“THE CONVERGENCE OF THE TWAIN”: ROMANTICISM AND NATURALISM IN THOMAS HARDY’S TRAGIC NOVELS

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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ABSTRACT

Hardy considered Romanticism essential to human nature in every age. His admiration for the English Romantic poets never wavered, and the influence of Shelley and Keats on his fiction is overdue for reassessment. At the same time, Hardy maintained a predilection for French fiction in general, and Zola’s Naturalism in particular, which has been underestimated. Hardy was openly envious of the greater freedom enjoyed by his French counterparts when portraying sexual relationships and lower-class mores. The convergence of English Romanticism and French Naturalism gives rise to Hardy’s “original treatment” of tragedy, one which integrates his considered engagement with the philosophical and literary climate of the late nineteenth century.

The five tragic novels under review belong to the “Novels of Character and Environment”, a title which summarises the interaction between Hardy’s Romantic idealists and what Hardy called the “opposing environment”. Far from the Madding Crowd is a mixed-genre novel in which Hardy makes his first excursion into tragedy with the portrayal of the maddened idealist, Boldwood. The Return of the Native takes Hardy’s developing vision one step further, with its allusions to great tragedies of the past, Greek and Shakespearean, and its questioning whether Eustacia’s despair or Clym’s misery affords them tragic status. In The Mayor of Casterbridge, Hardy succeeds in creating a tragic protagonist of Shakespearean stature, whose crime against family unleashes forces of retribution which resemble the supernatural powers of Greek tragedy. Despite the innocence of her intentions, the heroine of Tess of the d’Urbervilles is pursued by a torturing destiny, crushed by a naturalistic conjunction of upbringing and ancestry. Finally, Jude the Obscure portrays a working-class protagonist who prefigures the anti-heroes of modern tragedy, yet is also an unobserved pioneer of a new ethic of loving-kindness. Whether tragedy arises due to a character flaw, the forces of Nature and social determinism, or a sinister “Immanent Will” reminiscent of Greek tragedy, these novels run the gamut of Hardy’s tragic vision, from tragi-comedy through to a novel which anticipates modernist nihilism, pushing the tragic genre to its limits.
CUE TITLES

The following short-form designations are used for frequently cited texts. In the case of Hardy’s novels, all quotations will be taken from the Norton Critical Editions listed below unless otherwise indicated.

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INTRODUCTION

Romanticism will exist in human nature as long as human nature itself exists. The point is (in imaginative literature) to adopt that form of romanticism which is the mood of the age.¹

Hardy’s Literary Notebooks indicate that, during the period when he was preparing materials for his major novels, he was engaged in researching aesthetic questions such as “Realism and Idealism”, “Tragedy”, “Imaginative Literature” and French “Naturalisme”.² Michael Millgate argues that such quotations reveal Hardy’s “ruminations” over “the relationship between the real and the ideal” in a way which has “direct relevance to some of the technical effects he was striving towards in his fiction”.³ As Widdowson points out, Hardy was “a widely read intellectual” who was “closely familiar”⁴ with the contentious philosophical and literary debate occurring on both sides of the Channel concerning representation in art and literature. In this context, “Idealism” and “Imaginative Literature” might be taken as singling out English Romanticism, the movement which respects these ethical and creative faculties as essential to the practice of writing, and which respects the “universe-creating imagination” of the artist.⁵ Norman Page contends that “Hardy remained committed to a Romantic view of art as expressing the uniqueness of its creator’s mind”,⁶ while Widdowson emphasises his “consciously contradictory relationship with realism”.⁷ Hardy’s considered engagement with a range of literary genres including

¹ F.E. Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy (London: Macmillan, 1962) 147; hereafter referred to in the form “LIFE”.
⁷ Widdowson, CC, 74.
Romanticism, and realist or naturalistic fiction from both sides of the Channel, activates his work and contributes at every point to the development of his tragic novels.

Early reviewers were confused by the author’s divergent literary allegiances. One critic stated that “Mr Hardy is not ‘realistic’ in the vulgar sense of the word” while maintaining that the author’s “sympathies are manifestly with the French naturalistic school of fiction”.\(^8\) This review failed to take into account the scope of Hardy’s literary tastes, which included not only a broad range of English fiction and non-fiction, but also various styles of French fiction from Hugo’s Romantic novels through to Zola’s naturalistic writings. Yet the same critic noted his predilection for imaginative recreation, maintaining that his heroines were “idealized types, rather than portraits drawn from real life”.\(^9\) Modern critics have become increasingly conscious of Hardy’s debt to the English Romantics, although primarily in his poetry. For example, Page points to his ambivalent relationship with a Wordsworthian view of Nature, and to his “Keatsian idea of a work of art enshrining beauty and truth”.\(^10\) Critical studies to date have largely overlooked the role played by Romanticism in Hardy’s tragic novels. The Romantic idealism of his tragic heroes and heroines, constantly frustrated by a hostile or indifferent universe, itself contains the seeds of tragedy. Tragedy arises either as a conflict within the idealist, or as a conflict between the idealist’s consciousness and the social and natural environment.

Hardy’s account of Jude the Obscure, that it depicts “the contrast between the ideal life a man wished to lead, and the squalid real life he was fated to lead”,\(^11\) succinctly summarises this tragic worldview. For Hardy, the gap between man’s dreams and his

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\(^9\) Cox, 271.

