

“WHERE HEAVES THE TURF”: THOMAS HARDY AND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE EARTH

By Catherine Robson

WHAT DO WE EXPECT to learn when we scrutinize the boundaries of, or within, Victorian literary studies at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Because many nineteenth-century scholars had always worked within an interdisciplinary paradigm, the theoretical shifts of the last thirty years or so, which broke down divisions between generically distinct discourses, could be said to have brought continuity, rather than change, to this particular community. Yet it is probably true that a pre-existing predilection for historicist investigation has gained added strength in Victorianist circles in recent times. Certain kinds of journeys have become especially common: intrepid explorers travel beyond the bounds of a literary text to hitherto unimagined contexts, and then return to said text laden with the spoils of their expeditions. The exotic voyage to discover the strangeness of the Victorians, then, has become a familiar event; we have witnessed an expansion of the empire of possible connections. Rarer than these heroic ventures, however, has been the practice of quiet contemplation: we have perhaps been less adept at standing still, and looking carefully at the ground we already hold, the ground we assume we share with our nineteenth-century predecessors. What happens when we eschew the temptation to strike out across new territory, and turn our eyes merely to the earth below? Might we discover boundaries between the Victorians and ourselves in the most mundane, the most fundamental of places?

To test my hypothesis, I turn to that inveterate boundary-straddler, Thomas Hardy. Divided between the novel and the poem, the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, between his intense investment in a distinct geographical domain and the universal human condition, Hardy was himself profoundly interested in the meeting of boundaries. According to Elaine Scarry, Hardy's obsessive return to what happens when a body rubs up against another part of the world (a gate; another body; the surface of the earth) is the defining quality of his genius: understanding Hardy's fascination with boundaries is synonymous with understanding Hardy, given that both plot and meaning are generated for this author when two surfaces collide (ch. 2). For the purposes of this investigation, I limit my attention not to Hardy's besetting concern for the boundary between the human body and the earth on which it lives, but to a more specialized variant thereof, the contact between the corpse and the soil of its grave. By focusing on this muddy boundary, I do not wish only to delve deeper into Hardy's preoccupations, but to gain a clearer vision of the contours of the Victorian terrain more

generally. I propose that we have made the unthinking assumption that one particular part of their world is smoothly continuous with ours. If we strive to see what Hardy (and a host of others) really shows us when we step into the graveyard, we may gain a greater understanding of the distance that separates us from the nineteenth century.

To explore this contention, let us consider a moment four-fifths the way through *Far from the Madding Crowd*. When Bathsheba Troy walks into Weatherbury churchyard to visit Fanny Robin's grave, she does not immediately find what she is looking for. Admittedly, she has had a couple of bad nights. Her ordeal began some thirty-six hours earlier: after Fanny's coffin is lodged overnight in her home because of Joseph Poorgrass's drunken inability to get to the church on time, Bathsheba is overpowered by her desire to learn the truth about the extent of her husband's involvement with its unfortunate occupant. One screw-driver later, she knows that the coffin also contains Sergeant Troy's still-born child, and, a little later still, once Troy himself has arrived to view the scene, that her marriage is to all intents and purposes at an end. After fleeing to spend the remainder of the night in a hollow on the edge of a festering swamp, Bathsheba returns to her house to hole up in a disused attic. Her subsequent night's rest is also disrupted – at first by the blinking of a mysterious light through the trees, and then by a heavy rain and a “strange noise from the churchyard,” “the purl of water falling into a pool” (379; ch. 46). Unbeknownst to her, the intermittent light is caused by her husband “passing and repassing in front” of a lantern whilst planting flowers in the enclosed rectangle of the imposing tomb which has just been erected for Fanny. The peculiar noise that follows accompanies the undoing of these labors, for the rain-waters which gush out of the mouth of a gargoyle on the church-tower turn the grave into a boiling cauldron of soupy mould, flecking the headstone, and sweeping earth, bulbs and all over the borders of the coping stones and onto the grass and path beyond. When Bathsheba walks into the churchyard the next morning, however, she makes no connection between the object of her search and this tableau of wreckage. She knows that she is in the right part of the churchyard – any body enclosed “in parish boards” would be buried in this spot, on “the obscure side of the tower,” “the reprobate's quarter of the graveyard,” the place for “a pauper, a poacher, or other sinners of undignified sins,” but “the hole and the tomb” she finds here spark no recognition. Even though she sees Gabriel Oak staring fixedly at this “grand tomb and disturbed grave,” she “did not at once perceive” that this is Fanny's resting place, to use a most inappropriate euphemism. The reason she doesn't, of course, is because she is expecting to see a grave proportionate to Fanny's station in life – “she looked on both sides and around for some humbler mound, earthed up and clodded in the usual way” (380–81; ch. 46).

