

The Connell Guide to Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, by Cedric Watts & Jolyon Connell. London, 2012, pp. 135, ISBN 978-1-907776-09-0: £ 6.99.

The Connell Guide to Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*, by Phillip Mallett. London, 2014, pp. 124, ISBN 978-1-907776-15-1: £ 6.99.

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It is a challenging task for any scholar to write an introductory study to a novel by Thomas Hardy, but Cedric Watts's and Phillip Mallett's Connell Guides to, respectively, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* are effective instruments not only for the students venturing into Hardy's territory for the first time, but also for those readers who are familiar with his prose and its associated criticism. The two small volumes offer an insightful and systematic survey of Hardy's novels and let the reader into the narrative by virtue of an persuasive thematic exploration of both texts. The peculiar layout of the books, which comprise a series of critical sections, interesting notes, and even illustrations, makes the reading process an engaging one; at the same time, it offers a rounded view of two very complex works, which aptly become approachable and more easily decoded.

The distinctive format can also be detected in its chapter titles, which – intriguingly – are not statements but questions, a series of pointed queries that revolve around the lively critical debate and the deep level of ambiguity that Hardy's novels subsume. Accordingly, in the volume on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Cedric Watts focuses on one of the most equivocal scenes, when in Phase the Second, 'Maiden No More', the 'coarse pattern' deprives Tess of her innocence and makes her conscious of the solitude of any human being, systematically entrapped into the appalling scheme of chance. 'Is Tess raped – or seduced – by Alec?', is the title of a very thought-provoking chapter, where the reader is provided with contradictory critical interpretations of the Chase scene in which, 'between archness and real dismay', Tess's sexual encounter with Alec blurs the boundaries between seduction and rape. Watts notices how this scene is distinctly anticipated by Tess's tasting of strawberries, and by the slight complicity she manifests in her 'half-pleased, half-reluctant state' when eating the fruits Alec offers her. The abundant sexual allusions within the novel and the erotic potential of Hardy's heroine are also a key to 'the narrator's fascination with the interiority of her sexuality' (p. 65), and emphasize 'Hardy's passion for his heroine' (p. 62). This in turn leads to a sort of identification between the two, as Watts underlines in the chapter entitled 'How convincing is Tess?'

In both guides the hermeneutical process is prompted by the 'opacity factor' inherent in Hardy's writing, which grants the possibility of multiple approaches

within the construction of the sense. Accordingly, as the two books compare and contrast the most diverse critical viewpoints, they call into question the prevailing interpretations of the major scenes and characters. In so doing they do not claim to provide a definitive reading of the novels, but acknowledge the fact that in Hardy's writing the most powerful effect is established by its 'series of seemings'. As Phillip Mallett observes in his study on *Far from the Madding Crowd*, it is very difficult to decipher a character's state of mind, to sense his compulsions and the motivations of his/her actions; quite simply, 'we may never achieve full comprehension of our own natures, or the nature of others, any more than of the universe' (p. 33).

Mallett's analysis concentrates also on the relevance of gender issues in Hardy's novel and on the way in which the Victorian writer deals with the woman question: if *Far from the Madding Crowd* is often considered as 'a traditionally comic "taming of the shrew" story' (p. 10), tinged with misogyny and 'sickened love' (p. 12), his reading of the text is instead an attempt at recognizing 'the way in which Bathsheba's right to be herself comes into conflict with the ideology of womanhood' (p. 61). His interpretation of the female protagonist brings to light the way in which women are perceived, represented and shaped by the ideological system and the linguistic codes of a male perspective. In this sense, Mallett points out, 'The subject of the novel is not quite, as Henry James and others have supposed, the chastening and education of Bathsheba Everdene, so much as the attempt of three men to impose on her their own name, and their idea of who and what she should be: to remake her as Bathsheba Troy, or Bathsheba Boldwood, or Bathsheba Oak' (p. 55). Thus, the chapters 'Why does Bathsheba marry Sergeant Troy?' and 'Is Boldwood mad?' prompt an interesting reflection on Hardy's masculine identities and the way in which the novel reinterprets the framework of male sexuality, highlighting its intrinsic contradictions: from Troy's 'hypermasculinity' (p. 37), to Boldwood's supposed insanity, and finally, Gabriel Oak's 'emasculatation', both as a rejected lover and employee, despite his recognized acts of heroism and vigour.

The two guides also offer a stimulating investigation of Wessex as an organic rural community, and of the function of nature and the earth. Unlike other Hardyian microcosms, in *Far from the Madding Crowd* Weatherbury does not suggest an atmosphere of perfect immutability and timelessness, but it often reminds the reader that 'this partly real, partly-dream country' is deeply affected by class and economic tensions, and by what Mallett defines 'the darker sides of rural life'. In the volume on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, specifically in the chapters entitled 'How coherent is Hardy's view of Nature?' and 'How big a role does the earth itself play in *Tess*?', Cedric Watts refers to the natural environment as something more than a mere landscape or textual topography: Tess herself is so intensely identified with the earth

that the atmosphere and the elements often mirror her mood. Most significantly, Tess's life, her indomitable sensuousness, her passions and disillusion, her wanderings and tragic destiny can be properly understood only if inscribed within the valleys of Wessex. But what Watts mainly emphasizes is the 'tragic potential of nature' (p. 87), and the strong ambivalence in Hardy's vision of the natural world, since Tess is at the same time part of and victim of it. The novel clearly shows how the protagonist is not only damned by man-made laws, but also by nature and its 'blind biological purposes', as well as by an 'implacable, hostile earth' (p. 99).

Even in the guide to *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Mallett's exploration of the role of nature is extremely convincing: in a reading of the novel that never neglects the scientific framework underlying Hardy's narrative, he both refers to 'the system or order which appears to govern the physical world (Nature with a capital N) and the various objects – rocks, plants, animals, humanity – which make up that world (p. 74). If the laws of Nature founded on chance and change seem to remind man that the universe is uncaring and inevitably cruel, at the same time Hardy repeatedly suggests a special affinity between the humans and the non-human animals, thus creating a microcosm in which the landscape and its creatures are able to establish reciprocal and dynamic connections. It is well known that many animal species crowd Hardy's narratives, but in Mallett's investigation, the reference to non-human animals is also extended to insects; in an intriguing passage from 'What is the role of Nature in *Far from the Madding Crowd*?', he alludes to the moment Batsheba goes to hive her bees, a process that, according to the narrator, is 'somewhat analogous to that of alleged formations of the universe, time and times ago ... The bustling swarm had swept the sky in a scattered and uniform haze, which now thickened to a nebulous centre' (p. 72). Mallett infers that the invertebrates and their disorderly movements allows Hardy to hint at the 'nebular hypothesis', according to which the sun, the earth and the rest of the solar system began as swirls of dust and gas. The way in which Hardy describes the swirling motion of the insects appears surprisingly similar to the theory of evolutionary astronomy on the origin of the universe. In the close examination of the novel, the various forms of scientific thought come always to the fore; as a consequence, we are often confronted with Charles Darwin and other evolutionary scientists, whose theories and language shaped the cultural consciousness of the whole century.

Cedric Watts's and Phillip Mallett's Connell Guides to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* represent congenial instruments for students and for more expert readers. Despite their inevitable conciseness and an extremely selective bibliography, the two books never appear simplistic in their close reading of the two texts, as well as in their consistent survey of the cultural

background and the critical tradition around which the two novels were written. Full of perceptive insights and critical hypothesis, the two volumes bring to bear the expertise of two distinguished scholars and their great passion for Hardy's world.

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