\(^10\) Page, CC, 39.

ability to realise those dreams creates a sense of tragic futility: his protagonists are conscious of opportunities wasted and of possibilities not achievable in an uncaring universe. As he comments in his unacknowledged autobiography, “This planet does not supply the materials for happiness to higher existences”. While it is not possible to assume, by a process of back-formation, that all preceding characters in Hardy’s fiction are disappointed idealists like Jude, viewing the dramatic conflicts which arise in terms of frustrated attempts to pursue a higher vision opens out a range of tragic perspectives on his major novels. For example, if one sees Boldwood in *Far from the Madding Crowd* as a Romantic trying to make reparation for past sins in his idealised passion for Bathsheba, he emerges as a painfully thwarted and tragically tortured figure at odds with his pastoral comic background.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines idealism as “the unrealistic belief in the pursuit of perfection”. Even according to this short definition, those who pursue idealism are seen as “unrealistic”, and by implication, doomed to fall short of realising the ideal they seek. In the West, idealism dates from the teachings of Plato, for whom the *eidolon* was the eternal, disembodied model or form of a person or thing, and was not a literary term. An idealist may aspire to a range of ideals, philosophical or ethical, a love ideal or a political ideal. Various kinds of sentimental and philosophical ideals are pursued by Hardy’s doomed Romantics, from *Far from the Madding Crowd* onwards. It is in *The Return of the Native*, with the figures of Clym, the radical educational thinker, and Eustacia, the doomed lover, that his Romantic idealism becomes noticeably more Keatsian or Shelleyan. Hardy’s

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12 *LIFE*, 218.
approach diverges, however, from these Romantic poets’ conviction of the likely benefits of radical politics or the pursuit of an erotic ideal. The clash between ideals and harsh reality rapidly becomes more devastating than in Shelley’s overly optimistic version of social humanism.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of “idealism” goes on to note that it is often contrasted with realism in art or literature. Widdowson asserts that Hardy’s participation in what he calls the “pan-European debate about Realism” is crucial to an understanding of the “affinity between his work and late-twentieth-century critical approaches”.¹⁴ Linda M. Shires, even though she is one of the critics to identify his aesthetic as “radical” in its Victorian context, affirms the need for Hardy’s narrative complexity to be “fully linked to the historical moment and the narrative traditions informing it”.¹⁵ The apparently traditional critical approach I have adopted, examining the opposition between Romantic idealism and naturalistic versions of realism, has opened up new perspectives on the tragic novels.

In Hardy’s world, the ideals and values espoused by his Romantic protagonists are never clear-cut. “Real” and “realism”, too, are contentious terms in their application to his tragic novels. Hardy was never content to follow a single formula for tragedy. None of his novels can be adequately represented by equations like “realism + “idealism” or “French fiction” + “English Romanticism” = tragedy. Nevertheless, the presence of these dual tendencies in Hardy’s work is a key to his evolving versions of tragedy. In this thesis, I will confine myself to investigating the “real”, mainly as expressed through the techniques of French Naturalism, although with additional reference to the English realist tradition.

¹⁴ Widdowson, *CC*, 74.
Central to the “ideal” is the vision of life epitomised by Julian in Shelley’s “Julian and Maddalo”: “we might be all/ We dream of happy, high, majestical” (ll.172-3). This thesis examines how the disjunction between what a man (or woman) wishes to be and what he or she actually becomes (due to the vicissitudes of fate, social constraints or human frailty) creates the tragic expositions in five of Hardy’s major novels.

“Realism” was used in France in 1835 as an aesthetic term “to denote the vérité humaine of Rembrandt”, before coming into vogue as a literary term. The realist movement in France began as a “conscious revolt against romanticism”; realists sought faithfully to represent everyday happenings without softening or exaggeration. Controversies over subject matter, and the alleged “immoral tendencies” of Flaubert and others associated with the school, led to realism being “used primarily as the antonym of ‘idealism’”. The attempt to depict “real life” in telling detail was achieved by the Dutch portrait painters in a reaction against neo-classical orthodoxy. Even though consciously opposing Romanticism, some of the first French realists like Flaubert continued to work with Romantic elements, although the intense emotions they depicted were treated with a detached and ironic edge.

Naturalism grew out of realism by taking to an extreme the documentary and scientific dimensions of the novel, and was heavily influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution. The main precepts of Naturalism are the “emphasis upon heredity and environment; the conception of man as the mere product of these; the emphasis upon the

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19 Watt, 10.
commonplace as to both character and plot”, as well as “the importance of physiology” and “the constricting influence of poverty”. 21 The prime apologist for French Naturalism, Émile Zola, sought to apply scientific methods to the novel and to illustrate the deterministic effects of heredity and environment on his characters. Hardy, like many English critics of the time, used the terms realism and Naturalism interchangeably. His essay, “The Science of Fiction”, indicates his familiarity with the storm of controversy surrounding French Naturalism, especially as that storm centred on Zola’s work. He objected to the charge of brutality levelled against naturalistic writers and maintained that, “notwithstanding their excesses, errors, and rickety theories”, such French authors were “well-intentioned” in their “attempt to narrate the vérité vraie”. 22 Hardy himself demonstrated a great ability to portray the “real truth”, particularly regarding the difficulties of relationships, the struggles of the poor and the plight of the dispossessed.

While the influence of French Naturalism is traceable in his work, Hardy remained reluctant to associate himself fully with writers of that school. Even though he applauded “la sincérité dans l’art”, the catchcry of the French realist movement, Hardy was far from advocating a scientific approach to plot and characterisation. He constantly stressed the role of imaginative and emotive power in fiction: the “most devoted apostle of realism, the sheerest naturalist, cannot escape … the exercise of Art in telling a tale”. 23 Hardy went so far as to claim that “‘realism’ is not Art” since Art is a “disproportioning … of realities, to show more closely the features that matter”. 24 In “Tragedy and the Whole Truth”, Aldous Huxley would add weight to this argument by suggesting that realism can dilute the purity

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24 LIFE, 229.
of tragedy, that to exclude irrelevant detail is essential to the tragic. Not only does Hardy reserve the right to distort reality as he sees fit, he insists that the Romantic and even the sensational and supernatural have roles to play in tragic fiction: “We tale-tellers are all Ancient Mariners, and none of us is warranted in stopping Wedding Guests … unless he has something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experience of every average man and woman”.