This is one of those sentences that a contemporary reader might at first skate over without too much thought – without stopping to think very closely about the information we receive here about a signal difference between our experience of a churchyard, and that of a nineteenth-century person (fictional or otherwise). I do not mean to imply that today's literary critics have ignored the vast array of graves and tombs in the poetry, prose, and novels of the nineteenth century. Certainly teachers of the Victorian novel all have their favorite headstones – even if they have not emulated Wordsworth and written an *Essay on Epitaphs*, most have likely expended many a happy classroom hour expounding upon inscriptions, delighting in the hermeneutic acts they license, encouraging students to see how fictional forms, which make people out of words, seem irresistibly drawn to those stony markers which turn them back into words once again. Who has not traced Pip tracing the “shape of the letters” on his parents' tombstones in paragraphs two and three of *Great Expectations*, and thanked

Dickens for modeling modes of over- and under-interpretation which will assist explication of the rest of the novel (35; ch. 1)? When Jane Eyre makes the statement a quarter of the way through her narrative that Helen Burns's grave in Brocklebridge churchyard will get a "grey marble tablet" some "fifteen years after her death" (96; ch. 9), who is not grateful for this opportunity to point out to somnolent undergraduates that we have just been informed that the heroine will apparently reach a *telos* which encompasses not only the autobiographical urge but also financial solvency? Or (and now the examples come thick and fast), when gravestones appear where they really ought to appear, which is to say, at the end of novels, who has not had a field day with Tom and Maggie Tulliver's shared grave, with the unvisited tombs of good women like Dorothea Ladislaw, and, above all, with the woeful inadequacy of Lockwood's closing prognostications about quiet slumbers for those sleepers in the earth of *Wuthering Heights*?

But what is noticed, for the most part, is the gravestone itself, and what it may look like – "half buried in heath . . . harmonized by the turf and moss" or "still bare" (E. Brontë 367; ch. 34) – and more especially, the epitaph. If one has gone a little further, it is probably to register the historical date of the grave, and its geographical placement. When we come to those distant in time and space, it may be noted, for instance, that Browning and Ruskin supply any number of ornate tombs and funerary monuments of the Italian Renaissance. Within the nineteenth century itself, attention will be alerted to the difference between those buried in England and those who, usually through the exigencies of empire or exile, are laid to rest in foreign climes. In contemporary England, the horrors of interment in the Victorian city are especially hard to ignore – who can forget that "hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene," the "beastly scrap" of "consequential ground" into which Nemo is laid (or rather stamped) in *Bleak House* (180; ch. 11; 262; ch. 16)? Regardless of whether corpses find an urban, or a rural, resting place, one might notice that they can be buried either inside, or outside, the church: despite the fact that Little Nell has spent an inordinate proportion of her young life hanging about in graveyards, she is ultimately placed under a paving stone *within* the ancient church itself, and although much of *In Memoriam* finds the concept of external burial imaginatively fertile, the poem eventually acknowledges that Hallam's body was actually laid *inside* the church at Clevedon. Variants of this arrangement will be deemed worthy of recognition too, as in the case of *Oliver Twist*'s mother, who finally receives a "white marble tablet" inscribed with the single word "Agnes" "within the altar of the old village church" (479; ch. 53), even though her body lies God knows where (and Dickens will not say) in some mass pauper grave in Oliver's native town. When the grave *is* in the churchyard, significance may well be seen in its exact placement: it feels important that Catherine Linton is laid "on a green slope, in a corner of the kirkyard, where the wall is so low that heath and bilberry plants have climbed over it from the moor; and peat mould almost buries it" (E. Brontë 205; ch. 16) and (now I draw closer to my starting place), notice is surely taken when codes of social and theological propriety consign individuals like Fanny Robin and Tess Durbeyfield's poor baby Sorrow to "that shabby corner of God's allotment where He lets the nettles grow, and where all unbaptized infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned are laid" (148; ch. 14).

