

Thomas Hardy and His Readers: Contradictions of the Rebellious Serial Writer

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The ambiguous relationship established between Thomas Hardy and his readers marked the three decades in which his career as a novelist took place. Looking into this aspect is essential if we want to fully comprehend his novels. We can approach this rapport in two different manners: one way is to attend to what Hardy himself have to say about his novels in their prefaces; the other leads us to a tracing of the differences between the serial publication of each one of the novels and their final publication in volume form. Such differences respond to Hardy's editing, revising and deleting material from the original manuscripts when it came to serial publication in family magazines followed by a persistent attempt to reconstruct his original intentions when it eventually came to the volume publications.

Such cutting and pasting operations could only result in contradictory versions of the same novel, as can easily be appreciated when comparing the serial versions of his novels with the final volume versions, something we can now do thanks to the fundamental scholarship by earlier textual critics such as R.L. Purdy, F. B. Pinion and John Paterson in the 1950s and 60s and the later seminal studies by John Laird, Patricia Ingham and Rosemarie Morgan on *Tess*, *Jude* and *Far* respectively. All these works contrast the various versions of Hardy's novels and allow us to trace the evolution of each one of them

from its primitive manuscript conception, through its serial publication, to the finally authorised 1912 Wessex edition¹.

Hardy's artistic oscillation between ripping his manuscripts (in obedience to the standards of decorum imposed by popular magazines) and rebelliously reconstructing them for volume publication has attracted ample scholarly attention. Three relevant instances of this, at three different stages in the history of Hardyan scholarship can be D. H. Lawrence's "Study of Thomas Hardy" in 1914 which referred to Hardy's contradictions as "Prédilection d'artiste"; R. P. Draper who states, in the 1970s, that,

[Hardy's] instinctive sense of the falsity of conventional values asserted itself in forms that increasingly disturbed his attempts to write for the market, and particularly alarmed the editors of magazines to which Hardy sold the serial rights of his novels. (Draper 1975: 13)

And Peter Widdowson who remarks in the 1990s that,

Perhaps the most striking contradiction in Hardy's novel-writing career is his willingness to accommodate these pressures, to change, revise, cut suppress, to play the system for all its worth and, conversely, to produce novels which time and again reject fictional stereotypes...and which were bound to shock the Victorian moral conscience. (Widdowson 1989: 136)

On the one hand, Hardy would do anything to succeed, whether or not that involved initial mutilation of his texts in order to have them accepted for serial publication. On the other, he felt an imperious need to stand his ground and defend his original themes and his convictions about the role of the novel. This was, obviously, an almost impossible feat of prestidigitation, which he, nevertheless, practiced for thirty

¹ See Purdy 1954; Paterson 1960; Pinion 1968; Laird 1975; Ingham 1976; Morgan 1992.

years, the time span which separates his first novel from his last one, at the turn of the century. After that he decided to devote his talent to the writing of poetry, which proved to be a much less troublesome task.

The whole process is marked, as I say above, by the response of his readers. When Hardy's first novels are published, in the 1870s, conventional readership demands entertainment, melodramatic, happy ending plots and the strictest adherence to moral "decorum" which is to be expected from any prim and proper mid-Victorian writer. These were the readers who devoured instalments published every fortnight in one of the popular magazines of the times². They were often men reading episodes out to the female members of the family well before television would replace them. Nevertheless, from the 1880s onwards Hardy starts catering also for an alternative readership, aesthetic readers who take pride in their different taste. As R. G. Cox points out in his study of the reception of Hardy's novels,

It was only as his work progressed that it became clear that he was aiming at a more intellectually advanced public, though in some respects, such as sensationalism of incident and plot development, he appeared to be influenced by popular expectations up to a late stage. (Cox 1970: xxi)

Throughout the evolution of his career as a novelist, Hardy combines the elements taken from his most popular novels with others intended to simultaneously attract a more demanding audience who

