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**“The noiseless tenor of their way”: quotations, inscriptions and the words  
of others in *Far from the Madding Crowd***  
Emily Eells

The phrase “The noiseless tenor of their way” concludes the stanza of Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ from which Hardy extracted the title of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. I have chosen it as the title of this paper as a means of introducing the questions I propose to discuss. Gray’s use of the adjective ‘noiseless’ – rather than its close synonym ‘silent’ – involves a privative suffix (-

less) which points to a truncated, imperfect state. ‘Noiselessness’ indicates an echo or a barely perceptible reverberation. The Latin etymology of the word ‘noise’ relates it to ‘nausea’ and seasickness, thus suggesting chaos, upheaval and noisy confusion. My discussion here will focus on Hardy’s unsettling use of set phrases and quotations in *Far from the Madding Crowd* which – to use a popular expression – rocks the boat, upsetting the relationship between signifier and signified. Hardy’s use of the words of others shows how he appropriates a quotation from a particular context, and changes its meaning by applying it to a contrasting, or even contradictory situation in his narrative. The text of *Far from the Madding Crowd* also makes prominent use of inscriptions carved in stone, engraved in gold, impressed in wax or set to music. They all illustrate how Hardy materializes language, giving it a concrete quality suggesting its immutable permanency. However, the solidity of the language is threatened by repetition and misunderstanding, and at times dissolves into meaningless shreds. The materialized language contrasts with the elusiveness of the spoken word with which the characters forge an expression of their feelings. The challenge they face is, as Oak puts it, to “map out the mind on the tongue” (22). Recognizing that language will fail him, Oak’s solution is not to use it, as we learn when he first falls in love with Bathsheba:

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)

The narrator’s phrase “the coarse meshes of language” encapsulates the question addressed in this paper, as it points to the ambivalence of language. Language is a net in which one can get trapped, but whose meshes mean that it is porous, and unable to fully contain and retain meaning. The adjective ‘coarse’ underscores the inadequacy of language as it suggests that it can only convey a rough approximation.

This paper will begin by considering how quotations serve to chart the linguistic map of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which extends from the narrator’s library to the Dorset dialect, and which is invaded by a speaker of foreign languages in the person of Sergeant Troy. I will show how the use of quotations reveals a troubling differential between the source of derivation and the context of relocation. My second section on inscriptions will turn to the embedded texts in the narrative, in order to illustrate how written language is also subject to a divorce between its message and its meaning. My last section on the words of others will consider the strategies adopted by Bathsheba Everdene to negotiate the inadequacies of language in an attempt to express the “intangibilities of [her] feeling[s]”.

Marlene Springer has identified “approximately 160 allusions” in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (Springer, 57), an impressive figure which foregrounds the use of intertextuality as a key narrative strategy in this novel. Hardy’s use of quotations marks a distance separating the educated, literary world of the author and narrator from the Wessex community whose tale is related in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Starting with that title of the novel, derived from “one of the most quoted poems in the English language” (Springer, 58), Hardy has his narrator draw liberally from a fund of culture which he presumes to share with his educated reader, though not with the rustic workfolk. His choice of title is highly ironic, as the community of Weatherbury constitutes “a madding crowd”, with its drunken workfolk, its infatuated bachelor driven by jealousy to murder his rival, and its innocent girl seduced by a soldier left to die in childbirth in the local workhouse. The first quotation, offset in the text, marks a gap between its source and the situation to which it applies. It cites Shakespeare with reference to the difficulty Oak experiences professing his love to Bathsheba:

Oak had nothing finished and ready to say as yet, and not being able to frame love phrases which end where they begin; passionate tales —  
— Full of sound and fury  
— Signifying nothing —  
he said no word at all. (23-4)

These lines from *Macbeth* 5.5 are frequently abstracted like this from their original context, where Macbeth’s reaction to the news of his wife’s death is to define life as “a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.” Hardy’s quotation signals the gap between the narrator’s knowledge of the canon of English literature and Oak’s apparent inarticulateness, though not without irony, as literary eloquence is mobilized to refer to cacophony resulting in meaninglessness.

