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'Deeds of Darkness': Thomas Hardy and Murder

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Abstract: Critics have often sought to place Thomas Hardy's fiction within a realist generic framework, with a significant emphasis on Hardy's Wessex settings, visual imagination and equation of sight with knowledge. Yet Hardy's writings frequently disturb realist generic conventions by introducing elements from popular nineteenth-century genres, particularly sensation fiction and the Gothic. This essay considers how murder as a plot device troubles generic boundaries in the novels *Desperate Remedies* (1871), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). Set against backgrounds with significant non-realist elements, these texts view murder and its punishment from limited, distorted or averted perspectives that articulate a significant social and cultural critique.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy; murder; genre; sensation fiction; realism; Gothic; framing; architecture; spatiality

1. Introduction: Plotting Murder

In his posthumously published *Life* (1928/1930), Thomas Hardy narrates a startling incident from his youth. Blithely breakfasting in Bockhampton, young Hardy recalls that a man was to be hanged in Dorchester that morning, grips a 'big brass telescope' and 'hasten[s] to a hill on the heath a quarter of a mile from the house' (Hardy and Hardy [1928/1930] 2007, p. 29). Across a 'distance of nearly three miles', the sun illuminates a panoramic view of 'the white façade of the gaol, the gallows upon it, and the form of the murderer in white fustian, the executioner and officials in dark clothing and the crowd below' (Hardy and Hardy [1928/1930] 2007, p. 29). 'At the moment of his placing the glass to his eye', Hardy recounts in the third person, 'the white figure dropped downwards, and the faint note of the town clock struck eight' (Hardy and Hardy [1928/1930] 2007, p. 29). Startled by the sight greeting his eyes through the telescope, Hardy feels himself 'alone on the heath with the hanged man', regrets his morbid curiosity and never attends an execution again, this being the second he had witnessed (Hardy and Hardy [1928/1930] 2007, p. 30). Although we now know that the execution in question took place on 10 August 1858, when James Seale, murderer and arsonist, became the last man to be publicly hanged in Dorset, Hardy does not provide us with details of the crime or of the criminal's death; nor does he name Elizabeth Martha Brown, whose execution for the murder of her drunken, violent husband he had attended two years previously. Narrated across a distance of space and time, dominated by the spectacularly lit but sinister architectural structure of the gaol, and framed through the powerful, focused but severely circumscribed eye of the telescope, which 'nearly [falls] from Hardy's hands' as he averts his eyes from the gruesome spectacle, the execution is, Hardy's reaction implies, brutal and grotesque (Hardy and Hardy [1928/1930] 2007, p. 30). The dropping of the telescope therefore represents an averted gaze, a sense of unease and shame, and a rejection of the knowledge on offer, which can be read as a poignant critique of the gruesome spectacle of public execution.

This factual account proves illustrative of Hardy's fictional approaches to murder and its punishment. In his novels *Desperate Remedies* (1871), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), Hardy approaches acts of murder and their punishment through narrative

strategies that foreground non-mimetic generic elements, including Gothically inflected setting, framing, patterning and indirection, which are akin to the averted gaze described in *The Life* in their tendency ‘to suggest’ rather than to show (Thomas 2013, p. 437; emphasis in the original). What Michael Irwin says about *Desperate Remedies*, Hardy’s ‘improbable literary début’, is also true of the other two novels: the reader is offered ‘two reading experiences for the price of one’—a ‘serious literary’ text, experimental and original, and ‘a page-turner dealing lavishly in death, deception, detective work, flight and pursuit’ (Irwin 2010, p. v). Nestling amidst other sensational ‘deeds of darkness’ in *Desperate Remedies* lurks the murder of Eunice, the estranged wife of the land steward Aeneas Manston, which leaves him free to pursue a new love interest, the novel’s protagonist Cytherea Graye (Hardy [1871] 2010, p. 96). In the ironically titled *Far from the Madding Crowd*, obsessive Farmer Boldwood shoots dead Francis Troy, the supposedly dead husband of the novel’s protagonist Bathsheba Everdene, after Troy returns dramatically and unexpectedly to claim his wife, thereby spoiling Boldwood’s engagement to a woman whom he has long coveted. In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, the title character Tess Durbeyfield stabs to death Alec Stoke-d’Urberville, the *nouveau-riche* lover whose unwanted sexual advances have ruined her chances of happiness, after her estranged but beloved husband Angel Clare unexpectedly returns to resume his life with her. In each novel, murder is a sensational crime of passion motivated by sexual jealousy, disappointment or obsession—the territory of melodrama and sensation fiction—and brought about by the unexpected, uncanny and therefore Gothic return of a character believed either dead or irretrievably lost. Murder, then, functions as a plot device that troubles the texts’ predominantly realist framework and moves the narratives towards non-mimetic generic registers, particularly the Gothic, framed and set in ways that increasingly present the Gothic as the characteristic mode of modern consciousness.

