

# MAJOR AND MAYOR – ON TWO ‘TRUTHS’ IN HARDY’S NOVELS (BASED ON A READING OF HIS OWN PREFACES)

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The present paper offers a reading of the prefaces to Thomas Hardy’s *The Trumpet Major* (1880) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). We focus mainly on the former novel and use the latter as a point of reference. In this study we try to get a better understanding of how close to past experiences Hardy used as a basis of his novels he actually was. The observations made in our perusal of the prefatory texts are influenced by the hermeneutical ideas of scholars such as Wolfgang Iser and Paul Ricoeur.

**Keywords:** Thomas Hardy, reality, fiction, preface

When exploring Hardy’s views on art, discussions often draw attention to his opinion that “[a]rt is a disproportioning – (i.e. distorting, throwing out of proportion) – of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence “realism” is not Art” (Hardy/Харди 1983: 228 – 229). The message here is quite in accordance with another often mentioned statement from his preface to *Tess* – “Let me repeat that a novel is an impression, not an argument; and there the matter must rest” (Hardy/Харди 2008: xii). These two would suggest that Hardy’s approach to writing has additional aspects that allow for a more multifaceted label rather than simply defining his work as that of a realist – a term itself multifaceted, critically volatile, and precariously voluminous for the intentions of the current investigation.

The effort to gauge Hardy’s faithfulness to past realities may not be conclusive, but a good working definition could lead, if not to a precise designation of a literary style, at least to a better understanding of his work. The novelist’s own writings concerning his novels can shed light on the question. While his surviving notebooks containing data related to the writing of his fiction have been somewhat researched, the prefaces to his novels have not been studied from this perspective, to the best of our knowledge.

Since the “chief function [of a preface is] to ensure that the text is read properly” (Genette/ЖЕНЕТ 1997: 197), I shall look at the prefatorial sections of two novels and view them against the background of all pertinent critical opinions and literary theory with a view to gaining a better understanding of how Hardy used historical facts in his prose fiction. This research makes use of the prefaces of the early 20th century *Wessex Edition*. The reasons that lead one to choose these stem not only from the later date, which suggests latest thoughts and most updated condition, but also from the opinion of critics that this edition is “the definitive text” (Orel/ОрЪЛ 1990: xi). It offers both the latest versions of prefaces and their previous variants, yet it does not prioritise one over another. One can read an opinion of an earlier date and then that of a later one. In this way, we can trace the development of how Hardy regarded his works and how he reacted to readers’ reception and queries, and to criticism.

Most of the prefaces to Hardy’s fourteen novels seem to share a pattern in terms of their contents. Hardy usually provides a label of the particular novel such as a tale, frivolous narrative, picture, study, etc. He tends to give an in-depth description of all aspects of the setting, i.e. the characteristics of a specific region and time period, placing emphasis on the peculiarities and customs of the people living therein. Additionally, one finds some information about the pieces of evidence that were used, which contributes to our conviction in the authenticity of Hardy’s accounts, as well as clarifications whenever the mixture of fictionality and historicity has confused readers as to the identities of characters or places. The novelist also uses these prefaces to engage in a dialogue with critics and readers in which one can perceive his reaction to reception and criticism.

For the purposes of concise illustration, I have selected the prefaces to *The Trumpet Major* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as they are particularly indicative of matters pertaining to this paper. *The former novel is based on meticulous research confirming the facts behind the story, while the amount of preparatory work for the latter one was considerably smaller.* In other words, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is similar to other Hardy novels in terms of preparation.

The current study shall be unfolded by an examination of the available background of pertinent critical work and with a view of elucidating the writer’s perception and volume of reality in his fiction. Hardy’s notebooks and some of his literary essays will contribute to this purpose. Most importantly, a reading of the two prefaces could lead to an understanding of the intended and available disproportioning suggested therein.