If literary critics have noticed the potential of such abundant references, what have they done with these riches?¹ I venture to suggest that although we work at an especially auspicious moment for the exchange of information between disciplines, for the construction of more deeply interfused forms of cultural studies, there is still much ground to be explored by those

who are interested in understanding the relationship between representations and practices within death's dominion in the nineteenth century. To give one example – although Chris Brooks and others have carefully documented the growth of the cemetery movement in the years after the establishment of Pere Lachaise in Paris in 1804, little notice has been taken of the fact that there are extremely few depictions of the cemetery in the period's literary genres. There are no doubt numerous ways to account for this striking absence, but rather than look for what *isn't* there, I choose to direct our attention here to something that *is* there, but which we have not registered – or, if we have registered, have not made very much of. I wish to suggest that perhaps we have made the opposite mistake from Bathsheba – that while she walks into the churchyard expecting to see *not* a grave with head- and foot stones, side-coping and all, but a *mound*, that perhaps we walk in expecting to find graves with gravestones, *but not mounds*. In other words, we have not understood at a sufficiently deep level that country churchyards in the nineteenth century, were, not to put too fine a point on it, lumpy, bumpy, unmarked places.

Thomas W. Laqueur has noted that “archaeologists estimate that the average English churchyard, in use for a millenium or so, might contain the remains of some ten thousand bodies. This explains the usual elevation of the ground above the level of the church floor” (9). More precisely, the earth had risen in the following manner: given that space was limited in the churchyard, and that individuals had a common law right to be buried where they had lived, sextons would repeatedly reuse existing sites: as Lord Stowell had put it in a celebrated eighteenth-century legal case, the ground of the churchyard was “the common property of the living, and of generations yet unborn, and subject only to temporary appropriation” (qtd. in Laqueur 9). Under normal circumstances, a grave was considered “ripe,” as the saying went, after twenty years, so when gravediggers came to bury a new corpse, they would “intercut, hack . . . through, turn . . . over and toss . . . out the earlier tenant to make room” for the coffin, and then, after the service, fill in the hole and shape whatever displaced earth still remained into a mound on top of the grave (Laqueur 9). Every hundred years or so, the entire graveyard was leveled (although of course at a higher level than before), and the whole process would begin again. If no friends or descendants of the dead were around to object, gravestones could be relocated if necessary, or perhaps used as path paving, but in the vast majority of cases, there were no markers to move: the cost of funerary stonework put it beyond the pockets of all but a small elite band of mourners.