² Since the study of 19th Century serialisation and readership has already received ample scholarly attention, and given the space constraints of this article, it is not my intention to go into it here further than offering a short selection of contributions along these lines. On serialisation see, for instance, Altick 1957; 1998; Vann 1985; Hughes and Lund, 1991; Langbauer 1999; Law, 2000 and his contribution to Brake and Demoor 2009; Payne 2005 and Rodensky 2013 (particularly section II on "publishing, reading, reviewing, quoting and censoring"). On readership see Jordan and Patten 1995; Glavin, 1999; Waller 2006; Rooney and Gasperini 2016.

would prefer quality to moral decorum. This weird *ménage à trois* can only be attained by writing what I have elsewhere described as “palimpsests”, i.e., texts which could aptly be read in two different ways by two different types of reader³. We, therefore, come across two different authors when we read his serialised novels and the final volume versions. Hardy can be the conventional writer who willingly submits to the expectations of an equally conventional reader. On the other hand, Hardy is also the rebel whose opposition to the established canons of late Victorian literature is intended to be received by a similarly rebellious reader, relentlessly emerging in his fiction. The evolution of this contradiction can be seen at four climatic moments represented by his four most important novels: *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), *Jude the Obscure* (1895) and *The Well-Beloved* (1892 & 1897).

The love-hate relationship established between Hardy and his readers started with the rejection of his first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, in 1869, a novel which, according to his own words in *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, was exceedingly bold «the tendency of the writing being socialistic, not to say revolutionary», since it presented

A sweeping dramatic satire of the squirearchy and nobility, London society, the vulgarity of the middle class, modern Christianity, church-restoration, and political and domestic morals in general. (*Life* : 56)⁴

³ I have studied the mythological subtexts in Hardy’s novels since my MPhil and PhD dissertations at University of Birmingham (1993) and University of Granada (1995), respectively. A recent publication on the novels as palimpsests is in Monnickendam and Owen 2013.

⁴ Although *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1891* and *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy 1892-1928* were published in 1928 and 1930 respectively by Florence Emily Hardy, it is general knowledge that these works are Hardy’s autobiography. All references to these two works from now on will be included in the text and abbreviated to *Life*. The edition used is Millgate 1984.

Can we then be surprised that conservative Alexander Macmillan should have rejected it? or that George Meredith, censor for Chapman and Hall, would also refuse to publish it and advise Hardy to change direction «for if he printed so pronounced a thing he would be attacked on all sides by the conventional reviewers, and his future injured» (*Life*: 63)? Hardy had no way out other than follow Meredith's advice. He discarded the novel and ventured to write a second one: *Desperate Remedies*, published anonymously by *Tinsley's Magazine* in 1871. Positive reviews to the novel appeared in *Athenaeum* and *The Morning Post* but there were also negative reviews in *The Spectator*, which accused Hardy of immorality, advised readers against it and suggested that the writer should remain anonymous until he managed to write better novels⁵. Indeed some scenes in the original manuscript had had to be removed before final publication in *Tinsley* but even this had not been enough to fit the type of fiction Meredith had recommended. Thus, although this was the beginning of a pact with the conventional reader which would make Hardy one of the most popular writers with mass Victorian audiences, this pact was never solid, not even at this moment.

Also apparently the result of this search for harmony with the conventional reader are the following two novels: *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873) which define Hardy as the chronicler of rural bliss, a cliché which would set his fame and make the delights of generations of readers reaching our days. In both novels Hardy cultivated the image of the pastoral writer, as testified by their prefaces⁶. The preface to *Under the Greenwood Tree*, for instance, comments on the importance of rural traditions such as church choirs, (which explains the subtitle of the novel, *The Mellstock Quire*). *A Pair of*

⁵ «we have said enough to warn our readers against this book, and, we hope, to urge the author to write far better ones» (Anonymous review in *The Spectator*, 22 April 1871: 481-3).

⁶ An image he took good care to subvert by adding notes to the 1912 edition, as we will see later on in this article.

Blue Eyes focuses the preface on country life, tradition and his creation of “Wessex”, the mythic pastoral world he had just created.