### Introduction to the Resources Hardy Used

Critics have found out that some of Hardy’s surviving notebooks contain information confirming the fact that Hardy used historical records when preparing for his writing – William Greenslade observes that the novelist’s ‘Facts’ notebook shows that Hardy referred to the ‘Dorset County Chronicle and Somersetshire Gazette, especially for the years 1826-30’ focusing mainly on ‘all kinds of crime [...], current fashions, [...], trials [...], and executions’ (Greenslade/Грийнслейд 2000: 172). The same critic goes on to refer to Hardy’s acclaimed biographer who notes that the novelist desired to preserve ‘a fairly true record of a vanishing life’ for the purpose of his own satisfaction (Millgate in Greenslade/Милгейт, Грийнслейд 2000: 172). Millgate is also convinced that Hardy used his “Facts” notebook while he was perusing the entries from the Dorset County Chronicle at the time of his working on *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (cf. Millgate in Greenslade/Милгейт, Грийнслейд 2000: 177).

Other sources indicate that Thomas Hardy used a late 18th-century historical book on the region of Dorset as a point of reference – John Hutchins’ *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, which resulted in certain minor infelicities (Pinion/Пиниън 1968: 130). This comes to show that despite rejecting the optical reproduction of reality, Hardy tried to adhere to historical records and this led him to import even the inaccuracy that *The History* contained (Pinion/Пиниън 1968: 130). Using the recorded past of a region in this particular manner sounds contradictory to the idea of disproportioning, but Hardy has clarified that the changing of proportions can be of the “kind which increases the sense of vraisemblance” (Hardy/Харди 1983: 228) that makes things “more true” (Orel/Оръл 1990: 118). This could explain his historical point of reference – in the desire to create pieces of art which contain a higher level of truth in this sense, one needs a solid stepping stone so that this comparative degree can be formed. Wolfgang Iser seems to have a similar opinion on this as he refers to life in its relationship to literature as a “storehouse from which [literature] draws its material in order to stage what in life appeared to have been sealed off from access” (Iser/Изер 1989: 244). He also deems that literature is “a form of interpretation” and because of this “it must be linked to the real world” (Iser/Изер 1989: 210), which is exactly what Hardy’s novels demonstrate – an interpretation of events from an idiosyncratic viewpoint. In other words, the writer has certain attachments to the Napoleonic wars no matter whether it is owing to his (potential) family relations, his interest in local history, or both of them, and he borrows facts,

interpreting them in a fictional manner that serves his taste, desire, and motivation.

Pinion has also found out that Hardy's interest in old customs and superstitions was engendered in his childhood family environment and they were later used in his books – in other words, they were not invented by him but true to folk tradition in which Hardy seems to perceive great value for a narrative (cf. Pinion/Пиниън 1968: 131). While these manifestations of established beliefs are different from text-book history that is supposed to be based on veritable sources, they are, or at least were, also a way of recording and preserving events that occurred in the world of a community. In other words, Hardy's fascination with folklore, as testified by scholars and manifest in his works, is a fascination with history of a kind. Such is the case with *The Withered Arm*, a popular long short story of his. It is a tale of jealousy and revenge in which the supernatural is mixed with the factual, and local superstition plays an important role (cf. Hardy/Харди 1999: XXI – XXII, 50 – 53, 68 – 70).

### **The Trumpet Major**

The prefatory text to this novel in the Wessex edition bears the date October 1895 which appears after a clarification that the book was published in three volumes in 1880. This means that it differs from most other prefaces in that it did not receive an early 20th century update. One possible reason for this is the fact that this particular work was well-founded on evidence and it was unnecessary to update what was well argued.