These periodic exchanges between the work of the sextons and the levellers, however, entered a general decline from the middle of the nineteenth century after legislation ushered in alterations in the management of death which were felt first in urban, and eventually in some rural, areas. In England, a series of acts between 1848 and 1857 barred burial within churches themselves and in the confines of city churchyards, and, as Chris Brooks explains in his book *Mortal Remains*, established a new system of public interment with municipal cemeteries which has continued to the present day. Over the border, Scottish law specifically targetted earthy excrescences by declaring in the 1860s that “the grave-digger shall not make any mound over the ground above the general surface and shall be bound to fill and beat in the soil as far as can be done and to carry away the soil” (qtd. in Gordon 99). But the fact remains that up to the end of the Victorian period, the average English country graveyard was a green and bumpy place, and while it would be dotted with many gravestones old and new, no one would have expected each mound to bear a marker. From both our reading and our own loitering in graveyards, we would not expect the rural Victorian churchyard to be

a uniformly ordered space: we know that grave furniture came (and comes) in a variety of designs, and that bodies are sometimes encased in above-ground monuments (think of those cabinet tombs, and the “five little stone lozenges” that mark out Pip’s brothers, convincing him that “they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trousers-pockets,” Dickens, *Great Expectations* 35, ch. 1). Nevertheless, in conceiving generally of the grave as a horizontal place with a vertical stone at its head, we have, I believe, been substituting the exception for the norm.

But why should this matter? For the following reasons: when we bring back into view those grassy hillocks, it quite literally changes the lie of the land – reminds us, as we always need reminding, that we do not see things in the same way as our Victorian forebears; that the gap between the way in which we think about the dead, and the Victorians thought about the dead, depends not just on the distance between our religious perspectives but also upon marked material differences. Nowadays, although not many of us will have visited one of the few surviving bumpy English churchyards which escaped the leveler’s pick and plane, more of us have seen a humped grave just after a burial service (although cremations, first introduced in England in the 1880s, now claim around 70% of corpses): we will have seen the wreaths and floral tributes heaped upon the mound of earth ousted by the coffin. For Victorians, however, the domed mound over the grave did not gradually disappear as the earth compacted, but, because of the greater density caused by repeated re-use of sites, remained to grow green for years after the interment. How differently, then, the words “not dead, but sleeping,” must have resonated. Even though the body itself, in its wooden coffin, was not actually making the bump above the surface of the ground, the soil that it displaced did, and thus left a tangible, if deceptive, memorial of human presence. Corpses described a convex contour upon the earth; stood out above the level of what in another place Hardy called “the whole terrestrial curve” of the planet (*Tess* 422; ch. 49); stood out in a manner which is now wholly foreign to us. (To this reader at least, so foreign that when I wrote about Drummer Hodge’s veldt burial, I carried with me the false assumption that one of the signal markers of the difference between the grave Hodge received in the broad Karoo, and the one he would, in the natural course of things, have received in his Wessex homeland, was the fact that his South African resting place constituted a bump on the horizon.) In the nineteenth century, those buried in the churchyard helped to form their own mute landmarks after death: they continued to set forth, if not a text, a shape in the world.

What happens once we have registered this small fact? To begin with, we might simply start to see all the green humps that were there all the time – that one can just make out in the backgrounds of Victorian paintings like “The Doubt,” “Home from the Sea” and “The Vale of Rest”; humps that were lurking all along in obscure parts of sentences in literary texts. We might notice, for instance, that even before Helen Burns receives the belated gift of a tombstone bearing her name and the word “Resurgam,” her place in the world had been marked by “a grassy mound” (*C. Brontë* 96; ch. 9). And it is not only the mounds in nineteenth-century representations which regain their shape, but also those of earlier ages – with most definition, perhaps, in the poem that makes its mark on every literary evocation of the graveyard in the Victorian period, and also upon every other species of writing on the topic, from the discourses of public health to disquisitions on landscape aesthetics. Which is to say, in Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, first published in 1751 and arguably the most reprinted poem in the nineteenth century, “where heaves the turf in many a mould’ring heap.” These days, Gray’s churchyard in Stoke Poges sets forth nicely manicured

lawns and is as trim and level as could be, but at least up until 1898, the terrain was distinctly bumpy, as can be seen in a photograph in an American periodical of that date (Shelley 670). It has long been recognized that this beloved poem propagates a myth of Englishness which is predicated upon the containment of lower-class insurrection, but now we perceive that its vision of the graveyard's organic community, rooted in place and removed from history, manifests not only ideological bias but also, as Laqueur notes, material misrepresentation: "the rude forefathers of the hamlet" were definitely not "each in his narrow cell for ever laid," nor were their "bones" from "insult" protected (13).