Despite such comments from the author himself, early twentieth-century criticism had Hardy firmly established as a realist writer whose main claim to fame was as the creator of Wessex, a geographical/historical construct which has continued to be promoted in the interests of literary tourism. One might suggest that, while Hardy’s descriptions of rural life are authentic and true to the realist tradition, his desire to create the fictional world of Wessex would indicate to the attentive reader a tendency to romanticise his surroundings, to create a universe of the imagination as much as of sociological and geographical fact. Guérard’s ground-breaking 1949 work challenged the prevailing view by positing Hardy’s “deliberate anti-realism”. Guérard focussed on his debt to Gothic and sensation novels, and discussed his juxtaposing implausible incident and plausible human character. For Guérard, Hardy’s “attitude towards literal realism was ambiguous”, but he conceded that Hardy was a “realistic observer” of personality and the environment.

During the 1950s and 60s, a number of studies examining the rise of the nineteenth-century novel continued to place Hardy in a cohort of writers like Dickens and George Eliot who

26 LIFE, 252.
28 Guérard, 74.
were seen as exponents of Victorian realism.\textsuperscript{29} Apart from two articles by William B. Newton linking Hardy with the French naturalists, there were few challenges to the English realist theory.\textsuperscript{30} Phyllis Bartlett noted Hardy’s frequent allusions to Shelley’s poetry in his fiction but did not dispute the realist view of his novels.\textsuperscript{31}

During the 70s and 80s, literary criticism moved away from the realist consensus and re-examined Hardy’s philosophical and literary reflections. Linda Faye Tunick’s 1980 dissertation revisited the realist debate, asserting inaccurately that Thomas Hardy “was responsible for converting the English pastoral tradition from Realism to Naturalism”. We have already noted Hardy’s reservations with regard to Naturalism; George Gissing and George Moore can lay a better claim to pioneering English Naturalism. When Tunick suggested that Hardy shed any “idealism inherent to Wordsworthian Romanticism and novelistic realism”, she was ignoring a major feature of his aesthetic.\textsuperscript{32} David Baguley’s 1990 analysis makes the welcome claim that Hardy’s later, more naturalistic fiction was an important “point of reference” in the development of his novelistic tragedy.\textsuperscript{33} Two more recent studies, Katherine Kearns’ \textit{Nineteenth-Century Literary Realism} (1996)\textsuperscript{34} and Elizabeth Ermath’s \textit{Realism and Consensus in the English Novel} (1998),\textsuperscript{35} have not offset the trend away from critical interest in the issue of realism.

\textsuperscript{34} Katherine Kearns, \textit{Nineteenth-Century Realism: Through the Looking Glass} (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).
Peter Widdowson has called attention to the inherent contradictions in Hardy’s attitude to realism, what he calls his “potentially anti-realist thrust”.36 During my final revisions to this thesis, I have noted a resurgence of interest in the problematic issue of Hardy’s realism, including Tim Dolin’s article “On Hardy’s Realism, Again”. This study responds to Widdowson’s argument regarding the “silent naturalizing processes of the dominant cultural apparatuses”37 which uphold the critical orthodoxy of nineteenth-century realism. Dolin provides an in-depth account of Hardy’s responses to the critical and literary movements at work during the historical moment which shaped his fiction. Had I found this article sooner, I would have given Dolin’s arguments the full consideration they deserve. Instead it must suffice to say that, just as Hardy drew on and adapted poets like Shelley and Keats to elicit “that form of romanticism which is the mood of the age”,38 so too, as Dolin shows, he was inspired by Flaubert and Zola to produce a “progressive or critical realism”39 which was to confront a new generation of English readers.

My line on Hardy’s interpretation of French Naturalism derives from the author’s own justification for his approach. His essay, “Candour in English Fiction”, contrasts the restrictions imposed on English writers “by the proctors of opinion”40 with the greater frankness enjoyed by their French counterparts. In the course of his discussion, Hardy touches on all the primary features of his tragic novels. “Candour in English Fiction” functions as a kind of manifesto validating his “original treatment” of tragedy and as such will be considered at length in subsequent chapters.

38 *LIFE*, 147.
40 *LIFE*, 320.
Hardy’s proposition in “Candour in English Fiction” was that “the prevalent views of life”\textsuperscript{41} required a new style of writing and therefore public taste was “arriving anew at the point of high tragedy”.\textsuperscript{42} The ferment of ideas which were emerging in the second half of the nineteenth century, including Darwinism and new discoveries in geology and archaeology, rocked the foundations of belief for late-Victorian thinkers, leading to a crisis of faith. In his tragic novels, Hardy sought to express many of the preoccupations of his age, “philosophies and feelings as yet not well established or formally adopted”.\textsuperscript{43} While Hardy held back from creating an undiluted “novel of ideas”, philosophical questioning increasingly underlined the fictional content of his novels to the point in \textit{Jude the Obscure} where it threatened to overpower the plot and characterisation. This “enrichment by further truths” is an important aspect of what he describes as the “original treatment”\textsuperscript{44} necessary to a revival of high tragedy.

For Hardy, this treatment must incorporate “some developments of naturalism in French novelists of the present day”. A premise of “original treatment” was the acceptance of life as “a physiological fact”: its “honest portrayal must be largely concerned with, for one thing, the relations of the sexes”. Hardy’s major tragic novels show a growing emphasis on the physiological aspects of erotic love. His interrogations of marriage and the problems of sexual relationships explode the trite formula of the courtship novel, “they married and were happy ever after”. The desire to go beyond normative prescriptions for

\textsuperscript{41} “Candour in English Fiction”, Orel, 126; hereafter referred to in the form “Candour”.
\textsuperscript{42} “Candour”, 127.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{LIFE}, 320.
\textsuperscript{44} “Candour”, 127.
the novel reveals Hardy as a “true artist” prepared to explore territory previously uncharted in English fiction.45

One of the first authors to steer the English novel towards a more “sincere school of Fiction … that expresses truly the views of life prevalent in its time”,46 Hardy sees himself in the role of a beleaguered visionary, not unlike some of his own tragic heroes or heroines. In the privacy of the autobiography he did not see published in his lifetime, he confided that the “very fact of my having tried to spread over art the latest illumination of the time has darkened counsel in respect of me”.47 Being the advocate of an original approach to tragedy which laments “the triumph of the crowd over the hero, of the commonplace majority over the exceptional few,”48 Hardy identifies himself with characters like Tess or Jude who display a superiority of intellect or finer feelings and so are at odds with their upbringing and social environment.

