineffable and of intuition) and the temporal gradient (poetic speech is the only form of speech that can recall, in the form of a text, that which is no longer sayable in ordinary conversation).

We saw with Walter Benjamin that speech is not only a passage from silence to silence but also translation: through its naming capacity, it translates the silence of things and makes it adequate to the silence of God. In other words, poetic speech is also concerned by the metaphysical or cosmic gradient of silence. And Taylor quotes a passage from Darwin's *Origin of Species*, in which, following Lyell, he compares the order of geological strata as revealed to the gaze of the geologist, to a history of the world, only the last volume of which would be known to us, and only in bits and pieces, a word here, another word, there, all in different languages. This is how Taylor sums up the Darwinian metaphor, in order to ascertain what Hardy adds to it:

Darwin is, in fact, comparing four things: fossils in the geological strata, words in the body of known languages, phrases in a history book and stages in the history of man. [...] To this fourfold analogy, Hardy adds a fifth. We begin the process of understanding by using our own minds which also consist of records of personal development, most of them lost to consciousness. And our minds have in turn been influenced in multiple ways by language and books. [...] Our minds are embedded in a complex set of records, personal history, recorded history, and language, which Hardy renders in his distinctive choice of words. (Taylor, 283-4)

Here is where the other gradients of silence, and particularly the temporal gradient, are linked to the cosmic gradient: in the geological metaphor, which will no doubt remind us of the celebrated, too celebrated, scene in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* where the hero, hanging in peril of his life from Beeny Cliff in Cornwall, finds himself face to face with a trilobite, who looks at him with its dead eyes (Hardy 1986, 271). In this silent communion between the animal who died aeons ago and the man whose death may be imminent, Hardy's gradients of silence are all rehearsed: the silence of communion, which no longer needs speech; the silence of the ages that separate them; the metaphysical silence of the human naming of the animal, whereby the petrified being is made to communicate with its creator; lastly, the aesthetic silence of the ineffable in a scene that has always captured our imagination, which, with the help of poetic speech, becomes cosmic vision. The unity of Hardy's style lies in this linguistic transmutation of a multiplicity of silences.

It so happens that for half the year I live only a few miles from the church of St Juliot, in North Cornwall, where Hardy met his first wife. Every year, I take visitors to see the place, through Cornish lanes protected by their narrowness from the hordes of visitors that swarm on neighbouring Boscastle. The church stands on its own in the middle of the countryside, as even the old rectory is several hundred yards distant. It stands on the brow of the hill, dominating the Valency Vale and its woods and fields. It is steeped in silence, and I have never met anyone, as it is out of the trodden path of the average tourist. And every time I go there, the ambient silence is a source of intense aesthetic emotion, especially in March when the churchyard is filled with daffodils. And every time I understand why, for Hardy, writing is a way of breaking silence the better to reach it again.

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