CHAPTER 2

The Feminine: Reading Hardy after Lacan’s xxth Seminar

A “silk mouthful,” affording exquisite pleasure to writer and reader alike: that is how a text/textile could be defined. But then, one might ask, what is the nature of that strange enjoyment that one may derive from a literary text? An interesting *mise-en-abyme* of the reading act may be found in one of Hardy’s short-stories, “An Imaginative Woman,” where the heroine, Ella Marchmill, a would-be poetess unhappily married to a prosperous gunmaker, falls in love with a man she has never met merely by reading his poetry. So passionate is her devotion to him, so exquisite the sensations felt as her hand follows the half-erased letters traced by the poet on her bed-room wall, that her husband believes her to have been adulterous. The male perception is faced with a total enigma here, that of a woman’s desire—the “dark continent” that resisted Freud’s investigation. One cannot but marvel at Hardy’s insight into those mysteries, owed undoubtedly to his position as an artist—for, as Lacan reminded us, the artist always precedes the psychoanalyst.¹ This chapter will turn to what is often called the *feminine* mode of enjoyment, as Lacan attempted to figure it out in his xxth *Seminar*. But we must bear in mind when reading the following pages that there are some men, especially among artists, who are “just as good as women” (Lacan, 1975/1998, p. 76), men who too have access to that “Other” *jouissance*. This section will end with a parallel between the feminine pursuit and the artist’s quest.

We will start with an interrogation on Hardy’s supposedly “adulterous” heroines. Like Ella, many of Hardy’s heroines are reviled for their supposed improper or “adulterous” behaviour: Tess, rejected by her husband because of her previous affair with Alec d’Urberville, is left with no choice but to become a kept woman; in *The Return of the Native*, rumour has it that Eustacia Vye is a witch and that she is attempting to elope with a former lover of hers, Wildeve. Ella’s husband is so utterly convinced of his wife’s infidelity that after her death he rejects their fourth child whom he thinks is not his own but the poet’s.

¹ “[…] le seul avantage qu’un psychanalyste ait le droit de prendre de sa position […] c’est de se rappeler avec Freud qu’en sa matière, l’artiste toujours le précède et qu’il n’a donc pas à faire le psychologue là où l’artiste lui fraie la voie” (Lacan, 2001a). Lacan is referring to Freud, who claimed that an author is “the precursor of science and scientific psychology” (Freud, p. 172).
Yet in all these stories the heroine is unduly accused: Ella has never even seen the poet believed to have fathered her child, he is not much more than a figment of her imagination. Eustacia never commits any form of adultery, for all the gossip about her being “a voluptuous idle woman” (*Return* p. 204), for all the suspicions entertained by her husband. Critics often see her relation with Wildeve as “adulterous” (Garson, 1991, pp. 57, 58), but whatever she might eventually have done had the course of events been different, she never intends to run away with Wildeve, and she never does. Tess is asleep when she is raped/seduced, she is simply not there, she is elsewhere. And it is circumstances that compel her to become Alec’s mistress. As Hardy puts it, she is “a pure woman.” Each story is a typical case of the *diffamation* that Lacan says is the lot of woman: “On la dit-femme, on la diffâme” (Lacan, 1975, p. 79).2 Why then are those heroines a prey to such *diffamation*? What logic underlies the insistence on their being “adulterous,” despite evidence to the contrary?

### 2.1 An Imaginative Woman

Ella Marchmill’s story is apparently simple: a jealous husband imagines his wife cheated on him, though she did not. Of course paternity is always uncertain—*pater semper incertus*. But Hardy’s cryptic words in his preface to *Life’s Little Ironies* have made matters rather complex: “An Imaginative Woman,” he writes, is about “a trick of Nature, so to speak, a physical possibility that may attach to a wife of vivid imaginings, as is well known to medical practitioners and other observers of such manifestations” (*css* p. 377).3 How can Hardy write that a woman, merely by indulging in “vivid imaginings,” may be *impregnated* by a man, to the effect that the child she gives birth to is of questionable paternity? Isn’t he somehow giving credit to the husband’s belief in his wife’s infidelity? What can be made of the hypothesis that, by reading the “half-obliterated pencillings” (*css* p. 389) of a poet on a bed-room wall, an expectant mother could provoke a genetic mutation4 in her own womb, thereby causing the foetus to

---

3 Thomas Hardy, *Collected Short Stories*, referred to as *css* in this paper.
4 Rosemarie Morgan suggests that Hardy might be referring to a form of trauma-induced genetic mutation—a concept not yet available to him, but which the science of epigenetics is currently researching. For Hardy’s short-story rests on his belief that the organic and the inorganic worlds are not mutually impenetrable (in opposition to Bergson’s theory), so thin is the barrier supposed to separate them (Morgan, 2013, pp. 33–43).