The narrator makes abundant use of quotations, signposted by a framing in the text, though – like the lines from *Macbeth* – their source is rarely identified. In addition to creating a hiatus in the flow of the narrative and a modulation in the tenor of the narrative voice, the original meaning of the quotations sometimes clashes with the situation into which they are inserted in Hardy’s novel. A case

in point is a line from Keats's 'The Eve of St Agnes' to portray Bathsheba's rejuvenation at the time of her marriage to Oak: "As though a rose should shut and be a bud again" (306). Keats's line referring to a drugged maiden, passively borne off in her sleep to be married, is a far remove from Bathsheba's state. She has defied Victorian convention by taking the initiative of going to Oak's home to ask him to remain on the farm, which they both recognize would be tantamount to renewing their courtship. In a similar way, Hardy inserts a quotation from Sir Walter's Scott's 'Marmion' which is out of tune with the narrative situation. He cites Scott's account of a battle to convey the Weatherbury folk's anticipation of news of Boldwood's court case. The lines from the poem use onomatopoeia to convey the trample of the horse's hooves as it bears Coggan back with the law court's decision, inappropriately marking time when both the readers and the characters are on tenterhooks:

At last, when they all were weary the tramp of a horse was heard in the distance—

First dead, as if on turf it trode,  
Then, clattering on the village road  
In other pace than forth he yode. (296)

The use of quotations reveals not only the narrator's cultural superiority, but also his retrospective vantage point. This is explicit when he points to the proleptic value of the verse Bathsheba sings from 'The Ballad of Allan Water', written by Matthew Lewis who is better known for his Gothic novel *The Monk*. Little can Bathsheba know that the words of the song about a beautiful young woman wooed by a soldier's "winning tongue" foretell her own future, but the narrator shares the benefit of hindsight with the reader:

Subsequent events caused one of the verses to be remembered for many months, and even years, by more than one of those who were gathered there:

— For his bride a soldier sought her,  
And a winning tongue had he:  
On the banks of Allan Water  
None was gay as she! (123)

An alternative ending to the first verse and the two following versions of Bathsheba's song are not reproduced in Hardy's text, but they resonate in an ominous undertone:

**On the banks of the Allan Water,  
When the sweet springtime did fall,  
Was the miller's lovely daughter,  
Fairest of them all.  
For his bride, a soldier sought her  
And a winning tongue had he,  
On the banks of the Allan Water  
So misled was she.**

**On the banks of the Allan Water  
When the autumn spread its store  
There I saw the miller's daughter  
But she smiled no more,  
For the summer, grief had brought her  
And the soldier, false was he,  
On the banks of the Allan Water,  
Left alone was she.**

**On the banks of the Allan Water  
When the winter snow fell fast  
Still was seen the miller's daughter  
Chilling blew the blast.  
But the miller's lovely daughter,  
Both from cold and care was free,  
On the banks of Allan Water,  
In a grave lay she.**

The quarrel culminating in Bathsheba's first dismissal of Oak from her employment is another instance of how the narrator frames a quotation with hindsight. The narrator begins by reporting their argument in direct speech:

‘Go at once then, in Heaven’s name!’ said she, her eyes flashing at his, though never meeting them. ‘Don’t let me see your face any more.’  
‘Very well, Miss Everdene—so it shall be.’ (107)

The narrator then adds a post-script which compares Oak to Moses:

And he took his shears and went away from her in placid dignity, as Moses left the presence of Pharaoh. (107)

That comparison redefines the previous lines as a quotation from the passage in Exodus in which Pharaoh sent Moses away:

[Pharaoh to Moses]: ‘Get out of my sight ! Make sure you do not appear before me again !’ [...]  
‘Just as you say,’ Moses replied, ‘I will never appear before you again.’  
(Exodus 10.8)

It is laden with significance, because the subsequent ruin of Pharaoh’s property will prompt him to recall Moses, just as the “troubles in the fold” in the following chapter of *Far from the Madding Crowd* will compel Bathsheba to summon Oak back. For the reader who knows the Biblical story, the allusion is reassuring as it hints that Oak and Bathsheba will be reunited in the near future. However, a repeated allusion to how Oak deals with an upheaval in his emotions by turning to the Bible undermines the conviction that he masters his state of “placid dignity”. The narrator first suggests that he will read Ecclesiastes after Bathsheba turns down his marriage proposal:

No man likes to see his emotions the sport of a merry-go-round of skittishness.  
‘Very well,’ said Oak, firmly, with the bearing of one who was going to give his days and nights to Ecclesiastes for ever. ‘Then I’ll ask you no more.’ (30)