In this sense, Hardy’s approach to Romanticism is one tempered by a modernist sense of alienation and futility. Unlike the first-generation Romantics, Wordsworth and Coleridge, who found in Nature “the joy of elevated thoughts”,49 his view of Nature is played out in a potentially more inimical post-Darwinian universe, a Nature defined by the struggle to survive. Wordsworth, though to some extent a pantheist, still maintains an implicit belief that we come into the world “trailing clouds of glory … From God, who is our home”,50 whereas Hardy’s view of God is more sceptical: “Write a prayer, a hymn, to the One not Omnipotent, but hampered; striving for our good, but unable to achieve it

46 “Candour”, 126.
47 LIFE. 320.
48 “Candour”, 127.
49 “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour”, ll. 95-6.
50 “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”, ll. 64-65.
except occasionally”\(^\text{51}\). Even Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, with its wild, irrational vision of a hostile universe, appears to revert to a more orthodox vision of created Nature at the end:

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He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small.
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.\(^\text{52}\)
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Hardy’s Romanticism has more in common with politically and religiously subversive second-generation Romantics like Keats and Shelley, those “matchless singers” as Hardy describes them,\(^\text{53}\) and to a lesser extent, Byron. These Romantic poets moved away from Nature as a source of inspiration and instead took up the pursuit of sensual experience and ideal love as themes. Byron’s influence is perhaps most evident in Hardy’s use of irony, and as such is filtered through the portrait of Byron in Shelley’s “Julian and Maddalo”. There, Byron’s fictional counterpart (Maddalo) undercuts the overly sanguine Romanticism and Utopian hopes of his friend, Julian (Shelley), by reminding him of the human fallibility on which architects of a better future must build. In some ways, Hardy’s tragic vision is closer to Keats’s than Shelley’s, since for Keatsian protagonists there is often a foreknowledge that the pursuit of an erotic ideal, “at the tip-top … an orbed drop/ Of light, and that is love”, will lead to disillusionment and the decay of the very senses that drove on the young lover. In his quest to be at one with the moon-goddess, Diana or Artemis, Keats’s *Endymion* learns that his companion on his wanderings must of necessity be “Sorrow”.\(^\text{54}\) By accepting the melancholic truth that such is his condition in this “vale of

\(^{51}\) *LIFE*, 297.
\(^{52}\) *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ll. 614-17.
\(^{54}\) *Endymion*, I, ll. 806-8; IV, ll. 148-83.
Soul-making”, Endymion is able to achieve a maturer relationship with a mortal woman, the Indian Maid. In *The Return of the Native* one looks in vain for traits of Endymion in Clym Yeobright, save that he is, by novel’s end, a familiar of Sorrow. Eustacia Vye does however set out, not to pursue, but to become the Queen Moon, thereby precipitating her own and others’ catastrophes. As Duncan Heath contends, Keats’s lyric intensity “is an expression of his tragic conception of existence”: beauty is the only absolute permitted to mortal man but its inaccessibility “can only be expressed as tragedy”. Where Hardy goes beyond Keats is in establishing a new conception of “beauty in ugliness”. In *The Return of the Native*, he describes the “mournful sublimity” of Egdon Heath as being more congenial to the modern age than are landscapes of “orthodox beauty”.

Millgate notes that Hardy “cherished from the first an elevated conception of the artist’s role”, particularly admiring Shelley as “a type of the artist as hero”. Shelley’s influence on Hardy’s thought was greater than that of any other poet, Shelleyan Romanticism encompassing many of the novelist’s own aspirations. More than just an idealised view of erotic love, F.B. Pinion suggests that Hardy found in Shelley’s poetry “an exhilarating freedom and intellectual intrepidity, a scientific view of the universe consistent with Darwinism, and principles for social reform which were to make him sympathetic to much in the writings of Comte and later philosophers”. Shelley’s beliefs were a precursor of the social “evolution”, based on Comtean Positivism, which Hardy alludes to in

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57 *LIFE*, 121. I am indebted to Tony Slade’s notes on *The Return of the Native* (London: Penguin, 1999) 398, for pointing out this comment of Hardy’s.
“Candour in English Fiction”. While there is nothing new about tracing a Comtean influence on Hardy, looking at Hardy’s questioning of Comte’s social reforms alongside his remodelling of Shelley’s political thought yields new insights into Hardy’s fictional tragedies.

Transgressive as Shelley’s erotic love ideal can be, he numbers among his imperatives the transformation of ethical ideals and of expectations about human potential. Shelley extends the role of the poetic visionary to remarkable lengths when proposing that “morality stems from an individual conscience guided only by imagination”. Shelley’s Romantic meliorism, his notion that human beings can transform themselves and their world if they have the courage of their own imaginations, is one which appeals to Hardy’s sensibilities, but he lacks Shelley’s “visionary belief in humanity’s potential to realize its highest ideals”, and his own beliefs are at odds with the unchecked meliorism of a verse drama like *Prometheus Unbound*. Hardy’s own “evolutionary meliorism” is one tempered with a Keatsian sorrow: “It is the on-going – i.e. the ‘becoming’ – of the world that produces its sadness.” His vision is less transcendent than the Romantics’, his outlook modified by the “sincerity” of a Naturalism which takes a sober and long-term view of whether and when citizens and dreamers will rise above their oppressive circumstances. As such a qualified meliorism suggests, Naturalism and Romanticism need not be poles apart in Hardy’s aesthetic. In her guide to the Romantic movement, Lillian Furst points out that the distinction between “romantic” and “realistic” is in practice “more fluid than critical

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61 “Candour”, 127.
62 Heath, 110.
64 “Apology” to *Late Lyrics and Earlier, CP*, 557.
65 *LIFE*, 202.
theory would suggest”.