2. ‘Sharp Sensations’: Hardy, Murder and Realism

Like many other nineteenth-century novelists, Thomas Hardy was fascinated with murder and its punishment. As Trish Ferguson notes, as ‘an acting magistrate’ Hardy ‘was deeply immersed in the law at a time of prolific legal reform’ and drew on court cases and newspaper articles for plot material (Ferguson 2013, pp. 1, 4). Hardy’s *Facts’ Notebook*, a collection of transcripts and summaries from local newspapers such as the *Dorset County Chronicle*, documents this fascination with murder, attempted and successful. Some of the accounts in the *Notebook* are the merest skeletons, laconically exhuming the bare bones of historical domestic tragedies. An item transcribed from 1826 reads: ‘Wife pushes husband downstairs & kills him, he having come home drunk—’ (Hardy 2004, p. 44). Others, such as an 1883 report from the *Weymouth, Portland and Dorchester Telegram* titled ‘Tragedy in Poole’, demonstrate a certain penchant for the macabre. This item details how following a drunken brawl, a Danish sailor named Larsen had stabbed a local man to death. During the ensuing inquest, a doctor, while giving evidence ‘with calm deliberation’, ‘presented to the shocked gaze of the Court’ the pierced lung and heart of the deceased to demonstrate his manner of death (Hardy 2004, p. 23). ‘A thrill of horror pervaded the place’, the entry explains with sensationalist glee: ‘one man had to hold on to the rail separating the audience from the Court to prevent himself from falling through faintness, and a juryman who had dined but a short time previously, relieved his stomach of its contents, & a general hissing ensued’ (Hardy 2004, p. 23). Hardy’s interest in homicide, both contemporary and historical, is further manifested in diary entries about the Ripper murders and in his account of Mary Channing’s ‘sinister’ execution in the Maumbury Ring in Dorchester in 1706 (Hardy and Hardy [1928/1930] 2007, p. 220; Hardy 1967, p. 228).

Hardy was, of course, not the only nineteenth-century novelist to seek inspiration in newsprint or in the workings of the criminal justice system. The sensation novels of the 1860s and 1870s, for example, when Hardy first entered the market, were so indebted to the crimes detailed in newsprint that they were commonly referred to as ‘newspaper novels’, capitalising on Victorian readers’ fascination with crime, including homicide, during what George Orwell would later term ‘[o]ur great period in murder, our Elizabethan period’ (Orwell [1946] 1965, p. 9). As Linda M. Shires notes, most ‘critics who have

studied Hardy's style [...] have read his novels pre-eminently through a realist, humanist lens' (Shires 1999, p. 146). However, Richard Nemesvari, Trish Ferguson and Tim Dolin among others have noted the influence of sensation fiction, the 'low' cousin of classic realism, on Hardy's novels as allowing scope for readerly affect, social commentary and engagement with legal issues, including diminished responsibility and temporary insanity, and in the late 1880s Hardy contemplated the possibility of a primarily psychological brand of sensation (Nemesvari 2011; Ferguson 2013; Dolin 2009; Hardy and Hardy [1928/1930] 2007, p. 210). Contemporaries were aware of the generic hybridity of his fiction: Hardy would later himself describe *Desperate Remedies* as a 'sensational and strictly conventional narrative', the *Westminster Review* criticised *Far from the Madding Crowd* for its 'violent sensationalism' in 1875, and in 1892 Margaret Oliphant acknowledged the presence of 'sharp sensations' in *Tess* in a review in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (Hardy 1967, p. 4; Cox 1979, pp. 32, 203).

One of these 'sharp sensations' was murder, a plot element that according to Catherine Belsey commonly disturbed social and narrative order in classic nineteenth-century realism (Belsey 2003, p. 64). The century's leading fictional creed, realism was 'an imaginative discourse' that took 'the observed world' as its 'material' (O'Gorman 2013, p. 114). In its minute depiction of everyday life, in its prioritising of experience, and in its anti-romantic and unidealistic tendencies, realism leant, according to George Levine, 'toward the scrupulous construction of social and historical context, and to the life of characters within that context', 'defin[ing] itself against the excesses, both stylistic and narrative, of various kinds of romantic, exotic, or sensational literatures' (O'Gorman 2013, p. 113; Levine 2008, p. 191; Levine 1981, p. 5). In 'attempt[ing] to become [...] an instrument of knowledge', realism valued unambiguous focalisation and plentiful 'visual detail' that would 'reveal a comprehensible world' to the reader, most commonly through gentle 'comedy' (Levine 1981, pp. 13, 18, 21; Belsey 2003, pp. 70–71). Its narrative movement was, Belsey notes, towards 'closure' and 'the reinstatement of order' (Belsey 2003, p. 69).

Hardy's 'relationship with Realism', however, was 'uneasy' (Thomas 2013, p. 437). In his essays and diary entries, Hardy was critical of realism as 'an unfortunate, an ambiguous word', as 'life garniture and not life', and as 'a student's style' that was 'interesting no longer' (Hardy 1967, pp. 136, 119; Hardy and Hardy [1928/1930] 2007, pp. 190–91). Jane Thomas has noted Hardy's interest in 'the subjective, more painterly truth of art' over 'the objective, photographic "truth" of realism', while for Francis O'Gorman, Hardy's 'readiness to expose realism as a representational act [...] helped make realism self-conscious' (Thomas 2013, p. 443; O'Gorman 2013, p. 117). Levine observes that 'Hardy plays with realism's conventions', inventing 'stunning reversals of the emphases and assumptions that guided realists through the first half of the nineteenth century', only to reject Victorian realism's 'comic form of compromise' (Levine 2017, pp. 61, 48; Levine 1981, p. 229). For Richard Nemesvari, the 'radical undercutting of generic unity' and the 'whirl of generic hybridity' in Hardy's fiction are indicative of the author's 'refusal to fully commit himself' to realist representation and the accompanying ideological assumptions (Nemesvari 2009, pp. 106, 102–3). Aaron Matz argues that this refusal, most notably articulated through the 'specter of three children hanging from hooks and nails' in *Jude the Obscure* (1895), 'marks a terminus in the evolution of Victorian realism' (Matz 2010, p. 59). Hardy, Levine concludes, is 'realism's continuator and adversary', in whose fiction the 'world of Victorian realism turns upside down [...] as he self-consciously imagines his characters in a world that is [...] almost [...] demonic' (Levine 1981, p. 234; 2008, p. 207).