Hardy begins by stating that this “tale is founded more largely on testimony – oral and written – than any other in this series” and specifies that these pieces of evidence are “mostly an unexaggerated reproduction of the recollections” of people he knew personally and who were eye-witnesses to the events narrated (Orel/Оръл 1990: 13 – 14<sup>1</sup>). On page 29 one finds an authorial intrusion:

*The present writer, to whom this party has been described times out of number by members of the Loveday family and other aged people, can never enter the old living-room of Overcombe Mill without beholding the genial scene through the mists of the seventy or eighty years that intervene between then and now.* (Hardy/Харди 2002: 29)

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<sup>1</sup> We use Harold Orel's *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings: Prefaces, Literary Opinions, Reminiscences* for the Wessex Edition prefaces to the two novels in the spotlight of this research.

He also specifies that there exist physical “relics of the circumstances amid which the action moves” – a door with bullet-holes, fragments of weapons, buildings with military purposes, etc, and that these “lingering remains” brought to his “imagination in early childhood the state of affairs at the date of the war more vividly than volumes of history could have done” (Orel/Оръл 1990: 14).

The preface continues with the difficulties in determining an accurate sequence of events in the construction of “a coherent narrative of past times” and refers to the use of newspapers of the date and points at several documents mentioned in the book, as well as to a potential infelicity in a minor scene (Orel/Оръл 1990: 14 – 15). A confession of mistake appears in the preface to *Wessex Tales* too, a collection of stories that appeared a few years after *The Trumpet Major*, which is indicative of his consistent desire not to stray far from facts (cf. Hardy/Харди 1999: XXI – XXII). One of the documents mentioned in the novel’s prefatory text is the address from Chapter 23 which invites Englishmen from “all ranks and descriptions” to join in the military endeavour against the expected landing of the French (Hardy 2002: 139). Another interesting document is the caricature referenced in the preface and described in the novel as something “to make [people] brave and patriotic” (cf. Hardy 2002: 151) while others naively believed “Buonaparte to be in countenance and habits precisely [like] what the caricatures represented him” (Hardy 2002: 165).

All this points to the similarity of this work of fiction to compositions that are not exactly fictional. Genette observes that a common trait of prefaces to historical works from the time of Herodotus onwards is the credit authors give to themselves in their prefaces is their strife for “truthfulness or [...] sincerity – that is, the effort to achieve truthfulness” (Genette/Женет 1997: 206). The presence of this feature in the examined text does not automatically turn *The Trumpet Major* into a history book, of course. Genette also points out that fiction “is not wholly unfamiliar with this contract of truthfulness” (Genette/Женет 1997: 206) and refers to Balzac’s view that “even the details rarely belong to the writer [...] The only thing that comes from him is the combination of events, their arrangement” (207). While this definition cannot be applied to every novel, it clarifies that Hardy was not alone in his pursuit and, more importantly, that there are more than a few parallels between his work and those of historians. Such an interpretation could help one embellish the overall theoretical inclinations taken in this paper.

The conclusions we could draw, then, are the following. Even though Thomas Hardy labels this novel as a “tale” and a “romance” (Hardy/Харди

2002: 13, 15) which discloses the fictional character of the work (this echoes Iser's words on fiction's self-disclosure – “it turns the whole of the world organized in the text into an 'as-if' construction” (Iser/Изер 1993: 13) or, in simple words, the work tells its reader that it is a product of fiction), his process of conducting a research, working with the collected material in arranging it, is very similar to what happens, according to Hayden White, in the composition of a historian's text – namely, “endowing sets of events with, first, chronological and, then, narratological order and, beyond that, transforming persons and groups into figures in a scene that has more in common with the theatre than with real life” (White/Уайт 2006: 30). This cannot encourage us to claim that Hardy took on the cloak of a historian in the production of *The Trumpet Major*, but it comes to emboss the relationship between fiction and history – if not by drawing definitive borders between the notions, at least by broadening our understanding of what they have in common. Despite that fact that Hardy's approach appears to be self-contradictory, it could be considered that what he labeled “a romance” is, in its approach, very close to the work of a historian as per White's understanding.