In his “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” Wordsworth maintains that good poetry should arise from the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” at the same time as it realistically depicts “low and rustic life”.

Hardy’s synthesis of English and French movements lays the foundation for the “idealistic realism” of his tragic novels. While his realistic and naturalistic tendencies are much commented on, his debt to the English Romantics and how this nexus of literary genres informs his view of tragedy has been no more than hinted at. A reviewer in 1896 commented that Hardy’s “artistic combination of the real and the ideal” had produced a powerful framework surpassing “any of his French contemporaries”, but gave little idea of the picture within the frame.

Romantic extremes of emotion undergone by characters engaged in a daily struggle with oppressive circumstances are the stuff of Hardy’s tragic fiction. Tess’s declaration that her love for Clare is “too desperate for human conditions, too rank, too wild, too deadly”, specifically references Romeo and Juliet: “these violent delights have violent ends”. While Dickens often turned his realism to didactic ends, he too recognised that the novel was “capable of the greatest effects of tragedy” and insisted that the novelist must explore emotions and actions beyond the bounds of middle-class respectability: “The mystery of evil is as interesting to us now as it was in the time of SHAKESPEARE; and it is downright affectation or effeminacy to say that we are never to glance into that abyss”. Hardy argued that without the opportunity to present a “sincere and comprehensive

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70 Stang, 26.
sequence of the ruling passions”, such as was found in the French fiction of his day, an English novelist would be too hampered to unleash the power of tragedy.\footnote{71 “Candour”, 128.}

During the 1950s and 60s there was a surge of critical interest in tragedy, and a general scrutiny of how classical and early modern tragedy related to nineteenth-century or modernist writings. Critical theory was basically divided into two schools of thought. The “death-of-tragedy” critics led by George Steiner\footnote{72 George Steiner, \textit{The Death of Tragedy} (London: Faber, 1963).} felt that tragedy was not possible for the modern writer because of the collapse of a stable moral order. For Georg Lukács, the novel is a “post-tragic genre” which deals in a “degraded empirical existence”, thereby divorcing itself from the “spiritual essences” found in tragedy.\footnote{73 Georg Lukács, \textit{Theory of the Novel}; cited in Terry Eagleton, \textit{Sweet Violence} (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) 193.} The “vision-of-tragedy” critics maintained, by contrast, that the writing of tragedy was “an essential act of the human imagination”.\footnote{74 Maynard, 1.} Although critics on both sides of the debate neglected to consider the specific case of Hardy, their assumptions help to set out the premises which a theory of modern tragedy must address.

Richard Sewall identifies an underlying duality at the heart of post-classical forms of tragedy: the universals in conflict “must remain in perpetual and ambiguous tension – not in a state of balance ... not in a resolvable form”.\footnote{75 Dale Kramer, \textit{Thomas Hardy: The Forms of Tragedy} (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1975) 17.} Terry Eagleton cites Lucien Goldmann’s \textit{The Hidden God}, in which “tragic man” is “caught between an ideal which is compelling but increasingly absent, and an empirical world which is present but morally worthless”.\footnote{76 Eagleton, 208.} The tragic protagonist is thus driven to refuse the world, but simultaneously to have to re-create values from within the very world he spurns. Thus a student of divinity, as
his ambition to become a scholarly churchman fades, and he turns instead to a spiritual love for a cousin in order to give meaning to an otherwise worthless existence, is passing from the toils of one desire into those of another. Even Henchard, that least idealistic of Hardy’s protagonists, in his ambition to achieve a successful business enterprise is following his desire to realise all that he has within him. Jane Thomas identifies this “energy of the human spirit”, as it struggles to “attain ‘its little modicum of purpose’, in relation to the impossibility of the Real”, as the description of desire in Hardy’s work.\(^7\)

The existential “energy” of such desire is the lineal descendant of the “dream” of self-realisation of which Shelley’s Julian speaks.\(^7\) Wordsworth likewise writes of that Romantic “hope”, “Effort, and expectation, and desire”, an imaginative faith not in the empirical world but in what “the invisible world” holds in store, “something evermore about to be”.\(^7\) While Hardy recognises the limitations of the empirical world, he retains a faith that Romanticism is an enduring component of human nature, and a conviction that the form of Romanticism most important to the late Victorian age was one “naturalised” by French fiction.\(^8\) Without his faith in the persistence of Romantic idealism, Hardy would not have had the assurance that his “original treatment” of tragedy would be a sustainable genre on the eve of the twentieth century.

For Goldmann, the elemental gap between desire and the possibility of fulfilment “contains the seeds of a dialectical rationality”.\(^8\) Tragedy in Hardy’s work frequently arises from the dialectical opposition between his Romantic protagonists, driven on by an

\(^7\) Jane Thomas, *Thomas Hardy and Desire: Conceptions of the Self* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013) 2.
\(^7\) “Julian and Maddalo”, ll. 172-73.
\(^7\) *The Prelude* (1850), VI, ll. 599-608.
\(^8\) See *LIFE*, 147.
\(^8\) Cited in Eagleton, 208.
“essential yearning that defines the human condition”, and the indifferent or apparently hostile universe they are forced to inhabit. In *Romance and Tragedy*, Prosser Hall Frye expands upon the notion of dialectic or duality, suggesting that the “genuine ‘clash’ of tragedy” lies in “the contradiction life is perpetually opposing to our human values and standards”. He puts forward a theory of “tragic dissonance” which could well coincide with Hardy’s own conviction, arising from the incompatibility of man’s Romantic desires and aspirations with the actual conditions of life, “belittling as they may be, but always at odds with his higher nature”. In Frye’s view, this dialectical tension between an idealistic vision of human potential and the constraints of a day-to-day reality devoid of meaning gives rise to Romantic tragedy.