Nevertheless, few poems in the English tradition have reached further into the hearts and minds of the nation, and for Thomas Hardy, the *Elegy* both seemed to capture the spirit of his own rural home (he is recorded to have said Stinsford "is Stoke Poges" late in life) and "provided [him] with his basic model for what a poem is" (qtd. in Taylor 451, 454). If we add that Hardy's ironic vision repeatedly exposes the distortions of Gray's calm certainties, who would disagree with this observation? It is only a slight exaggeration to state that nearly every one of Hardy's poems has some kind of recourse to a churchyard, a tomb, a corpse, or indeed a ghost, as Tim Armstrong's book *Haunted Hardy* makes beautifully clear. Hardy wrests the title of "graveyard poet" from those eighteenth-century pretenders Young, Blair, and Gray, and offers up the most grave-laden poetic oeuvre in English literature. In truth, the work of historical recovery I attempt here could have been accomplished through a simple perambulation around the *Complete Poems* and a few citations from the *Life*: Hardy's activities as an architect, church restorer and later as a member of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings nicely complemented his apparently innate attraction to graveyards, and provided him with a substratum of experiences for poetic exploration. He knew all about the fate of the graveyard and "The Obliterate Tomb": he supervised the dismantling of St. Pancras's churchyard in 1864 when the Midland Railway Company was building a new line into London, and later, in 1882, composed a poem entitled "The Levelled Churchyard," which drew upon his observations of the modernizations of the grounds (the "smoothings of Thy Sward, . . . O Lord!") of Wimborne Minster (Hardy, *Complete Poems* 383–88, 157–58). He also qualifies my earlier assertion about the paucity of representations of cemeteries by writing "In the Cemetery," a characteristically bleak "Satire of Circumstance." This poem comments wryly on the provisional nature of the new burial ground's one-body-one-grave promise ("sprats in a tin") by describing how the re-routing of a drainage pipe results in the clandestine disinterment of children's bodies, which are then "packed . . . away in the general foss/With hundreds more" (418). But what Hardy's poems give us, time and again, are mounds, whether they be green hills, or rounded hillocks, turfy or grassy heaps. Although he certainly had a surer sense of his own mortality, perhaps in some ways Hardy saw his literary labors as akin to those of "The Sexton at Longpuddle" (777), who

. . . notes each finished and greening mound
 Complacently,
 As their shaper he,
 And one who can do it well
 And, with a prosperous sense of his doing,
 Thinks he'll not lack
 Plenty such work in the long ensuing
 Futurity.

For people will always die,
And he will always be nigh
To shape their cell.