This generic disruption is figured in the setting and framing of murder in Hardy's fiction. As a trained architect, Hardy was keenly aware of the impact of the lived environment on human lives, and his murders unfold in settings that are not conducive to contentment. Furthermore, the murders are viewed indirectly through framing structures that limit the characters', and therefore the readers', ability to view them fully or directly. This restrictive framing extends to the punishment of murder, which takes place off-stage, away from the prying eyes of the gallows crowd, and the narratives therefore challenge both the period's investment in the realist mode and its fantasies of effective crime control. The combination of Gothically inflected architectural settings and limited viewpoints in texts

turning on acts of murder reveals Hardy not only as an author who was deeply invested in the popular narratives of his time, but also as one whose fiction was a significant textual intervention in the social and cultural debates of the period.

3. 'Abnormal Distortions': Setting the Murder Scene

Much has been written about Hardy's Wessex settings, and many critics have noted the influence of the author's architectural training on his writing (Beatty 2004; Gatrell 1999; Hands 2000; Ingham 2003; Rattenbury 2018; Shires 1999). As a trained architect, Hardy was aware of the influence that buildings and landscapes could exert on individuals and anticipates the arguments of later spatial theorists such as the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, who explored the close relationship between our identities and the buildings in which we live. Hardy foresees, for example, Bachelard's contention that 'the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind', when in *Tess* he writes of the Durbeyfield cottage: 'Part of [Tess's] body and life it ever seemed to be; the slope of its dormers, the finish of its gables, the broken courses of brick which topped the chimney, all had something in common with her personal character' (Bachelard [1958] 1994, p. 6; Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 372). However, Hardy was also painfully aware of the spatial and architectural dislocations and ruptures that accompanied the coming of modernity, as age-old ways of life began to give way to the pressures of urbanisation, industrialisation and migration in a sort of 'general removal' that proves 'fatal to local traditions' (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 385; Hardy and Hardy [1928/1930] 2007, p. 212). Murder in his fiction arguably occurs in the course of these dislocations, and it is set in non-realist architectural structures that are either stereotypically Gothic, uneasily oppressive or rootlessly, anonymously modern, and therefore not conducive to human well-being.

In *Desperate Remedies*, a novel that knowingly deploys a range of established sensation and Gothic conventions, Miss Aldclyffe, 'nearly fifty years old, still unmarried and still beautiful, but lonely, embittered, and haughty', conspires to employ her illegitimate son Aeneas Manston as land steward on her Knapwater House estate (Hardy [1871] 2010, p. 67). Manston is an import from London, and thence, by train, will also come his estranged American wife Eunice, who will become the victim of the novel's murder plot. At Knapwater, Miss Aldclyffe houses the 'bold and frank' Manston, 'a voluptuary with activity', in the 'dismal' 'old manor house', which is ominously described as a 'carcase [. . .] full of cracks' (Hardy [1871] 2010, pp. 94, 51–52, 86). This 'awkward and unhandy' house 'stands too low down in the hollow to be healthy', and a nearby waterfall and pump engine make its setting disturbingly noisy so that '[r]espectable people [do not] care to live there' (Hardy [1871] 2010, pp. 51–52). In its grounds, hemmed in by trees, is found an 'unequalled' 'hiding-place', a pit filled with 'withered' and 'rotten' leaves that 'had not been disturbed for centuries' and 'might not be disturbed for centuries to come, whilst their lower layers still decayed and added to the mould beneath' (Hardy [1871] 2010, pp. 302–3). "'Tis jest [*sic*] the house for a nice ghastly hair-on-end story', a local tells Cytherea Graye, 'Perhaps it will have one someday to make it complete; but there's not a word of the kind now' (Hardy [1871] 2010, p. 52). While Miss Aldclyffe is in fact trying to conceal her past transgression, her bold attempt to bring her son home is met with ominous architectural markers that bode ill for the future.