Such irreconcilable dichotomies are sometimes also present within the makeup of the protagonists themselves. Widdowson describes this “dismantling of the illusion of coherent character” as part of Hardy’s deliberate “deconstruction of realism”. While Hardy may indeed dismantle his characters as psychologically stable entities, his portrayal of the inconsistencies within their personalities comes paradoxically closer to a modern understanding of “realistic” character than some of the moral stereotypes portrayed by earlier nineteenth-century authors such as Dickens. Hardy’s tragic protagonists, racked by inner conflicts and self-doubt, torn between their sensual and spiritual desires as much as by opposing circumstances, prefigure many of the modern anti-heroes or heroines of latter-day fiction.

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82 Thomas, 2.
84 Frye, 102.
85 Cited in Dolin, “On Hardy’s Realism, Again”, 42.
D.H. Lawrence called into question Hardy’s tragic metaphysic because of its deviation from a more visionary Romanticism, viewing it as “pessimistic, perverse and untrue because it was at odds with the affirmation of his ‘sensuous understanding’”. What Lawrence failed to recognise were the dichotomies at the heart of his tragic vision. After Lawrence’s *Study*, drafted in 1914 and peppered with his unique, psycho-sexual analyses of Hardy’s characters, there was little further appraisal of Hardyan tragedy until the 1970s and 80s. Jean R. Brooks took a liberal humanist approach, suggesting that in the “tragic confrontation with futility and absurdity Hardy affirms some of the highest values men and women can achieve”. She defined his multi-faceted view of experience as “poetic” for the heightened emotions it allowed Hardy to project, and because of his use of language and imagery. Brooks implied but failed to inspect the Romantic component of Hardyan tragedy. By contrast, Jeannette King suggested that his “realistic tragedy” resulted from his adaptation of Greek dramatic conventions to contemporary people and situations. In King’s view, “Heredity and environment, character and society, are each conceived as modern Fates”. Although King fails to identify a source for Hardy’s attention to familial influences and class oppression, it derives in large part from French Naturalism and Zola.

In a recent prolegomenon to Hardy’s life, work and criticism, Naturalism does not rate a mention and his fascination with the Romantics is considered only in relation to his poetry. Dale Kramer’s 1975 work, *Thomas Hardy: The Forms of Tragedy*, has been considered the definitive word on tragedy in Hardy’s fiction, but its formalist arguments deny any adherence to either modern theories or Aristotelian traditions. Instead Kramer

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suggests that each novel has its own dominant aesthetic which “creates the peculiar quality of tragedy that distinguishes it”. His openness to reading each tragic novel as a new version of tragedy remains welcome, but the range of critical approaches to Hardy since the 1970s has made it possible to look afresh at the mix of literary, philosophical, sociological and archaeological ingredients he pours into his fiction. As Brooks notes with respect to Hardy studies, “constant reassessment is essential to keep the balance between modern and historical perspective”. Since tragedy is a principal thread connecting Hardy’s major novels, it seems a critical reappraisal of his tragedies is overdue.

Cyrus Hoy has described the peripeteia, or reversal of fortune, which underpins tragedy as a “deep disparity between intentions and deeds … the ideal at which one aims and the reality in which one is enmeshed.” Hoy’s narrative point reinforces the notion that some form of idealism is a necessary basis for tragedy. Richard Palmer identifies the Romantics as being “the first to drive a wedge between human experience and the Spirit and then to perceive tragedy either as a manifestation of that chasm or as a sign of humanity’s struggle to bridge it.” Taking the opposite perspective, George Levine characterises realism as the “mode of disenchantment”, since it displays the “disparity between the human imagination of the real and the possibilities of the real itself”. The investigation of a further congruence between Romanticism and realism/ Naturalism should provide the entry point to a deeper understanding of Hardyan tragedy.

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91 Brooks, 7.
Hardy’s major tragic novels all attempt to bridge the gap between the Romantic ideals of life, love and liberty and the heartbreak, disillusionment and loss that attend on failure to realise these ideals. A recent study of his tragic poetry by Katherine Kearney Maynard generalises that tragedy “depicts the difference between our ideals and our reality, illustrating the difficult processes by which men and women recognize that things are not as they seem”.\(^95\) Maynard’s account is perhaps based on the Platonic distinction between sensory appearances which delude, and reason which gives us a better understanding of the eternal forms which underlie the shadow-play of appearances. Hardy indulged in like reflections on the contradictions of experience: “I discovered, several years ago, that I was living in a world where nothing bears out in practice what it promises incipiently.”\(^96\)

The clash of opposite hemispheres in Hardy’s poem “The Convergence of the Twain” sums up what Draper calls this tragedy of “ironic discord”.\(^97\) Hardy images the human desire to progress towards higher goals, represented in the Titanic, coming into perhaps irremediable conflict with the “Immanent Will” of an opposing universe.\(^98\) The hubris of those who built the ship in a presumptuous bid to subdue the environment presents a classic prerequisite for tragedy. In the face of “human vanity/ And … the Pride of Life” (ll. 2-3) which planned the display of opulent mirrors and “Jewels in joy designed/ To ravish the sensuous mind” (ll.10-11), Hardy opposes an uncaring natural world where the “sea-worm crawls – grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent” and the “moon-eyed fishes”

