

Distancing from Lawrence's appraisal of Thomas Hardy in "Study of Thomas Hardy" (Chapters III and V)

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In Lawrence's astute analysis of the "aristocrat-character" (*STH* 46) in Hardy's novels, but ultimately one-sided, unfair judgement of Hardy as a writer, I detect two distinct personalities and two conflicting conceptions of the role of a novelist. On the one hand, we find Lawrence (1885-1930), the late Victorian, confident, implacable, irascible, emphatic, who, despite the fact that his novels were repeatedly targeted by censorship, never wavered in his attempts to candidly write and publish what he felt to be true and necessary to the improvement of women and men's relationships with each other and with society at large; as opposed to Hardy (1840-1928), the prudent, modest, yet ambitious novelist who suffered many rejections from publishers before his first success and, because he was always wary of further rejections and determined to be an acclaimed, productive writer, submitted to extensive editorial revisions which went against his endeavour to expose the shortcomings and injustices of the society of his time, yet were inevitable, in his view, to ensure his continued literary fame and thus his opportunities to obliquely denounce a number of moral and societal concerns.

These fundamental differences between Lawrence and Hardy account for the fact that, in my opinion, Lawrence misreads Hardy's intentions as a writer, perhaps wilfully at times, to make a point which corroborates his general argument. In fact, Lawrence occasionally qualifies a statement later in the essay, or unknowingly contradicts himself, showing that his analyses of Hardy's plots and characters are accurate but tailored to his line of reasoning, resulting in a highly biased and often

incomplete representation of Hardy as a thinker and writer. I shall take the example of Lawrence's study of Hardy's aristocrat characters to point out how he shapes his interpretation of Hardy to suit his personal convictions, thus unfairly criticising the Victorian in Hardy, despite his obvious profound understanding of Hardy's artistic sensibilities, which were so near his own.

Lawrence first tries to classify these characters in four categories: 1. "distinct individuality, more or less achieved"; 2. "unaccomplished potential individuality"; 3. "impure, unindividualized life embedded in the matrix, [...] achieving its own lower degree of distinction"; 4. unindividualized and unfulfilled. In the Lawrencian system of thought, as we know, the natural aristocrat is a woman or a man from any social class, who has achieved a "distinct individuality", and refuses to compromise or comply with social conventions and "bourgeois virtues" (STH 45).

Lawrence denounces Hardy's "moral condemnation" of the aristocratic figures in his stories and rebukes him for "sympathis[ing] with the aristocrat" much too late: "Not until he comes to Tess and Jude does he [ever] sympathise with the aristocrat – unless it be in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and then he sympathises only to slay." (STH 45). What Lawrence seems to forget or chooses to ignore is the fact that contrary to him, Hardy feared Victorian censorship and consequently stifled his admiration of his aristocratic characters, albeit only partially. The plots of his earlier novels therefore punish the unconventional individuals who would disrupt the established order, so as to guarantee publication and public approval of the as yet unestablished, insecure young author. When indeed Hardy came to Tess and Jude, that is to say in 1891 and 1895 respectively – two decades and a dozen novels after the publication of his first work of fiction, *Desperate Remedies* (1871) – he had become a famous, acclaimed writer, a known literary figure in London upper class circles, taking less care to remain entirely respectable and allowing himself to be more openly progressive and critical of Victorian morality. On this point, it is illuminating to consider Hardy's essay "Candour in English Fiction", which was published as a contribution to a symposium in the *New Review* in 1890. In that essay, Hardy laments the restrictions imposed by "the censorship of prudery" upon the "conscientious

fiction” of his time, which only seeks to “reflect and reveal life” as it is. Had Lawrence read this essay, he might have acknowledged Hardy’s literary choice of staging “the triumph of the crowd over the hero, of the commonplace majority over the exceptional few” (“Candour”) as a truly critical reflection of society, neither endorsed nor evaded by Hardy.

Lawrence also minimises the many ways in which Hardy does sympathise with and express admiration for his aristocratic characters before *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). Although Lawrence acknowledges Hardy’s “*prédilection d’artiste*”, as he calls it, for the aristocrats, he emphasises what he sees as Hardy’s “moral antagonism” (STH 46) to the aristocrat – and which, I insist, is not Hardy’s personal antagonism but his survival instinct as a compliant writer. What Lawrence does not examine is Hardy’s underlying praise or affection for his independent, unconventional heroines and heroes. Yet he does perceive Hardy’s inclination for some of them, as when he notes in the first pages of the essay that the supposedly villainous Troy in *FFMC* is presented in a nuanced portrait: “unscrupulous, and yet sensitive in taking his pleasures” (STH 22), “unscrupulous, but discriminative, almost cynical” (STH 23). Lawrence also notes Hardy’s “first show of real sympathy, nearly conquering the bourgeois or [communal] morality, [...] for Eustacia”, the heroine of *RN* (STH 47), though Lawrence’s observation is rather dismissive and deserves to be more thoroughly demonstrated.

To conclude, Lawrence’s appraisal of Hardy is precious as a dual insight into both writers’ philosophies and writing styles: it reveals Lawrence’s strengths as a sensitive and morally courageous writer of fiction and non-fiction, even as it discloses his obtuseness and radicality regarding the role of the novelist and his challenges towards contemporary society; at the same time, it throws Hardy’s literary choices into sharp relief, inviting a reappraisal of Hardy’s societal criticism, in a more positive light than Lawrence’s assessment, as well as a reappraisal of Lawrence’s radical stances and their narrative potency, in comparison with Hardy’s.