### **The Trumpet Major Notebook**

*The Trumpet Major* is a particular novel in the light of the current investigation, as it had a dedicated notebook in which Hardy collected his research. One critic notes that it is different from other notebooks in that it “has a practical focus; the facts assembled relate essentially to the public and verifiable matter of the story” (Greenslade/Грийнслейд 2000: 175). Hardy actually claims, in his preface, that if he had to transcribe all the memories of eye-witnesses, the length of the book would have been increased significantly (cf. Orel/Оръл 1990: 14). This means that he acted as an editor of the evidence, which makes the creation of the novel a good example of Iser's theory of the fictive in literature – we select elements from real life, we combine them to the workings of the imaginary in our mind, and the fictive then reveals itself as a somewhat conditional world, an “as-if” (cf. Iser/Изер 1993: 13, 14, 16), as we observed earlier. Hardy found a load of facts and chose to use those of them that best fitted the narrative he wanted to compose. The resulting narrative is the said ‘as-if’ construction, “a world organized in the text” and one's attitude towards it must be moderated (Iser/Изер 1993: 13) because of the established awareness of its being a fictional construction, however factually supported it may be.

The same scholar believes that literature “reacts to reality, and in doing so interprets it” and that we live by interpreting so as to “establish something that will correspond to the needs of a particular situation without laying claim to any normative validity of other situations” (Iser/Изер 1989: 209). Hardy’s literature, from this point of view, can be regarded as a reaction to the days of his life when country life was changing at a great pace and his desire, as mentioned above, was to preserve it as a record – for his own satisfaction – of important events in which his family was probably involved. In the selection of what to preserve he, no doubt, interpreted the data he had at his disposal – what is more indicative of this past life, what is most important and worthy of his writerly attention.

We cannot refrain from noting that there might have been a personal motive behind Hardy’s desire to do his thorough research. Michael Millgate comments that Hardy’s library had genealogical accounts of other families and figures with his surname possibly connected to his line (cf. Millgate/Милгейт 2004: 8). Among these is a potential personal connection to the Napoleonic wars – “the Thomas Masterman Hardy of Portisham who was Nelson’s flag-captain at Trafalgar” (Millgate/Милгейт 2004: 8) is perhaps the one that may have provoked the novelist the most. It is curious to observe that in Hardy’s first biography written by his second wife, supposedly under his dictation, these other Hardy people are presented as members of the family (cf. Hardy/Харди 1983: 5) and not as potential connections as the case is in Millgate’s more contemporary revised biography.

### **The Mayor of Casterbridge**

The preface to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* appears to be a blend of two versions of it as we are given a single text with two dates below it – February 1895 and May 1912. The novel is defined as a “tale” and more of “a study of one man’s deeds and character than, perhaps, any other of those included in my Exhibition of Wessex life” (Orel/Оръл 1990: 18). This is in accordance with his notion voiced in *The Science of Fiction* that good writers possess “a sympathetic appreciativeness of life in all of its manifestations, this is the gift which renders its possessor a more accurate delineator of human nature” (Hardy/Харди 1998: 122). Despite his frequent portrayal of characters as dots against a vast landscape that are left to capricious fate, Hardy always seems to remain on the side of the downtrodden and makes them his protagonists. We are referred to British economic policy relating to “the home Corn Trade” (Orel/Оръл 1990: 18)

underscoring its importance for the people at the time which would have been difficult to understand by a later reader. Hardy then mentions the three real incidents that form the basis of the story, saying that they “chanced to range themselves in the order and at or about the intervals of time” presented in the novel after which he lists the three independently occurring events (Orel/Оръл 1990: 18). This is followed by an explanation of an update in the contents based on the reception of US readers. The prefatory text continues with an answer to criticism received regarding the speech of the Scottish character in which he defends his choices by pointing out his references (a professor of the tongue and a lady married to a Scotchman), declaring that his intention was to present him as a Scotchman would appear to Southerners and not to other Scotchmen (Orel/Оръл 1990: 19 – 20). In other words, Hardy attempted not to represent the thing but the impression of the thing.