The topic would consolidate the following year and so would his compromise with the readers of serial novels. *Far from the Madding Crowd*, is published by *Cornhill Magazine*, one of the most important magazines at the time, particularly popular with middle class readers. Critics acclaim the novel and compare Hardy with the best George Eliot. Indeed, such was the success that the novel was reprinted seven times within 1874. The truth is that the final product is significantly different from the original manuscript, which was heavily censored by Leslie Stephen, editor of *Cornhill Magazine*⁷. By accepting Stephen's offer, Hardy continues the learning process he had started with Meredith. On this respect *Life* comments that

In addition to providing invaluable advice about periodical writing, such as the importance of sustaining narrative pace and keeping the plot in line, Stephen also provided Hardy with a short sharp course in Grundyan conventions-- conventions of literary propriety and decorum that were deeply ingrained in Stephen's consciousness but not in Hardy's, who appeared, as far as Stephen was concerned, to have “no more consciousness of these things than a child”. (*Life*: 99)

Stephen, let us not forget, addressed his magazines to a most conservative readership of whose tastes he prided himself of being a connoisseur. Since the first commandment for every writer should, in

⁷ Stephen justified his censorship by describing *Cornhill Magazine* as a periodic publication devoted to inoffensive issues and hence avoiding «the only subjects in which reasonable men can take any interest: politics and religion». As Rosemarie Morgan points out, Stephen's exclusions extended much further: class struggles, “improper” behaviour in women, sexuality, etc. (Morgan, *Cancelled Words*: 137). More on Victorian censorship can be found, for instance, in Hyland and Sammels 1992; Thompson 1996; Larson 2001 or Patterson 2013.

his opinion, be «Thou shalt not shock a young lady» (Matland 1906: 266), it is no surprise that on receiving a letter from three «respectable ladies» who complained on the content of some of the episodes from *Far from the Madding Crowd* already serialised he should ask Hardy to cancel anything that could generate such complaints. A letter to Stephen shows the extent to which the writer would surrender his authority over his text for the benefit of mass consumption of his product,

The truth is I am willing, and indeed anxious, to give up any points which may be desirable in a story when read as a whole, for the sake of others which shall please those who read it in numbers. (*Life*: 100)

We must, nevertheless, doubt the sincerity of such generous offer. For a start, Hardy was never comfortable with his servility to Stephen, as the different poses adopted in *Life* make evident. Thus, many years after the incidents he remembers them in his autobiography as mere trivialities. They come out as funny anecdotes or else just as indicators of his utter indifference towards his reputation as a writer or the quality of his novels. As Rosemarie Morgan (1992: 106) points out, both attitudes simply mask his discomfort before his own self-betrayal, a discomfort that can only find relief in the painful reconstruction of his mutilated novels once it came to gathering all episodes together for the volume publication. Besides, Hardy insists that he does not give up in his intentions of becoming a serious writer,

Perhaps I may have higher aims some day, and be a great stickler for the proper artistic balance of the completed work, but for the present circumstances lead me to wish merely to be considered a good hand at a serial. (*Ibid.*)

These «higher aims» were closer in time than what «some day» seems to indicate. In spite of his professed intention to remain as simply «a good hand at a serial», surprisingly, and paradoxically after

the enormous popularity of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy swerves again in 1876 and publishes *The Hand of Ethelberta*, a novel that represents the urban antithesis to its bucolic predecessor.

Faithful to his assertion that «he had not the slightest intention of writing forever about sheep farming, as the reading public was apparently expecting him to do» (103), Hardy «set off, with what seems in retrospect an almost perverse determination, upon an entirely different task» (Millgate 1982: 171). *The Hand of Ethelberta* is an urban novel, which stands out for its radical treatment of social differences and its sarcastic tone, reminiscent of *The Poor Man and the Lady* and proleptic of the notorious novels of the 90s⁸. It is first serialised by *Cornhill* and then published in volume form by Smith, Elder & Co. The reception was cold, as, according to Stephen, it was to be expected since Hardy had diverted from his real talent, the gift he had exhibited in *Far* (Morgan 179)⁹. Under Stephen's influence Hardy, once again, tries to counteract the effect of the novel and uses the preface to this effect. Hence the 1895 preface trivialises the novel by describing it as «This somewhat frivolous narrative» and «an interlude between stories of a more sober design» (*Personal Writings*: 11).¹⁰ The 1912 “Wessex” edition, however, undoes these words by describing *Hand* as too advanced for its time and hence misunderstood by contemporary readers,