Although the female protagonists of *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Tess* inhabit settings that are less formulaically Gothic, Bathsheba and Tess are at times so perturbed by their experiences that they deliberately bury themselves in just such pits of dead leaves as are depicted in *Desperate Remedies*. *Far from the Madding Crowd*, published less than four years after Hardy's sensational first novel, has its share of storms, fires, sensational events and, as Penny Boumelha notes, 'episodes of malice', but the Gothic architectural tropes found in *Desperate Remedies* take on an essentially psychological form in this later novel (Boumelha 1999, p. 138). The murder that occurs towards the end of the novel is primarily foretold in the depiction of Farmer Boldwood, a man later driven mad by sexual jealousy and obsession, as a fortress or monastery under siege, soon to be a magnificent ruin. The downfall

of the stationary Boldwood is, significantly, caused by the arrival in Weatherbury of an attractive woman farmer, Bathsheba Everdene, and, later, the return of an itinerant soldier, Francis Troy; both signal a disruption of Boldwood's even way of life. The 'handsome', 'stern looking' and 'erect' Boldwood is initially marked by his 'dignity', but his 'quiet [. . .] demeanour' and 'stillness' in fact only conceal 'the perfect balance of enormous antagonistic forces', the disturbance of which leaves him 'in extremity' (Hardy [1874] 2000, pp. 66, 81, 105). When Bathsheba breaks 'into that dignified stronghold', Boldwood finds himself 'living outside his defences for the first time, and with a fearful sense of exposure' (Hardy [1874] 2000, pp. 103, 106–7). A disappointment of his hopes leads to 'an abnormal distortion' in his flawed construction, his smile becoming twisted into 'the smile on the countenance of a skull' (Hardy [1874] 2000, pp. 87, 225). The text consistently connects Boldwood's 'dark and silent shape', his 'dark and strange' manner and the 'impending night [. . .] concentrated in his eye' with the Gothic register of darkness, danger and death (Hardy [1874] 2000, pp. 106, 311, 180). The novel foreshadows Boldwood's eventual ruinous collapse in its depictions of his 'unreasonable anger' and of his 'incomprehensible, dreadful' 'fevered feeling', in his promise to Troy to 'punish him [. . .] for this reckless theft of [Boldwood's] property', by which he means Bathsheba, but above all in Boldwood's neglect of his farm and home (Hardy [1874] 2000, pp. 179–81).

If *Desperate Remedies* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* are early, to some extent improvisatory, works, *Tess* offers Hardy's most mature and complex setting of the murder scene. The stabbing that concludes the novel is woven at multiple levels into this narrative that states, and sets out to prove, that life on this 'blighted' star is 'injustice, punishment, exaction, death' (Hardy [1891] 1996, pp. 58, 305). As Jean Jacques Lecercle notes, Tess 'is not only the object, but also the subject of violence' (Lecercle 1989, p. 5), and her double role as victim and murderer is foretold in the 'coarse pattern' traced throughout the narrative (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 103). This pattern appears, as numerous critics have observed, in the persistent association of the colour red with her; in the multiple motifs of penetration and the drawing of blood that punctuate the narrative; and in Tess's affinity with hunted and persecuted animals (Boumelha 1982; Ingham 2003; Tanner [1968] 1989). Early on in the narrative, for example, she becomes 'splashed from face to skirt with the crimson drops' of the blood of a dying horse whose 'murderess' she feels herself to be, and later on she will confront her seducer Alec 'with the hopeless defiance of the sparrow's gaze before its captor twists its neck' (Hardy [1891] 1996, pp. 60, 62, 358).

However, the murder that will lead to Tess's execution is also prefigured in the novel spatially and architecturally. As members of 'the shiftless house of Durbeyfield', Tess and her family are direct descendants of the once noble d'Urbervilles who now 'don't live anywhere' because they 'are extinct' (Hardy [1891] 1996, pp. 51, 35). However, as noted above, Tess feels a distinct sense of belonging in her native Marlott, to which she repeatedly returns in the course of the narrative and departure from which signals the beginning of her troubles. The loss of the family cottage leaves Tess spiritually homeless, with 'no place' in the world (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 285). Eventually, the Durbeyfields are forced to seek shelter among the ancestral tombs of their 'fierce, domineering, feudal' d'Urberville forebears, whose history of violence is half-remembered in the 'ghostly legend' of the d'Urberville Coach with its ominous if vague associations of murder (Hardy [1891] 1996, pp. 215, 195). As Patricia Ingham notes, the novel accomplishes an 'identification of Tess as a d'Urberville warrior' through its many references to the field-woman's 'buff-glove', 'heavy and thick as a warrior's', which Tess wears and which she eventually flings in the face of Alec, that 'blood-red ray in the spectrum of her young life' (Ingham 2003, p. 175; Hardy [1891] 1996, pp. 344, 358, 69). This scene in turn foreshadows the murder of Alec which is, as Ingham observes, 'in a sense a killing both by and of a d'Urberville', in keeping with the ambiguous family legend (Ingham 2003, p. 173). Tess's extensive travels by cart, gig, coach or on horseback further align her with her d'Urberville ancestry. However, they also call attention to her rootlessness, or 'the ache of modernism' as Hardy terms it (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 154).

Tess's journey to murder and the gallows is plotted in her passage not only through landscapes but also through houses, which leave their marks on her and erode her sense of self. At fecund Talbothays, dairyman Crick plants his 'great knife and fork [. . .] erect on the table, like the beginning

of the gallows'; the former d'Urberville mansion, a 'mouldy old habitation' chosen by Angel for the honeymoon, proves unsettling as Tess's 'fine features' look back at the couple in the 'exaggerated forms' of her kinswomen's portraits with their 'merciless treachery' and 'arrogance to the point of ferocity'; following her confession, Tess contemplates suicide by hanging, while Angel, walking in his sleep, buries her in an empty coffin in the nearby cemetery, moaning that she is '[d]ead, dead, dead'; and following her estrangement from Angel she is accused by Alec of tempting him at the 'Cross-in-Hand', a memorial to 'a malefactor who was tortured there [. . .] and afterwards hung' (Hardy [1891] 1996, pp. 150, 245, 274, 338). The series of dwellings and landscapes through which Tess passes seems relentlessly to foretell her future through the Gothic patterning of such repetition-with-variation.