But if the neutral tones of Hardy's poems all begin with shades of Gray and the heaving turf, what about his novels, his writing in the years before the stonework of *Jude the Obscure* effectively capped his first literary career with its grim epitaph "Done because we are too menny"? The separation of the two forms of Hardy's art is primarily a convenient fiction, for not only was he composing poems throughout his time as a novelist, but he had also staked a claim in the graveyard from the very beginning. And for the title of his fourth published novel, of course, he went straight to the *Elegy*. Discussions of *Far from the Madding Crowd* usually insist that Hardy presents an action-packed melodrama under this heading as a rebuke to Gray's fantasy of the "noiseless tenor" of country ways, but his choice of title invites other kinds of analysis as well. The churchyard may not seem to enclose the exploits of Bathsheba and her three suitors, but it is certainly at the center of Weatherbury, and more especially, of Fanny Robin's story. It is here that we first glimpse her, and here that Gabriel feels the "quick, hard beat" of her pulse in her slender wrist (101; ch. 7). When that pulse has ceased to throb, and Fanny Robin is returned to her village in a coffin, her life's double pattern of damaging conjunctions and missed appointments is, as we have seen, far from over. Readers and critics have always noticed that Fanny does not receive the expected. Instead of a half-crown funeral and a pauper's unmarked grave, a poor country girl who died in the Union-house gets a grand 27 pound tomb engraved with 77 characters. Instead of peace in the coffin, she and her baby are three times disturbed, first by the rap of heavy drops of water which fall upon the elm lid in Yalbury Great Wood; then by Bathsheba and her screw-driver, and last, by "[t]he persistent torrent from the gargoyle's jaws" (375; ch. 46). But the "hollow" that is created by this final affront now seems all the more disturbing. Concavity replaces convexity; instead of raised, clodded earth, there is a "hole" filled with water, and then, once the water has soaked away, with nothing. There is no simulacrum of a body "stretched at [its] ease" under a blanket of earth ("The Later Autumn," *Complete Poems* 710), no fantasy of flesh and mass maintained, but instead, the evacuation of presence. Or rather, and still worse, the body already stripped back to the bleached bone, for Hardy displaces the violation of Fanny's corpse onto the bulbs and primrose plants uplifted by the gargoyle's mocking stream, so that what Troy sees the morning after is not a tenderly planted "coverture" over his beloved, but "a tuft of stringy roots washed white and clean as a bundle of tendons" (376; ch. 46).

If we approach the novel through the poetry, it becomes transparently clear that Fanny Robin's experience in the churchyard partakes of the nature of Hardy's essential poem, one that takes the ground of its being from Gray's *Elegy*, and then refuses to let that ground lie still. And even down to its more particular lineaments, it is a poem that Hardy will write a couple of times more, most explicitly in "Rain on a Grave," one of the *Poems of 1912-13* about his dead wife (*Complete Poems* 341-42). In its closing lines, however, the "ruthless disdain" of the spouting waters in the first stanza is transformed, and seen to nurture, not destroy, the grave:

Soon will be growing
Green blades from her mound,

And daisies be showing
 Like stars on the ground,
 Till she form part of them –
 Ay – the sweet heart of them,
 Loved beyond measure
 With a child's pleasure
 All her life's round.

When we choose the issue of boundaries to structure an investigation, it is perhaps in the hope that the borders of our territory will be renegotiated, that we will break through to a new world, or expand our empire. I offer here not a huge gain of terrain, but a slight adjustment to the contours of the land we already had: a recognition that death used to be round too.

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NOTES

1. Of course, markers of death, over-emphasizing as they do the “testamentary essence” of all writing, delight those of the Derridean persuasion, but throughout the twentieth century, the more orthodox practitioners of Victorian studies tended to relate representations of death in nineteenth-century literature to questions of religion and spirituality, to the agonies of mourning in an age famously characterized by struggles of faith and doubt. Those of a material turn of mind, however, have always relished the opportunity to get historical. Sometimes the literary text has been seen as a self-sufficient source of data: given that the novels of Dickens, in particular, offer such an incredibly comprehensive archive on the nineteenth-century way of death, scholars are perhaps to be forgiven if their investigation of, for example, Victorian undertaking begins and ends with a study of *Oliver Twist's* experience as an apprentice to Mr. Sowerberry or David Copperfield's unfortunate awareness of the labors of the family Omer and Mr. Joram. At other junctures, the vision is more expansive, particularly when Dickens's catalogues of information manifestly supply the evidence for his part in a concerted reforming mission: it is hardly surprising to find well-trodden critical paths from say, *Bleak House's* depiction of that noxious city graveyard to landmark texts in the discourse of public health, such as Dr. Walker's *Gatherings from Graveyards, Particularly London* (1839) and Edwin Chadwick's *Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns and Cities* (1843). But Dickens is certainly not the only game in town, and a great variety of valuable work in the wider field of Victorian death studies in English literature has been performed by critics such as Christ, Wheeler, Stewart, Bronfen, and Gallagher.

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