Oak’s reading of Ecclesiastes is also referred to after he berates Bathsheba for her flirtatious treatment of Boldwood:

Gabriel at this time of his life had outgrown the instinctive dislike which every Christian boy has for reading the Bible, perusing it now quite frequently, and he inwardly said, ‘“I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets!”’ This was mere exclamation—the froth of the storm. He adored Bathsheba just the same. (120)

The Biblical quotation functions here as an attempt to check a flood of emotions. It is used as a means of battenning down emotions with the hatches of language, as if a phrase framed by another and printed in a text could stop the sensation of sea-sickness caused by unsettled feelings.

The distance the narrator puts between himself and the farming community is mirrored by the use of dialect which roots the Wessex folk in a linguistic space of their own. Hardy even has Bathsheba feign not to understand that Oak means marriage when he uses the local phrase “to get thee”, which he then translates into what he calls “plain British” (302). In the same passage, a quotation from a poem in Dorset Dialect complements the narrator’s literary references. It is taken from ‘Woak Hill’ in the volume of *Poems of Rural Life in Dorset Dialect* published by William Barnes in 1844, in which the poet expresses grief over his wife’s death. The tenor of the poem therefore contradicts the narrative situation in which it is embedded, namely Oak and Bathsheba’s final reconciliation. Their meeting takes place in Oak’s home, and the quotation is used to describe the light of the fire reflecting on his old wooden furniture ‘all a-sheenen/ Wi’ Long years o’ handeln’ (301). Hardy recognized that his readers would not know the source of the citation, and added a footnote to the 1895 re-edition of his text to specify it. He also inscribes his presence in the text in a note on the phrase ‘a devil in a cowl’ with which the farm-hand Mark Clark refers to the dishonest baliff, Pennyways, meaning that he was a ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’. Hardy’s note indicates how the natives’ language has been corrupted beyond recognition: “This phrase [‘a devil in a cowl’] is a conjectural emendation of the unintelligible expression, ‘as the Devil said to the Owl’ used by the natives” (53, note 4). The Wessex dialect is characterized by that fact that “Ten generations failed to alter the turn of a single phrase” (114), making it as “well-worn” as Oak’s wooden furniture or the stone-flag floor in Warren’s Malthouse which was “worn into a path from the doorway to the kiln, and into undulations everywhere.” (45). The rustics’ language is so eroded that it crumbles into isolated syllables and incomprehensible syntagms. The typographical presentation of the ‘ballet’ Joseph Poorgrass sings (to use the rustics’ corrupted form of the word ‘ballad’) replicates his drunken stammering and the way the words have decomposed into fractured syllables. The language is shattered into pieces, so that the adjectives ‘low’ and ‘ill’ emerge out of the noun ‘willow’ and the verb ‘will’, deepening the shadow cast by the song:

‘Go on, Joseph [...],’ said Coggan. ‘Tis a very catching ballet. Now then again—the next bar; I’ll help ye to flourish up the shrill notes where yer wind is rather wheezy:—  
O the wi'-il-lo'-ow tree' will' twist',  
And the wil'-low' tre'-ee wi'll twine'. (122)

Language is fractured in a similar way by the young dunce on his way to school, trying to learn a prayer by heart. The way he splits the sentences into meaningless semantic units indicates just how little he understands of what he is reciting:

‘O Lord, O Lord, O Lord, O Lord, O Lord’:—that I know out o' book. ‘Give us, give us, give us, give us, give us’:—that I know. ‘Grace that, grace that, grace that, grace that’:—that I know.’ Other words followed to the same effect. The boy was of the dunce class apparently; the book was a psalter, and this was his way of learning the collect. (233)

Even the clock over the Alms-house in Casterbridge has a chime which is not only “stammering”, but also corrupted in the sense that it intones “a shattered form of ‘Malbrook’” (216), the French lullaby ‘Malbrouk s’en va-t-en guerre’ which itself deforms Marlborough’s name.