Imaginary circumstances that on its first publication were deemed eccentric and almost impossible are now paralleled on the

⁸ This novel is full of self-conscious passages which direct the reader's attention to Hardy's own situation as an artist at the time and at his difficult relation with Victorian readers. It is, as Richard H. Taylor (1982: 71) puts it «a study of the physical and personal deracination» which he would later come back to in his fiction of the 90s.

⁹ In a letter from Stephen to Hardy dated May 16, 1876 (Matland: 291-2).

¹⁰ All references to the prefaces of Hardy's novels are taken from Harold Orel edition of *The Personal Writings of Thomas Hardy* (1967) and referred to in the text as *Personal Writings*.

stage and in novels, and accepted as reasonable and interesting pictures of life; which suggests that the comedy (or, more accurately, satire)... appeared thirty-five years too soon. (*Ibid*: 12).

At any rate, this novel raised Stephen's mistrust so that he ended up refusing to publish Hardy's next novel, *The Return of the Native*, which was then sent to *Blackwood Magazine* with the following note: «Should there accidentally occur any word or reflection not in harmony with the general tone of the magazine, you would be quite at liberty to strike it out if you chose» (*Life*: 188). His concessions were useless, though, since *Blackwood* also rejected the novel and it was finally *Belgravia* that bought it for much less than what Hardy had received for the serialisation of his previous novels.

Two on a Tower, published in 1882, also contained elements that were deemed immoral and anticlerical by contemporary critics. *The Saturday Review*, for instance, accused Hardy of filling his novel with “repellent” episodes¹¹, while Harry Quilter's article in *The Spectator* labelled the novel as simply “repulsive”¹². Hardy uses the 1895 preface in order to respond to this. In it he denies any type of relationship in the novel other than conventional marriage and he insists that his intentions had always been to represent the Church in a most respectful way.

The situation is similar with the volume publication of *The Woodlanders* in 1887, which generates negative reviews such as R. H. Hutton's in *The Spectator*, complaining about Hardy's attack on marriage and his too permissive attitude towards his characters' immorality. Hardy felt again the need to defend himself and used the preface to the 1895 edition to this effect. Here he defines himself as a

¹¹ The episode which so perturbed the critic in the *Saturday Review* was the marriage of one of the characters to a bishop in order to legitimise her son, described by the magazine as «a most repellent incident, which the author was extremely ill advised to include in the scheme of his plot» (18th November 1882)

¹² *Spectator* 3rd February 1883: 154.

neutral observer who simply recalls things as they are and who fully sympathises with the majority of his readers on the degenerate nature of extra marital connections (20). One is tempted to believe Hardy were it not for the fact that he was seven years away from publishing *Jude*, his notorious attack on the Church. It is certainly curious that, up to this point in time, Hardy would always counteract his provoking boldness in the texts via the prefaces to the volume editions. He comes out as an oversensitive author who opposes conservatism in his fiction but cannot do the same when it comes to non-fictional interactions with his editors and audience.

Hardy's modus operandi would change soon, though, as the editing story of the 1890s novels testify. The story of the making of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* also starts with a desperate Hardy accepting heavy mutilation of his text. In October 1889 the writer had offered the manuscript to *Murray's Magazine* whose editor had rejected it on the bases of «improper explicitness» (the same reasons which had led this editor to reject Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*). He then resorted to *The Macmillan's Magazine*, which also rejected the manuscript. Hardy got nervous and started editing heavily. He removed passages, some of which were published separately under the generic title of «Episodic adventures of anonymous personages». Among these were "A Midnight Baptism, a Study of Christianity" and "Saturday Night in Arcady", published by *The Fortnightly Review* and *The National Observer of Edinburgh*, respectively. Between July and December 1891 *The Graphic* and *Harper's Bazar* finally serialised the novel in Great Britain and the United States, respectively and the volume form also appeared at the end of 1891. Parts of the two detached episodes were restored to the volume edition but some passages, with references to classical mythology, were still not included in their totality until the 1912 "Wessex Edition"¹³. In its preface Hardy refers to them as follows,

¹³ For more on the many changes that the novel went through from Manuscript to the 1912 final version see N. Furbank's notes to the "New Wessex" edition of the novel (469-71) and Laird.