Even though the preface avoids all mention of the historical research he conducted in the construction of this work, apart from the mention of these three incidents and the political point of reference, critics have built bridges between them and the excerpts in one of his notebooks. Among these discoveries is one related to a fragment from *The Brighton Gazette* that narrates about the selling of a wife who had two children and even though in the final text of the novel there is only one child, an earlier manuscript shows that the Henchard family had two children (cf. Winfield/Уинфийлд 1970: 226 – 227). Another example might be a description of the amphitheatre where Henchard was about to have a clandestine meeting with his lost wife. We learn that there was something sinister about this location and that its “history proved that” (Hardy/Харди 2011: 88), which statement is followed by a brief description of all bloody and grim events that had taken place there, among which the communal account about a woman who killed her husband and was then brutally executed and “at a certain stage of the burning her heart burst and leapt out of her body” (Hardy/Харди 2011: 88). This account is of the type Greenslade and Millgate indicated as a specific Hardy interest in his perusal of local chronicles, as discussed earlier.

### **Some further theoretical clarifications**

One must inevitably consider how the context of the age could have affected Hardy’s thoughts on history and literature. Hayden White notes that the concept of history was reformulated in the 19th century – “historical consciousness was for the first time theorized, and the modern scientific method of historical inquiry was inaugurated.” (White/Уайт 2011: 25). He



goes on to add that fiction is the enemy to history because “it presents imaginary things as if they were real and substitutes illusion for truth” (White/Уайт 2011: 25). White claims that literature in this period “has regarded history not so much as its other as, rather, its complement in the work of identifying and mapping a shared object of interest, a real world” and that the renowned modernist writers aimed at “representing a real instead of a fictional world quite as much as any modern historian” or, in other words, “modernism created a new conception of realistic representation itself and beyond that a new notion of reading which permits a creative re-reading even of the formerly transparent historical document” (White/Уайт 2011: 26, 27). Thus, we can suppose that Hardy may have been affected by this new way of looking at history which is partly realist in its strife for being true to a world in the empirical sense of the word and in the use of history as a complementary resource in the (re)construction of a narrative in the cases of the reviewed novels. This process unfolds with Hardy casting a fictional garment over his creation that helps one realize, as the writer put it in his essay *The Profitable Reading of Fiction*, that a novel is “a view of the thing” and not the thing itself (Orel/Оръл 1990: 124).

The same essay shows Hardy’s claim that the best fiction “is more true [...] than history or nature can be” and that the “idealization of characters is [...] the making of them too real to be possible” (Orel/Оръл 1990: 118). This leads us back to the initial quote in which Hardy denounces realism as art and praises disproportioning instead. The type of disproportioning (intentional or unintentional), judging from the essay in question, he strove to achieve may have been namely this – making characters and stories based on reality but because they have been cut out of the real world and pasted in the controlled environment of the novel, they have been aestheticised and made more real and true in the sense that these figures of history are more available or accessible through art.

To go back to White’s theory, he writes that “historical knowledge always comes to the present in a processed form” (White/Уайт 2011: 29) and this processing of raw data is a preliminary stage as they contain a certain potential, and along the road to the composition of a historical text is where “the problem of the relation between the factual and the fictive in historical discourse arises” (White/Уайт 2011: 30). To put it differently, sterile bits of historical information have to be put together and organized by someone and in the act of doing so how much of the account is contaminated by the subjectivity of the historian is uncertain. This is probably why White aphoristically paraphrases Collingwood that “one cannot historicize without narrativizing” and that “historical discourse

refers to objects and events in a real world – but [...] since these objects and events are no longer perceivable, they have to be constructed as possible objects of a possible perception rather than treated as real objects of real perceptions” (Collingwood in White/Уайт 2011: 30). Essentially, it appears, a historian in general, on the one hand, and a novelist such as Thomas Hardy, on the other, differ in the way of narrativization, and in the idiosyncratic for some fictional texts self-disclosure. The latter is not available in history books but that does not mean that the subjectivity of the people who put them together did not ‘contaminate’ the raw data with fiction.