Each of the novels, then, carefully sets the scene for a murderous act through spatial markers that foreground unease, disturbance and displacement, while self-consciously pointing out their own artifice and generic hybridity. The ominous Gothic spatiality of the old manor house in Knapwater Park, the depiction of Farmer Boldwood as a ruin about to happen, and the careful patterning of Tess's physical journey demonstrate Hardy's increasing sophistication as a novelist and his growing appreciation of the possibilities of genre blending as his deployment of the Gothic register moves from the level of mechanical novelistic apparatus in *Desperate Remedies* to the psychological sensations of *Far from the Madding Crowd* and then eventually to the exploration of the modern condition in *Tess*. This distortion of, or challenge to, literary realism is further developed in the narration of the actual murders.

4. 'Through the Keyhole': Partial Witness Statements

A number of critics have commented on Hardy's 'visual' and 'scenic imagination', 'self-conscious "framing"' and 'genius for spectacle' (Berger 1990, p. xi; Thomas 2013, pp. 436, 438; Dolin 2009, p. 330). Sheila Berger argues that Hardy's writing abounds with framing structures such as 'doors, windows, a telescope, a hole in a fence' through which the narrator 'present[s] things as sights or views or scenes or pictures' (Berger 1990, pp. 64, 24). In the Christmas story 'What the Shepherd Saw' (*Illustrated London News*, 1881), for example, a shepherd boy catches vague glimpses of a murder from 'the little circular window' of his hut on a 'moonlight night' (Hardy 1881, p. 19). As an empiricist mode, realism prioritised unmediated first-hand knowledge, which according to the oft-repeated mantra of nineteenth-century novelists supposedly somehow reproduced 'truth'. As Berger notes, while seeing represented 'a form of knowing' for Hardy, his fiction problematises the equation of sight with knowledge by presenting the reader with viewers who are 'non-authoritative', 'fallible', secretive or even voyeuristic (Berger 1990, pp. xii, 14). Thus, '[w]hat took place' the shepherd boy of the 1881 story 'never exactly knew', since his sight is severely limited by the restrictions of his vantage point (Hardy 1881, p. 19). Therefore, Berger concludes, a frame in Hardy's writings 'can hide or reveal knowledge' and is capable of 'determin[ing] plot movement' or 'heighten[ing] experience' (Berger 1990, p. 14). The murders in the three novels are depicted as 'deeds of darkness' (Hardy [1871] 2010, p. 96) that are only glimpsed partially at best.

In *Desperate Remedies*, murder occurs about a third of the way into the novel, but the novel defers its discovery by directing the reader's suspicions about Manston's 'problematic masculinity' towards the stock sensation device of bigamy instead (Nemesvari 2011, p. 42). Manston's crime is eventually uncovered when the text unexpectedly shifts its focalisation to Anne Seaway, a lookalike whom he has persuaded to impersonate his murdered wife Eunice in an effort to prove her continued existence. Though complicit in Manston's scheme, Anne is unaware of the murder, and the text replicates her confusion and limited vision to maximise suspense. Anne sees, but is unable to overhear, Manston's whispered confession to Miss Aldclyffe; she sees Manston drug her wine by a shadow on the wall but is unable to divine the reason; and in the dead of night she follows him into a workshop on the grounds of the old manor house, though uncertain of his intentions. Light is significantly lacking during this nocturnal scene, for although the night is moonlit, 'the thick clouds overspreading the whole landscape rendered the dim light pervasive and grey' (Hardy [1871] 2010, p. 298). Nonetheless,

Anne is able to observe, unseen, Manston drag from a concealed 'old oven' 'a heavy weight of great bulk' which she 'could see [. . .] plainly' but at the contents of which she, and the reader, can only guess (Hardy [1871] 2010, p. 299). Nor is she the only watcher: when Manston leaves the workshop with the sack and a spade, 'the light of the clouded and weakly moon' reveals to Anne that he is being followed by a man (a detective) and a woman (Miss Aldclyffe) (Hardy [1871] 2010, p. 301). The element of surveillance is so strong as to be almost comic: Anne observes Miss Aldclyffe, who observes the detective, who observes Manston, as he proceeds to bury his burden in the sinister pit of rotting leaves in the grounds. 'Night herself seemed to have become a watcher', Hardy's narrator wryly comments (Hardy [1871] 2010, p. 302).