The present edition of this novel contains a few pages that have never appeared in any previous edition. When the detached episodes were collected as stated in the preface of 1891, these pages were overlooked, though they were in the original manuscript. (*Personal Writings*: 29)

What this “overlook” hides is the fact that those pages contained references to mythological stories, which covertly alluded to sexual desire. Hardy knew that restoring the passages in their wholeness in 1891 would have automatically meant the rejection of the novel for volume publication. On the other hand, this ripping and restoring of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* contradicts the author's brave insistence on subtitling the volume “A Pure Woman”, an aspect that did not go unnoticed by contemporary critics. Mowbray Morris, for instance, commented on the contradiction between Hardy's willingness to edit his text and his dignified insistence on the subtitle,

Putting the sense of self-respect out of the question, one might have thought of a writer who entertains such grandiose views of the mission of the novelist would see something derogatory in this hole-and-corner form of publication. (Cox 1970: 217)¹⁴

And he concluded that with *Tess* Hardy had told «a disagreeable story in an extremely disagreeable manner». Margaret Oliphant shared his opinion and talked of «grossness, indecency, and horror» (Lerner and Holmstrum 1968: 126-27) and Andrew Lang defined it as «a sermon on modern misery» (Oliphant 1896: 135-49; Lang 1982: 247-49).

This clamorous rejection was partly provoked by Hardy. In his preface to the first edition of *Tess* he abandons for the first time his defensive attitude, faces his potential critics and refuses to censor his text: «If an offense come out of the truth, better it is that the offense

¹⁴ The article was called “Culture and Anarchy” and appeared in April 1892. Mowbray, editor of *Macmillan’s Magazine*, had already rejected the serialisation of *Tess*.

come than that the truth be concealed» (*Personal Writings*: 25-26). He extends his vindication in the preface to the 5th edition when he explains the purpose of the novel as being «the plan of laying down a story on the lines of tacit opinion, instead of making it to square with the merely vocal formulae of society» (*ibid*). This constitutes Hardy's first direct attack on the "too genteel reader", a change of direction which means his beginning of the end as a novelist, as Hardy himself admits in *Life*, «the book, notwithstanding its exceptional popularity, was the beginning of the end of [Hardy's] career as a novelist» (240).

Despite the scandal raised by *Tess* not only in literary circles but also within the whole of Victorian society, Hardy keeps adding wood to the fire when he publishes *Jude the Obscure* four years later. Once again he is forced to alter the original manuscript in order to get it published in instalments and once again, in spite of his own anticipation of the scandal which was to follow, Hardy restores his novel to its original conception when he gets it together into volume form. Readers were quick to react, hence the famous incidents which followed the publication: the Bishop of Wakefield showed his utter indignation in a letter addressed to *The Yorkshire Post* where he labelled *Jude* as "rubbish" and explained that he could only calm his anger after reading it by throwing the book into the fire; Margaret Oliphant wrote "The Anti-Marriage League", an article which has since become an essential document to understand the fin-de-siècle which concluded with the famous indictment that «nothing so coarsely indecent as the whole history of *Jude* ... has ever been put in English print» (Cox 2005: 270)¹⁵; *National Review* also accused Hardy of being one of the "decadent" writers in A. J. Butler's "Mr Hardy as a Decadent" which stated that «there can be nothing more certain in literature than that a tendency to dwell on foul details has never been a "note" of any but third-rate work» (*ibid*: 300); *Pall Mall Gazette* renamed the novel as

¹⁵ This famous article was published originally published in "Blackwood's Magazine", in January 1896. Her thesis was that Hardy was the promoter of a pact against marriage. As such he would be on a league with Walter Allen and Oscar Wilde, amongst others.