Sergeant Troy’s “dashing” (137) use of foreign words adds a note of exoticism to the polyphony of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. The son of a “Parisienne” (136), he was educated at Casterbridge Grammar School, where according to Liddy he “learnt all languages while he was there; and it was said he got on so far that he could take down Chinese in shorthand” (130). Troy marks himself off from the country folk by consciously borrowing from their language, explaining that as he has already started to flatter Bathsheba, he will continue to do so:

‘I may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb (an old country saying, not of much account, but it will do for a rough soldier).’ (135)

Troy adopts the saying “one might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb” to mean that he might as well go on to a greater offence after perpetrating a minor one. Interestingly, he dismisses the expression as “not of much account” reflecting how flat it has become. Troy’s use of set phrases and quotations reveals the shallowness of his feelings. On his very first meeting with Bathsheba, he glibly paraphrases a love poem to comments on how she has extricated her dress from his spur: “Your light fingers were more eager than mine. I wish it had been the knot of knots, which there’s no untying!” (129). The citation comes from a song by Thomas Campbell which begins:

How delicious is the winning  
Of a kiss at love’s beginning,  
When two mutual hearts are sighing  
For the knot there’s no untying! (Campbell, 241)

It might fit perfectly with the context in which the narrator cites it, but the citation at the same time signals Troy’s superficial romanticism. Troy spars with language as skillfully as he wields the sword, as is confirmed when his flattery is implicitly qualified as *passados*, in other words with a fencing term derived from the romance languages (132). His courtship of Bathsheba is framed with two phrases in a foreign language which both possess an oracular quality: the first, the French proverb “qui aime bien châtie bien” (136) serves to foreshadow Bathsheba’s fate in his hands. The other one brings me to the second part of this paper, on inscriptions. It is a phrase from Ovid, inscribed in Latin on a gold watch Troy has inherited from his natural father: “*Cedit amor rebus*—‘Love yields to circumstance’” (138). This motto adopted by the Severn family has a polysemic permanence, in other words its meanings vary according to the circumstances in which it is read. At one and the same time it could refer back to the Earl of Severn’s affair with Troy’s mother, hint at Troy’s relationship with Fanny and predict his romance with Bathsheba.

The text of *Far from the Madding Crowd* contains several inscriptions worked into different media (metal, stone, wax, wood and paper) which makes its texture uneven. These inscriptions embedded in the narrative – but standing out from the main text due to typographical variation – also raise questions about the status of the written text. They are like a snag in the text or a loop-hole in the fabric of the narrative which partake in the novel’s reflections on language. Inscriptions are set in a complex time-scheme involving the two distinct moments of writing and reading. Those activities are not only inscribed in time, but also in a context defined by the characters’ mood and frame of mind. The valentine which Bathsheba sends Boldwood lightheartedly is a joke, but it is received in earnest, and interpreted in the grave light of the bachelor’s parlour “where the atmosphere was that of a Puritan

Sunday lasting all the week” (80). Boldwood reproves Bathsheba for trifling with his emotions, using an expanded chiasmus to explain how the tenor of a text is coloured by the attitude in which it is read and written:

I took for earnest what you insist was jest, and now this that I pray to be jest  
you say is awful, wretched earnest. Our moods meet at wrong places. (158)

The time lag between writing and reading sometimes acts like a photographic developer revealing the discrepancy between the text and the situation to which it is referring. For example, Fanny’s use of tenses in her letter to Oak about her forthcoming marriage recoils on her: “All has ended well, and I am happy to say I am going to be married to the young man who has courted me for some time” (88). She transposes the verb in the title of Shakespeare’s play into the present perfect tense (“All has ended well”), though this perfect, present moment will be short-lived. Similarly, Boldwood’s anticipation of marriage with Bathsheba is inscribed on the name-tags on the trousseau he has bought for her. For him, as for Fanny, writing the future appears to tempt fate, and the name ‘Bathsheba Boldwood’ will only ever refer to a figment of his romantic imagination. Hardy uses inscriptions in this way to point to man’s pride in wanting to take charge of their destinies, as the unfolding of events shows that words that aim to foretell – or predict – prove to be meaningless. The “methodizing pen” (252) bases a newspaper report of Troy’s drowning on “formidable presumptive evidence” (252), though the future will prove the illegitimacy of the printed word.