Yet firm knowledge of the contents of the package is repeatedly deferred, and is eventually only signalled by the discovery of 'the hair of a woman' outside the tightly wrapped package; inside, though unseen, are the decaying remains of Mrs Manston (Hardy [1871] 2010, p. 304). In a later first-person confession, Manston relates having just heard of the supposed death of his much maligned wife, when a woman—the very wife whom Manston had been so glad to lose—'advance[s] from beneath the shadow of the park trees' to taunt him with her apparent return from the dead (Hardy [1871] 2010, p. 315). Manston recounts how he 'gnashed [his] teeth in a frenzy of despair [. . .] like a madman', for Eunice's continued existence puts an end to his plans of marrying Cytherea: 'I furiously raised my hand and swung it round with my whole force to strike her. [. . .] my hand came edgewise exactly in the nape of her neck [. . .] she fell at my feet, made a few movements, and uttered one low sound. [. . .] I found that she was dead' (Hardy [1871] 2010, pp. 315–16). The scene has, however, been overheard—though not witnessed—by a poacher, who concludes that 'the house was haunted' and the strange sounds '[g]hostly mouths talking' (Hardy [1871] 2010, p. 318). The deferred explanation of the murder oscillates generically between Manston's matter-of-fact (though unreliable) statement, which would not be out of place in the denouement of a detective story, the secrecy and deception characteristic of the sensation novel, and the denied vision and implied decay that belong rather to the Gothic mode. Significantly, Hardy displays awareness of the novel's often heavy-handed generic machinery by self-consciously emphasising 'the recurring creak of the [pump] engine', which foreshadows the sinister events of the plot but also foregrounds the straining of the novel's generic machinery (Hardy [1871] 2010, p. 303).

Far from the Madding Crowd, though a novel that abounds with scenes of secret surveillance, particularly by the ever-watchful Gabriel Oak, deploys very similar strategies of indirection in relating the murder of Francis Troy by the unhinged Farmer Boldwood. The setting is Boldwood's 'abnormal and incongruous' Christmas party, during which 'a shadow seemed to move about the rooms saying that the proceedings were unnatural to the place and the lone man who lived there', as 'the twilight deepen[s] into darkness' outside (Hardy [1874] 2000, pp. 313, 314, 320). Frightened by Boldwood's 'wild [. . .] scheme' of marrying her at the end of an engagement of six years, Bathsheba is pleading with him to be allowed to 'go home', when Troy makes an unwelcome return from the dead to claim her (Hardy [1874] 2000, p. 329). The reader, already aware of the 'dreadful' news that 'nobody is dead' and able to anticipate Troy's return, may also have registered Boldwood's increasingly unstable behaviour and Troy's earlier sense of misgiving (Hardy [1874] 2000, p. 330). However, in the ensuing murder scene the narrator repeatedly focuses on the wrong person or the wrong part of the room to provide a full view of the events. Troy's return is heralded by an 'unearthly silence', followed by Troy's 'mechanical laugh' and Bathsheba's 'quick low scream', and finally 'a sudden deafening report' that fills the room 'with grey smoke' that occludes the scene (Hardy [1874] 2000, pp. 330–31). The sequence leading up to the murder is heard, not seen, until Troy is perceived briefly as a 'spectacle' at the centre of this unconventional Christmas scene, expiring with 'a long guttural sigh', 'a contraction' and 'an extension' before Bathsheba removes his body from the prying eyes of other guests and the reader (Hardy [1874] 2000, pp. 332–33). Troy's 'mechanical laugh' allows Hardy to acknowledge the awkward machinery of the sensational and melodramatic plotting that will enable the union of Bathsheba and Oak (Hardy [1874] 2000, p. 331).

In *Desperate Remedies* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, narrative indirection is eventually followed by a certain degree of explanation that allows for closure in keeping with realist conventions. *Tess* is more circumspect. As Shires notes, there is in this novel ‘a distinct pattern [. . .] of key scenes omitted’, so that ‘Tess’s confession to Angel, her murder of Alec, or her execution, [and] the facts and details of the violation scene remain[n] unnarrated’ (Shires 1999, p. 152). Tess’s revenge eventually plays out in Sandbourne, a ‘fashionable watering-place’ nestling uneasily by the side of ‘the enormous Egdon Waste’ (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 402). ‘[L]ike a fairy place suddenly created by the stroke of a wand’ or ‘a Mediterranean lounging-place on the English Channel’, modern Sandbourne is an incongruous neighbour, a ‘new world in an old one’, to the ‘prehistoric’ heath (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 402). In its rootlessness it is, then, an apt setting for a crime of passion by a young woman, ‘a cottage-girl’ who has lost her cottage, her bearings and her sense of self, ‘allowing [her body] to drift, like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will’ (Hardy [1891] 1996, pp. 402, 406).

Equally lost, Angel initially struggles to locate Tess in this ‘exotic’ ‘city of detached mansions’ lit by ‘midnight lamps’, but he eventually tracks her down to a boarding house where she and Alec are staying as a married couple (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 402). The painful scene between the two leaves Tess, framed ‘still in the opening of the doorway’, poised ‘on the threshold’ of murder, but the act itself takes place behind closed doors (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 404). Though the landlady attempts to spy on the d’Urbervilles ‘through the keyhole’, the murder in the upstairs bedroom is instead revealed through the appearance of ‘a spot in the middle of [the] white surface’ of her ceiling downstairs, which ‘speedily grew as large as the palm of her hand, and then she could perceive that it was red. The oblong white ceiling, with this scarlet blot in the midst, had the appearance of a gigantic ace of hearts’ (Hardy [1891] 1996, pp. 407–8). As the landlady enters the d’Urbervilles’ rooms, Alec’s murder is announced as much indirectly by the ‘untouched’ breakfast and the ‘missing’ ‘carving-knife’ as by the subsequent statements of Alec’s death from a stab wound to the heart (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 409).¹ As with the earlier novels, in *Tess* the ‘regular beat’ of ‘[d]rip, drip, drip’ that finally signals Alec’s death also serves to call the reader’s attention to the grotesque pattern of blood stains that has marked Tess’s passage through the novel (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 409).