"Jude the Obscene" and urged Hardy to: «Give us quickly another and cleaner book to take the bad taste out of our mouths» (ibid: xxviii); R.Y. Tyrrell pointed out in *Fortnightly Review* that «the book is steeped in sex» and suggested that: «Either Mr Hardy's powers have undergone a sad deterioration...or he has determined to try the patience of his public and to see whether they will accept in lieu of a novel a treatise on sexual pathology» (ibid: 302); In *Academy* J. B. Allen wondered why Hardy should include in his novel topics which were normally excluded from decent conversation and B. Williams concluded in *Athenaeum* that the novel was simply «a titanic bad book by Mr Hardy» (ibid:261).

As with his previous novels Hardy uses the first preface as preventive remedy. This time his discursive tool is irony, which functions as a protective shield against such potential antagonism. In it Hardy starts by deviating attention from the conflictive issues within the novel and he does so by adopting precisely the type of discourse the novel was set to attack. Hence, he says that the struggle between "flesh" and "spirit" is what makes Jude fail, thus contradicting the novel critique on how Victorian institutions were repressing both flesh and spirit. The strategy backfires, however, and the hinting at sexuality, the big Victorian taboo, in these words sets readers on fire. Years later Hardy would correct his mistake in the prologue to the 1912 "Wessex Edition" when, now from the position of the consolidated writer who had stopped writing fiction over a decade before, he can actually express himself freely and protest that his novel was misunderstood at the time. His tone now is much more in accordance with the transgressive message *Jude* contains: it ridicules the conventional reader who opposes his novel simply on the grounds that it does not express «a view of life that [those] who thrive on conventions can permit to be painted» (*Personal Writings*: 35) and, finally facing Victorian bourgeois discourse, Hardy dismantles the sanctification of marriage as a sacrament by redefining it as a contract: «the famous contract — sacrament I mean — is doing fairly well still» (*ibid*).

Thus, *Tess* and *Jude* mark Hardy's final breaking away from Victorian literary conventions and mainstream readership and his attempt to capture the attention of an alternative readership, the sort of "degenerate" readers which Margaret Oliphant intuited in her review of *Jude* when she wrote,

I do not know [...] for what audience Mr Hardy intends his last work [...] Is it possible that there are readers in England to whom this infamy can be palatable? The transaction is insulting to the public, with whom he trades the viler wares under another name [...] If the English public supports him in it, it will be to the shame of every individual who thus confesses himself to like and accept what the author himself acknowledges to be unfit for the eyes — not of girls and young persons only, but of the ordinary reader — the men and women who read the Magazines, the public whom we address in these pages (126).

Oliphant is right in spotting that such reader is not exactly «the ordinary reader», nor is he the reader of popular magazines which had been Hardy's forum for so long. This said, she was wrong in her guess that there were few readers of this type. Indeed, there were many readers who admired the transgressive elements in Hardy's novels since they believed that moral decorum was hindering artistic freedom of expression. These readers sympathised or were members of the anti-system artistic movements that had proliferated during the last third of the 19th century, from Aestheticism to its later facets: the so-called "Decadence" and the "New-fiction movement".

One of these sympathetic readers is Algernon Swinburne who expresses his deep admiration for *Jude the Obscure* in a letter to Hardy, in which he refers to other like-minded readers,

I will risk saying how thankful we should be (I know that I may speak for other admirers as cordial as myself) for another admission into the English paradise "under the greenwood tree" (*Life*: 288-89).