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\(^95\) Maynard, 6.
\(^96\) LIFE, 155.
\(^98\) Hardy derived “Immanent Will” from his readings in Schopenhauer. Robert Schweik reports that Hardy owned several translations of Schopenhauer’s works, including The World as Will and Idea. Hardy at one time asserted that his “philosophy” was “a development from Schopenhauer through later philosophers”. See Schweik, “The influence of religion, science, and philosophy on Hardy’s writings”, CC, 68.
ask “What does this vaingloriousness down here?”. Above this vision of a naturalistic universe indifferent to humans, he conceives the existence of an implacable entity, the “Spinner of the Years” (l. 31), actively arranging times and circumstances to crush humankind’s hopes. The clashing hemispheres of the poem are a memorable image of Hardy’s tragic vision, describing the ongoing conflict between human ideals and the physical and metaphysical forces which oppose them. What Frye, in Romance and Tragedy, terms the “tragic qualm”, in the modern era is better known as existential angst: the realisation that the time is, to use Hamlet’s words, “out of joint” (I. v. 149). Like Hardy, Shakespeare intimates that noble natures may forever be out of joint with social compromise and vulnerable to failure in their intimate relationships. Hardy gives us reason to believe that the universe itself is out of joint – that an indifferent naturalistic universe, combined with a brooding “Immanent Will”, continues to frustrate all efforts on the part of idealists to rise above the mundane.

Some critics have censured the apparent inconsistency of Hardy’s style, which itself appears to be “out of joint”. Early reviewers were divided concerning the obvious contrasts in his work: for each critic who identified Hardy with sensational Gothic effects or Romantic tendencies, there were an equal, or perhaps even greater, number who identified him with “Zolaism” and a frankness “not hitherto touched in fiction, or Anglo-Saxon fiction at least”. What they failed to register was the number of effects achieved by Hardy’s mixed modes of expression, and how they worked to shock and extend his reader’s tastes and sensitivities. In his Literary Notebooks, Hardy underlined quotations from Anthony Trollope affirming that a good novel should be sensational and realistic, “both in

100 Frye, 98.
101 Cox, 254.
the highest degree”. While his juxtaposition of disparate elements may not always be perfect in execution, the sometimes jarring effect of competing styles extends the reader’s sympathy with intense states of mind and mood swings, like the Gothic elements in Coleridge’s and Shelley’s narrative verse. Also it can draw the reader’s attention to other possible interpretations beneath the realistic narrative surface. Hardy himself insisted that reproducing a natural object is “achieved by seeing into the heart of a thing”, that “realism” should be “pursued by means of the imagination” and employing “what M[athew] Arnold calls ‘the imaginative reason’.”

Recent critics including Richard Nemesvari have suggested that a technique of Hardy’s is to generate generic expectations in his fiction, then subvert them “by introducing contrasting and at times contradictory genre discourses into his narratives”. Hardy’s opposition to purely objective realism, and his use of “disproportioning” and “incongruity”, challenge narrative conventions in ways both modern and postmodern. Widdowson describes Hardy’s approach as demonstrating a “consonance” with later formalist concepts of “defamiliarization” and “denaturalization”. Shires draws attention to Hardy’s propensity to undermine expectations of authorial reliability. Hardy frequently subverts traditional ideas of plot and character, introducing a complex mix of intertextual references which challenge “not just the decorum of a given genre but the decorums of the

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102 Lennart A. Björk, ed. *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1985) 163; hereafter referred to as “LN”.
103 *LIFE*, 147. Tim Dolin’s article drew my attention to this note of Hardy’s which so neatly sums up his creative synthesis of realism and imagination. See “On Hardy’s Realism, Again”, 46.
104 Richard Nemesvari, “‘Genres are not to be mixed … I will not mix them’: Discourse, Ideology, and Generic Hybridity in Hardy’s Fiction”, *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, 102.
105 Harvey, 200.
language”. She suggests that his ruminations on the limits of mimesis in literature undermine “the very foundations of traditional representation and belief”. When such anti-realistic traits are added to Hardy’s sense of “alienated modern consciousness”, Shires has no hesitation in describing him as a “proto-modernist”. Hardy embraces literary theories and philosophies which foreshadow the Modernism of the twentieth century and much that has come since.

Page draws attention to an Impressionist aesthetic in Hardy which values “individual perceptions and private associations” above realistic descriptions. He highlights Hardy’s depiction of characters whose heightened consciousness transforms “a banal external world into something dream-like”. Shires points out that the author particularly admired the English father of Impressionism, Turner, and delighted in the “tragical mysteries” underlying his painterly distortion of reality. Hardy’s prose similarly evokes “the deeper reality underlying the scenic, the expression of what are sometimes called abstract imaginings”. As he comments in “The Science of Fiction”, it requires something beyond the experience of the outer senses to apprehend the “still sad music of humanity”, quoting Wordsworth in order to define his own angst and the tinge of Expressionism as well as Impressionism in his tragic fiction.

This collision of styles in Hardy’s fiction reflects his deeply-held conviction about the discordancy of human existence. As Hardy declares in “Candour in English Fiction”, his “artistic instincts” are attuned to the great tragedies of the past – the “collision between

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109 Page, 39.
110 *LIFE*, 185.
111 “The Science of Fiction”, Orel, 137. Hardy quotes from William Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour”, l. 92.
the individual and the general” – formerly worked out with such force by the Periclean and Elizabethan dramatists”. 112 The clash between well-meaning individuals and inimical gods or Fates hearkens back to Greek tragedy, whereas the struggles of Hardy’s tragic heroes and heroines, often set against the comic relief of rustic characters, have links with Shakespearean drama. Just as Shakespeare used existing stories and adapted them to his own ends, so Hardy draws on traditional and contemporary literary sources, and on folklore and journalism, to create his many-layered tragic novels.

Many of Hardy’s novels had or still have an ur-novel or subplot which informs the major action. In addition, his novels include an interweaving of textual references ranging from classical myths and legends, through Biblical stories to nineteenth-century French fiction. His adaptation of existing material has been so prominent as to give rise, at a time before intertextuality was common, to the imputation of “plagiarism”, though even ninety years ago the charge was framed in inverted commas. Hardy himself conceded that “to plagiarise is the instinct, the characteristic audacity of almost every poet of the highest class”. 113 Hardy stands accused, at times, of even the “literal lifting” 114 of passages. Such intertextuality can lead to a somewhat “over-determined” characterisation of protagonists but is important in creating a feeling of tragic dissonance between the unreleased potential of the created characters and the inhibiting social niches that they are forced to inhabit.