5. ‘Hard Judgements’: Generic Disruptions

Although the critic of the *Saturday Review* opined in 1892 that in *Tess* ‘Mr. Hardy leaves little unsaid’, Hardy persistently follows narrative strategies of indirection, ellipsis and limited vision in concluding the murder plots of his novels (Cox 1979, p. 189). Once Manston, Boldwood and Tess are caught, they are never seen again: they ‘wal[k] the world no more’ as ugly and intimidating carceral structures conceal their sufferings from the reader (Hardy [1874] 2000, p. 333). An ‘acting magistrate’, Hardy admitted ‘that Capital Punishment operates as a deterrent from deliberate crimes against life to an extent that no other form of punishment can rival’, but he was nonetheless deeply ambivalent about ‘the moral right of a community to inflict that punishment’ (Hardy and Hardy [1928/1930] 2007, p. 326). Fiction, as Ferguson suggests, could offer narrative resolutions that not only ‘encourage[d] debate and discussion of legal questions’ but that were ‘often more liberal and judicious than [those] provided by official law’ (Ferguson 2013, pp. 5, 21). While all three fictional murderers are punished (and Tess particularly harshly), the refusal in the novels to narrate their imprisonment and execution arguably represents Hardy’s deliberate decision to avert his gaze in distaste from the workings of a disciplinary system that blots out the protagonists’ ‘deeds of darkness’ with its own, whether in the form of capital punishment or life imprisonment (Hardy [1871] 2010, p. 96).

In spite of his ‘dread of a death upon the gallows’, Aeneas Manston of *Desperate Remedies* is driven in a ‘last stage of recklessness’ to approach Cytherea, only to be captured and taken away in

¹ In the illustration accompanying this chapter in the bowdlerised *Graphic* serial, the artist Hubert Von Herkomer chose to depict the dead Alec in bed, with an effect that is rather incongruous with Hardy’s narrative technique.

shackles ‘to die’ (Hardy [1871] 2010, pp. 319, 309, 312). Soon, however, the arrival of an empty coffin announces his suicide by hanging in the county gaol, saving him from the gaze of the gallows crowd if not from the noose. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, meanwhile, Boldwood fails in his attempt to turn the murder weapon on himself and instead seeks ‘another way [. . .] to die’ by stepping ‘into the darkness’ outside to hand himself in at the local gaol, an intimidating structure of captivity and oppression that is represented by ‘an archway of old brown brick, which was closed by an iron-studded pair of doors’ (Hardy [1874] 2000, pp. 332–33). As Nemesvari notes, Boldwood is, however, ‘denied becoming the one public spectacle he finally desired’ when his death sentence is commuted to life imprisonment (Nemesvari 2011, p. 117). Instead, the trial lays bare the ‘pathetic evidence of a mind crazed with care and love’ by producing evidence of Boldwood’s ‘excited and unusual moods’ and ‘mental derangement’ in the form of the ‘extraordinary collection of articles’ intended for ‘Bathsheba Boldwood’ found in ‘a locked closet’ of his house (Hardy [1874] 2000, pp. 337–38). There is something peculiarly disturbing in this exposure of the secrets of a reclusive man, and in his condemnation to a life of obsessive rumination under the watchful eyes of prison officials.

As Nicola Lacey observes, Tess ‘displays both agency and pathology’ in murdering Alec (Lacey 2008, p. 102). Angel, previously described as ‘nebulous, preoccupied, vague’, is not a witness to Tess’s act of madness, revenge or self-assertion but an impotent bystander in this tragedy of his own making (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 144). Though explicitly stating that he has no ‘wish to add murder to [his] other follies’, by calling Alec Tess’s ‘husband in Nature’, whose continued existence prevents Angel from living with Tess, Angel effectively signs the death warrants of both Alec and Tess (Hardy [1891] 1996, pp. 261, 271). ‘He has come between us and ruined us’, Tess tells Angel, ‘and now he can never do it any more. [. . .] Angel, will you forgive me my sin against you, now I have killed him?’ (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 411). Angel’s response to ‘this aberration—if it were an aberration’ is a ‘confused and excited’ combination of ‘horror’, ‘amazement’ and pseudoscientific reflection on Tess’s degenerate heritage, but the reader understands that it is in fact his hypocrisy that has ‘plunged her into this abyss’ (Hardy [1891] 1996, pp. 411–12). Izzy’s previous statement to Angel—that Tess ‘would have laid down her life for ‘ee’—proves prophetic, a part of the pattern of foreboding that runs through Hardy’s narrative monument to Tess’s suffering (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 297).