Hardy pinpoints the possible contradiction between the written text and reality in the episode centered on Fanny’s coffin. Here again, there is a time lag between the moment of writing and the moment of reading. The narrator creates suspense by not spelling out the “few other words” on the lid of the coffin:

One of the men then stepped up beside it, took from his pocket a lump of  
chalk, and wrote upon the cover the name and a few other words in a large  
scrawling hand. (216)

He uses polyptoton to echo back to that passage, by transposing the adjective ‘scrawling’ into the noun ‘scrawl’ when he reveals the full inscription before he has Oak delete the end of it:

[...] he looked again, as he had looked before, at the chalk writing upon the  
coffin-lid. The scrawl was this simple one, ‘*Fanny Robin and child.*’ Gabriel  
took his handkerchief and carefully rubbed out the two latter words, leaving  
visible the inscription ‘*Fanny Robin*’ only. (224)

Oak attempts to rewrite the chalk inscription by erasing the tell-tale “and child”, but the emended text proves to be further from the truth than the whispered rumour that Fanny had died in childbirth.

Inscriptions are a means of circumscribing reality, but key information manages to slip through the meshes of language of which Oak was so wary. This is evident in the inscription Troy ordered for Fanny’s tombstone, which the reader discovers with Bathsheba:

A motion of satisfaction enlivened her face as she read the complete  
inscription. First came the words of Troy himself:—

ERECTED BY FRANCIS TROY  
IN BELOVED MEMORY OF  
FANNY ROBIN,  
WHO DIED OCTOBER 9, 18—,  
AGED 20 YEARS.

Underneath this was now inscribed in new letters:—

IN THE SAME GRAVE LIE  
THE REMAINS OF THE AFORESAID  
FRANCIS TROY,  
WHO DIED DECEMBER 24TH, 18—,  
AGED 26 YEARS. (297)

The careful wording of this double inscription leaves as much unsaid as it actually says. Although it specifies the deceased’s name, date of death, and the age at the time of passing, the exact relationship between Fanny and Troy is not defined and the presence of their still-born child in the tomb is elided. Whereas Troy identifies himself as the author of the first inscription, the second inscription is anonymous. Bathsheba chooses to neither admit authorship nor define her status as Troy’s wife.

Bathsheba's effacement from a text she authored and had set in stone brings me to the third section of this paper, on the linguistic strategies she adopts to express herself. Faced with the novelty of complex emotions, she experiences the inadequacy of language to translate what she feels and thinks, stumbling over words in her response to Boldwood's marriage proposal:

[...] I don't know how to answer you with propriety and respect—but am only just able to speak out my feeling—I mean my meaning [...]. (101)

Bathsheba feels that words fail her, and she echoes Oak's dissatisfaction with 'the coarse meshes of language' in a phrase singled out by Virginia Woolf<sup>1</sup> and subsequently appropriated by feminist critics:

It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs. (270)

Deprived of a language of her own, Bathsheba resorts to the 'man-made' language of set-phrases. This is the case in the episode of the valentine, which has been perceptively analyzed by Isabelle Gadoin in her article 'Le blanc de la lettre dans *Far from the Madding Crowd*.' My own preoccupation is with the composition of the message which stages a borrowing of the words of others. At a loss as to what to write on the card, Bathsheba asks her maid Liddy for inspiration. Liddy replies 'promptly', meaning 'quickly', though, in the context, the adverb also suggests that she acts as Bathsheba's prompter. The message Liddy proposes is a trite verse formulated by a male suitor and addressed to his female beloved:

The rose is red,  
The violet blue,  
Carnation's sweet,  
And so are you. (78)

The inscription on the valentine is thus third-hand language, as Bathsheba takes dictation from Liddy, who in turn borrows a male-authored romantic cliché. Bathsheba relinquishes all control of the missive allowing chance to determine the addressee as well as the seal on the envelope. Its message "Marry Me" (79) is not formulated by Bathsheba, she simply impresses it in the wax, "idly and unreflectingly" (79).

As if to offset her playful appropriation of pre-fabricated language when composing the valentine, Hardy has her express her heart-felt repentance for past deeds, using the words of a poem by John Henry Newman, set to music as a hymn by John Bacchus Dykes in 1861. The scene takes place in the graveyard outside the church where the choir is rehearsing "The Pillar of Cloud":

[...] the choir was learning a new hymn. Bathsheba was stirred by emotions which latterly she had assumed to be altogether dead within her. The little attenuated voices of the children brought to her ear in distinct utterance the words they sang without thought or comprehension—  
Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,  
Lead Thou me on.