The publication of variant early texts has resulted in a welcome explosion of knowledge about Hardy’s fiction, and made it possible to see submerged and overwritten outlines in the finalised later versions. Variant texts in the Oxford’s World Classics and Penguin Classics editions read at times like suppressed or unconscious thoughts, fears and

112 “Candour”, 126-7.

113 LN, vol. 1, 108.

motivations of the characters. The chapter in which Michael Henchard brings back a
goldfinch as a wedding present for Elizabeth-Jane was cut for the American edition of *The
Mayor of Casterbridge*, restored thereafter, and then cut again a second time for the recent
Penguin edition. This inclusion of this scene shows a softer, more sentimental side of the
irascible Henchard, adding to our sympathy for him in his estrangement from those he has
loved. It also shows a colder, less Cordelia-like Elizabeth-Jane, who can after all be capable
of resentment and unforgiveness. Such scenes, absent or restored, do much to alter our
estimate of the tragic stature of the protagonists.

Related to ur-novels and variant texts are the issues of censored passages and scenes
in which much about the sexual interaction between characters had to be implied. That
Hardy was required to suppress or modify scenes in order to have his novels published has
been well documented. Examining the variant texts over a period of time is illuminating
from both social and literary historical perspectives. In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, the
pivotal sexual encounter between Alec and Tess develops from an early version, in which
Tess is drugged and raped against her will, into a scene revised to read more like seduction.
The 1912 version of the novel contains contrary indications which can be used to justify
either point of view. Learning to read the novels and characters both ways stimulates a
postmodern reading of an unstable text, in which personalities are also unstable and the
moral and social issues with which Hardy is dealing are invested with relativist uncertainty.

Hardy explored humanistic ideals more and more in his later work, as he came to
regard the “application of ideas to life” (a phrase borrowed from Matthew Arnold) as the
“real function” of literary writing. He was well aware that many readers would reject the
philosophical questionings of his novels and that his “grave, positive, stark, delineations”
would not appeal to “stereotyped tastes”. In his “Apology” to *Late Lyrics and Earlier,*
Hardy defended abandoning “delineations ... of the passive, lighter, and traditional sort” so that he could unfold instead a charter of the human soul’s “eternal rights”\textsuperscript{115}.

In this “Apology”, which is more a justification of his life’s work than the introduction to a short collection of poems, Hardy frames a philosophy which he claims to have been his through the earlier decades of his writing. Rather than a purely melioristic philosophy like Shelley’s, Hardy describes it as a qualified or “evolutionary meliorism”, which purports to explore reality stage by stage with a “frank recognition” of the best and worst in humanity.\textsuperscript{116} Such meliorism fell short of being a philosophy of transcendence. As Virginia Hyman points out, progress for evolutionary meliorists was primarily \textit{ethical}, moving “out of the egotistic stage and into the altruistic one”,\textsuperscript{117} in line with Comtean theory. Hardy stood alongside those who wished that “pain ... be kept down to a minimum by loving-kindness, operating through scientific knowledge, actuated by the modicum of free will”. But he concluded with his customary scepticism that progress would only be made when “the mighty necessitating forces – unconscious or other ... happen to be in equilibrium, which may or may not be often”.\textsuperscript{118}

In his \textit{Literary Notebooks}, Hardy aligned himself with Trollope’s proposition, that “he who can deal adequately with tragic elements is a greater artist than the writer whose efforts never carry him above the mild walks of everyday life”.\textsuperscript{119} Defending himself against the charge of “pessimism” in his “General Preface to the Novels and Poems”,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{115} \textit{CP}, 558, 557.
\item \textsuperscript{116} \textit{CP}, 557.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Virginia R. Hyman, \textit{Ethical Perspectives in the Novels of Thomas Hardy} (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat, 1975) 5.
\item \textsuperscript{118} \textit{CP}, 558.
\item \textsuperscript{119} \textit{LN}, vol. 1, 163-64.
\end{itemize}
Hardy contended that “Some natures become vocal at tragedy”. The author himself judged his five tragic novels to be his finest, as have the majority of general readers.

In his “General Preface to the Novels and Poems” for the 1912 Wessex Edition of his collected works, Hardy classified his novels under three headings. The fictions I have focussed on are classed as “Novels of Character and Environment”, novels which, in Hardy’s view, “may claim a verisimilitude in general treatment and detail”. He is somewhat dismissive of the remaining novels, describing them as “Romances and Fantasies” or “Novels of Ingenuity”, further designated as mere “Experiments”. This may be largely a self-protective assertion, designed to allay the often harsh critical reception of the latter two groups of novels and to align himself with the perceived orthodoxy which, as Widdowson argues, “associated literariness with realism”. Modern critics, however, have begun to revalue the as-it-were uncanonical texts which disrupt “the myth of Hardy’s tragic realism”, and embrace what Jane Thomas calls his “Experiments in Metafiction”.

While in no way disparaging the significance of the so-called minor novels, my own study, on Hardy’s evolving treatment of tragedy in fiction, has necessarily focussed on the five so-called major novels.

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120 “General Preface to the Novels and Poems”, Orel, 49.
122 Tim Dolin points out that recent critics have revalued Hardy’s disruption of the conventions of nineteenth-century realism, a change of emphasis which casts doubt on the ranking of these novels. See “On Hardy’s Realism, Again”, 40-41.
123 “General Preface to the Novels and Poems”, 44-45.
124 Dolin, 39.
125 Dolin, 40.
127 Although The Woodlanders is included in “Novels of Character and Environment”, the main characters, Giles Winterborne and Grace Melbury, lack higher ideals and are too passive or too inclined to compromise to qualify as tragic protagonists.