Contemplating the d’Urberville burial vaults at Kingsbere, Tess had previously felt ‘on the wrong side of th[e] door’, suffering unjustly ‘under an arbitrary law of society’ (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 391, 306). ‘Never in her life—she could swear it from the bottom of her soul—had she ever intended to do wrong; yet these hard judgements had come’, the novel reflects: ‘Whatever her sins, they were not sins of intention, but of inadvertence, and why should she have been punished so persistently?’ (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 382). But punished she is, and to such an extent that when the law eventually catches up with her at Stonehenge she declares herself ‘ready’ (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 422). The execution scene recalls Hardy’s later account of his response to the execution of James Seale in 1858. From a summit above Wintonchester, Angel and Liza-Lu behold an ‘almost unlimited’ ‘prospect’ of architectural and natural beauty: the Gothic towers of the cathedral, a church, a college and a hospice, set against a backdrop of ‘landscape beyond landscape’ (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 424). The picture is dominated, however, by the town gaol, ‘a large red-brick building, with level gray roofs, and rows of short barred windows bespeaking captivity’, which appears ‘the one blot on the city’s beauty’ and ‘contrast[s] greatly by its formalism with the quaint irregularities of the Gothic erections’ (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 424). The ‘black flag’ raised on top of the ‘ugly flat-topped octagonal tower’ of this forbidding disciplinary edifice of red brick that represents the final red blot in the novel’s most persistent pattern announces that, in Hardy’s notorious expression, “‘Justice” was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess’ (Hardy [1891] 1996, p. 424). Lecercle comments that the novel’s conclusion represents ‘an explosion of anger, irony giving way to sarcasm and rage, an instance of verbal violence, as if the pent-up energy of a narrator who so far had kept his distance has suddenly been liberated’ (Lecercle 1989, p. 1). Yet, ironically, the narrator *does* keep his distance: we do not

see Tess's imprisonment or execution, and the raising of the black flag that announces her death is witnessed from a distance.

This ultimate denial of vision confirms a non-mimetic tendency in Hardy's responses to murder and its punishment. In 1890, Hardy had written about his wish to be able to approach in literature 'things which everybody is thinking but nobody is saying' (Hardy 1967, p. 133). Realism, with its preference for 'order' and its 'illusion of adequacy and efficacy' (Wolfreys 2009, p. 33), was ill-suited for expressing Hardy's repugnance towards the social injustices that bring his characters to commit murder: the unavailability of divorce, the stigma of illegitimacy, the turmoil of a disturbed mind, the humiliation of sexual violence or rejection, the unequal relations between the sexes. Nicholas Ruddick observes that the objections of 'Mrs Grundy' to frank literary discussions of the important social questions of the day led at the fin de siècle to a 'break with fictional realism', as ambitious authors began to develop 'indirect representational mode[s]' in which sensitive topics, 'ill-suited to realistic treatment', could be addressed (Ruddick 2007, pp. 189, 205). Hardy's fiction, I have argued, is no objective Stendahlian 'mirror travelling along the highway' but a distorted and distorting subjectivity passing judgement not only on nineteenth-century readers' hankering for sensational crimes but also on social injustice and the inadequacies of criminal law.

Nemesvari has established that Hardy 'employed melodramatic and sensationalist devices' in his fiction in order to explore 'late-Victorian cultural, economic, and sexual anxieties' and to evoke a sense of 'individuals and cultures in transitional crisis'—so much so that his 'willingness to mix apparently disparate genres within his fiction comes close to being his most distinctive novelistic device' (Nemesvari 2011, pp. 1, 9, 6). While melodrama and sensation are undoubtedly present in Hardy's writings, so is the Gothic. As a trained architect, Hardy was familiar with John Ruskin's influential mid-century argument for the Gothic as the mode in which alienated modern consciousness might best exert itself through distortion and irregularity (Ruskin [1851–1853] 1985). 'Art', Hardy writes in a diary entry from 1890, 'is a disproportioning—(i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion)—of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence "realism" is not Art' (Hardy and Hardy [1928/1930] 2007, p. 235). Earlier that year, he had noted: 'Art consists in so depicting the common events of life as to bring out the features which illustrate the author's idiosyncratic mode of regard' (Hardy and Hardy [1928/1930] 2007, p. 231). In *Tess*, he observes that 'the defective can be more than the entire', 'the touch of the imperfect' lending 'sweetness' and 'humanity' (Hardy [1891] 1996, pp. 296, 180). While realism, too, foregrounds the ugliness of existence, the imperfection and lack of closure found in Hardy's fiction owe much to the Gothic aesthetic.

In his fictional depictions of murder and its punishment, Hardy breaks with mimesis by foregrounding Gothically inflected indirection, obscurity, distortion, ellipsis and pattern. These limited, idiosyncratic viewpoints, which disrupt any equation of sight with firm knowledge—indeed reject the desirability of certain kinds of knowledge—represent Hardy's rejection of modern society's drive to control and contain social transgression through perfect knowledge, scrutiny and codification as voyeuristic and morally dubious (Foucault [1975] 1991). In an 1893 letter reproduced in *The Life*, Hardy writes that he 'consider[s] a social system based on individual spontaneity to promise better for happiness than a curbed and uniform one under which all temperaments are bound to shape themselves to a single pattern of living' (Hardy and Hardy [1928/1930] 2007, p. 266). Shires is therefore right to argue that 'Hardy's aesthetic demands that readers grasp reality as objectively varied, changing, filtered by multiple and contradictory subjective impressions' (Shires 1999, p. 147). In his spatial articulacy, narrative indirection, generic hybridity and nuanced commentary on the human condition, Hardy emerges as a distinctive, idiosyncratic commentator on the Victorian art of murder.

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