Paul Ricoeur reflects upon similar matters, stating that “in inventing documents [...] history is conscious that it is related to events that “really” happened”<sup>2</sup> (Ricoeur/Рикьор 1990: 5). It is noteworthy how he chooses his words in saying “history is conscious” which sets an illusory impersonal atmosphere. Of course, what is implied is the people who write history. He continues by explaining that these documents are traces for the consciousness in question – signs “of what was but no longer is” (Ricoeur/Рикьор 1990: 5). From Hardy’s prefaces and the information we have from other sources regarding his compositional process we know that it adheres to this pattern – his novels are based on, in the case of *The Trumpet Major*, factual information drawing from documents, oral testimony, relics, history books, and communal tradition, or are at least inspired by various independent events that truly happened and were recorded in a local chronicle, as is the case of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

### Hardy and Realism

As stated in J. A. Cuddon's *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1998), ‘Realism is [...]’ an ‘exceptionally elastic critical term, often ambivalent and equivocal’ but, essentially, ‘realism is the portrayal of life with fidelity’ (Cuddon/Къдън 1998: 728 – 729). Peter Childs associates the term with “the effort of the novel in the nineteenth century [...] to establish itself as a major literary genre”, he also notes that it suggests an obsession with “physical detail and topographical accuracy” and that “the novelist is only metaphorically and incidentally a historian” (Childs and Fowler/Чайлдс, Фаулър 2006: 198). He adds that while “all theories of realism [...] rest on the assumption that the novel

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<sup>2</sup> By the invention of documents in this part of his work, Ricoeur seems to have in mind the raising “to the rank of document traces of the past that were not meant to serve as the basis for a historical narrative” (Ricoeur 1990: 5).

imitates reality [...] it is possible to conceive of the relationship between art and reality in terms of imaginative creation rather than imitation” (Childs and Fowler/Чайлдс, Фаулър 2006: 200). Hardy, in his essay *The Science of Fiction*, too labels realism as an “unfortunate, an ambiguous word” and seems to express a certain dislike towards it and comments that “a more accurate delineator of human nature” is someone who has “the mental tactility that comes from a sympathetic appreciativeness of life” and not someone who has strong “external observation, but without that sympathy” (Hardy/Харди 1998: 122). These, taken together with the quote on realism presented at the beginning of the paper, cannot but confuse one. On the one hand, we are induced to think that Hardy did not subscribe to the school of realism (however many conventional and not so conventional interpretations this term may have), hence he himself would not describe his works as realist novels. On the other hand, his prefaces and notebooks show that he strove to portray life with fidelity – be it as in the case with *The Trumpet Major* for which he used documents and conducted careful research, or as in the case with *The Mayor of Casterbridge* where he used bits and pieces of real events and combined them in his way.

Hardy would have trouble qualifying as a realist according to another theory that classifies classic realist fiction as having “impersonal narration” as the novels of Hardy contain narrators that pronounce their presence (discourse) and do not allow “the events to narrate themselves” (*histoire*) (Childs and Fowler/Чайлдс, Фаулър 2006: 200).

Thus it appears that Hardy’s prefaces can bring further clarity into the question of how true to reality his art was, and help one realize that there can be more than one appropriate “-ist” category for it. Whether we could agree with some who call him a surrealist based on, among other things, the way he uses “chance” as a plot-trigger and the particularity of his visual way of depicting characters and landscapes (cf. Sumner/Самнър 1985: 46 – 53) or label him an impressionist based on a few of the quotes here given or because of the way he creates verbal pictures that are possible because of light or involve a specifically constructed description of the light in certain scenes, or we could agree with some critics is a question that can be in the focus of a thorough future research.

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