Other aesthetes express themselves in a similar way. Richard Le Gallienne, frequent collaborator in *Yellow Book*, the famous journal of the Aesthetic movement, writes in *Star* (1891) that he adores *Tess*, which to him represents the best novel by Hardy to date. He adds to this that what he really likes about the novel is Hardy's political compromise with causes such as the fight against the sexual discrimination of women in late Victorian society (Cox: 178-80)¹⁶. Likewise, William Watson, poet and also contributor to *Yellow Book*, reviews *Tess* for *Academy* (1892) as «a tragic masterpiece» and, just like Le Gallienne, ends up applauding Hardy's brave side-taking on the unjust inequality between men and women (*Ibid*: 125-26). Certainly, women critics, other than Oliphant, did appreciate Hardy's contribution to the woman's cause and Clementina Black is an example of this. Her article on *Tess* appears in *Illustrated London News* in 1892. In it she classifies Hardy as «one of that brave and clear-sighted minority». Black is accurate in accounting for Hardy's transgression by a very precise x-ray of the conventional reader and its ways,

[T]his very earnestness, by leading him to deal with serious moral problems, will assuredly cause this book to be reprobated by numbers of well-intentioned people who have read his previous novels with complacency. The conventional reader wishes to be excited, but not to be disturbed; he likes to have new pictures presented to his imagination, but not to have new ideas presented to his mind. He detests unhappy endings mainly because an unhappy ending nearly always involves an indirect appeal to the conscience, and the conscience, when aroused, is always demanding a reorganization of that traditional pattern of right and wrong which it is the essence of conventionality to regard as immutable. (*Ibid*)

¹⁶ Years later Le Gallienne would also come out in defense of Hardy by writing a praising review of *Jude* in *Idler*, a magazine which was also associated with the Aesthetic movement.

Along similar lines we must also highlight the *Saturday Review* 1896 review on *Jude* where the author states: «whether for many years any book has received quite so foolish a reception as has been accorded the last and most splendid of all the books that Mr Hardy has given the world» an unjust reception which can only be comparable to «the New England Witch Mania», concluding that, all circumstances considered, perhaps the term “readers” should better be transformed into «sanitary inspectors of fiction» (*ibid*: 153-54).

Last, but certainly not least, we should mention here Havelock Ellis's “Concerning *Jude the Obscure*”, an article he publishes in 1896 for the *Savoy Magazine*. Ellis, also a habitual collaborator in *Yellow Book*, states that Hardy's narrative career has been an evolution of gradual liberation from the tyranny of his contemporary readers: «The whole course of Mr Hardy's development, from 1871 to the present, has been natural and inevitable, with lapses and irregularities it may be, but with no real break and no new departure» (35-39).

The end of Hardy's bumpy career as a novelist is to be found in his last and most autobiographical novel, *The Well-Beloved*. The novel, which narrates the life of an artist in a constant search for beauty, cannot be understood without considering mind the oscillations of the story which have just told. Curiously *The Well-Beloved* differs from all his other novels since there are two different versions to it. The serialised version of 1892 was called *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved: A Sketch of a Temperament* and is significantly different from the volume version of 1897, whose title is shortened to *The Well-Beloved*. While the former presents a rebellious artist, Jocelyn, a Romantic hero capable of attempting suicide because of his artistic ideals, the latter gives us an antihero who nonchalantly abandons his search for beauty at the end of the novel and becomes a fully integrated member of his community. The idealistic artistic search is substituted for a practical sense of usefulness. Jocelyn Pierston has finally become an ordinary and useful member of his community who will “ossify” with the rest. Similarly, Hardy, having defined his goals in novel writing, and finding it impossible to fulfil them, has decided to bid farewell to fiction, pull down his image as an immoral fictionist and build a new and more

acceptable image of Himself as Hardy the poet. As *Life* puts it with *The Well-Beloved* «ended his prose contributions to literature... his experiences of the few preceding years having killed all his interest in this form of imaginative work» (*Life*: 304). And the closing episodes of *Well-Beloved* certainly resonate this way,

At present... his productions are alluded to as those of a man not without genius, whose powers were insufficiently recognized in his lifetime. (*The Well-Beloved*: 206)

Indeed, as Michael Ryan (1979: 189) notes, taking into account that this is the last sentence of Hardy's last novel, one cannot help but interpret it as a portrait of a late version of himself, whose talent as a novelist had been misunderstood by his contemporaries. Pierston's ultimate abandonment of the search for his well-beloved is, at the end of the day, Hardy's final farewell to a narrative project which simply could not be.

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