[...] 'Are you going in?' said Bathsheba [to Oak]; and there came from within the church as from a prompter— I  
loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,  
Pride ruled my will: remember not past years.  
'I was,' said Gabriel. 'I am one of the bass singers, you know. I have sung bass for several months. 'Indeed: I wasn't aware of that. I'll leave you, then.' Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile, sang the children. (298)

In this passage the narrator returns to the distinction he outlined between the words of the prayer repeated mindlessly by the young boy and his actually understanding of them, as he indicates that the singing children are "unconcerned at the meaning of their words". The religious tenor of the hymn is transposed into an expression of Bathsheba's feelings and can be interpreted as words she addresses to Oak. The children's voices in the wings act as her prompter here, couching her sentiments in the style of a prayer. She turns to Oak for guidance ("Lead Thou me on") and begs him to forgive her former pride ("Pride ruled by will: remember not past years"). The last line of the hymn resonates with her admission that she has always loved Oak ("which I have loved long since") and could be interpreted as an expression of her regret for having spurned him ("and lost awhile").

<sup>1</sup>See Woolf's essay 'Men and Women' (published in 1920): "I have the feelings of a woman, says Bathsheba in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, but I have only the language of men" (Woolf, 30).



After the sound and the fury of her courtship by Boldwood and marriage to Troy, Bathsheba has learned to appreciate “the noiseless tenor” of Oak’s ways. Her engagement to Oak has no use for the “pretty phrases and warm expressions” of a conventional romance. Their marriage is based on a working relationship, whose unusual quality is highlighted by a bilingual reference to its “good-fellowship” or *camaraderie*.

They spoke very little of their mutual feeling; **pretty phrases and warm expressions** being probably unnecessary between such tried friends. There was that substantial affection which arises (if any arises at all) when the two who are thrown together begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other’s character, and not the best till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality. This good-fellowship—**camaraderie**—usually occurring through similarity of pursuits, is unfortunately seldom superadded to love between the sexes, because men and women associate, not in their labours, but in their pleasures merely. Where, however, happy circumstance permits its development, the compounded feeling proves itself to be **the only love which is strong as death—that love which many waters cannot quench**, nor the floods drown, beside which the passion usually called by the name is evanescent as steam. (303. My emphases)

The recourse to French here strikes a dissonant note, as the language conventionally associated with romance is used to describe a marriage founded on hard prosaic reality. But the harmony is resolved with a paean to their love, which aligns two phrases from The Song of Solomon – “the only love which is strong as death” and “that love which many waters cannot quench” (Song of Solomon 8. 6-7). These phrases carry no markers and are so perfectly integrated into Hardy’s text that they escaped annotation in the Norton critical edition. Incidentally, Solomon, was the son of Bathsheba and David, and he wrote the two lines the narrator cites for the voice of the female beloved in his poetic dialogue.

A conclusion on the novel’s conclusion. Hardy brings the text to an end with a quotation, which he puts into the mouth of one of the leading members of the rustic chorus. It is Joseph Poorgrass who has the last word in the novel, and he makes it into the last of its thirty-eight Biblical citations:

I were once or twice upon saying to-day with holy Hosea, in my scripture manner, which is my second nature. ‘Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone.’ But since ‘tis as ‘tis, why, it might have been worse, and I feel my thanks accordingly. (308)

The negative tenor of Poorgrass’s speech is jarring in the context of the marriage celebrations. Poorgrass implicitly identifies Oak with Ephraim (meaning the northern kingdom of Israel) and reproves his association with the idols. I think he means that by marrying Bathsheba, Oak has joined ranks with Boldwood, who idolized her (125), and Troy, the idolater of women in general (134). Robert Schweik interprets the quotation as “comically irrelevant” (308, note 5), but to my mind its incongruity is in keeping with the ironic use of intertextuality in this work.

My own conclusion to these reflections on quotations, inscriptions and the words of others is equally disquieting. By the end of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy has made the point that quotations do not always harmonize with the embedding text, that written language is not reliable, and that language in general is insufficient for self-expression and powerless to prevent circumstances from having the last word. The text engages in a questioning of the faculty of language to contain the “intangibilities of feeling” in the coarse meshes of its net. It reaches the conclusion that the signifier does not always relate to the signified because both written and oral language suffer from displacement, attrition and misappropriation. In this novel, Hardy reveals the inadequacy of language thus probing one of the questions that will be central to modernism.

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