MARRIAGE, MURDER, AND MORALITY;
THE SECRET AGENT AND TESS

Abstract

This article opens by citing some contemporary reviews and critical accounts (including Conrad's own) to show how (and why!) Conrad was commonly compared to Thomas Hardy by those people who then read him. Evidence that Conrad in fact had read Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles, and with deliberation and care adapted dramatic elements that struck him to form a crucial part of The Secret Agent, is considered. It is maintained that Conrad found much in Tess that was of use, often in the spirit of creative rejection. Key areas of both novels are closely examined, and Conrad's characteristic method of ironic tragedy is contrasted with Hardy's particular tragic emphases. Ultimately, the intention of this study is to place present assumptions about the nature of "Modernism" in a new light.

An unsigned review of The Secret Agent in the Glasgow News of 3 October 1907 contrasts the mood of Conrad's writing with that of the tragic Thomas Hardy:

At the utmost there is a grave irony, or a faint tinge of melancholy, as of one brooding without resentment over the futility of human efforts and desires. But this is a new note in our literature - Hardy's sombre tragedy is something quite different.

This astute immediate response to the striking originality of Conrad's novel appears to fit in with a general contemporary English attempt to place the mature, post-sea novel Conrad in the perspective of some recent, familiar English novelist. Hardy's later tragedies, such as The Mayor of Casterbridge, Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure seemed to provide a natural reference-point for Conrad readers. C. E. Montague, reviewing Chance in the Manchester Guardian of 15 January 1914, compares Conrad with Tess, saying of the Dorset novelist:

Mr Hardy likes to show the sufferers, by such tragic embarrassments [defined by Montague as "profound, incalculable troubling of the stream of experience, not by their fault"] in their isolation - to show, for instance, how little it mattered to anyone what mattered to Tess.

Richard Curle in his Joseph Conrad, A Study (1914) in his chapter 10 ("Conrad as Artist") makes an explicit contrast between the two writers:

Conrad again shows his artistic realism in the fact that his works are not overweighted with mechanical plots or impossible coincidences. No character can appear actual, when it is obvious from the first that its life has to fit into a preconceived dovetailing. Look at the dénouement of a book like Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge - it is too absurdly
obvious that the author himself is pulling the strings of fate. Conrad can write a novel called *Chance*, he could never write one called *Coincidence*. There is all the difference in the world.

In a rather different spirit R. E. Megroz remarks in his *Joseph Conrad's Mind and Method* (New York, 1931):

Conrad had a much more critical respect for what we may call the realism of human emotions than his modern English peers, Meredith and Hardy. . . . And yet Hardy's definition of his own artistic aim exactly fits that of Conrad: "to intensify the expression of things, so that the heart and inner meaning is vividly visible".

— but perhaps, as I wish to show later, though *The Secret Agent* can be shown to bear a most interesting relation to Hardy's artistic emphases, Conrad's "heart and inner meaning" is often quite another thing from Hardy's!

J. H. Retinger, a Pole who knew Conrad well, mentions in his *Conrad and his Contemporaries* (London, 1941) that Conrad himself "among his contemporaries praised Thomas Hardy and Henry James for the virility of their conceptions, the economy of their technique, the precision of their style". Then, of course, there is the famous letter by Conrad to John Galsworthy of 6 January 1908 on the failure of his *The Secret Agent*:

I suppose there is something in one that is unsympathetic to the general public — because the novels of Hardy, for instance, are generally tragic enough and gloomily written too — and yet they have sold in their time and are selling to the present day.

Jocelyn Baines for one, though, from studying Conrad's private correspondence for his *Joseph Conrad, A Critical Biography* (London, 1960), found it hard to discover whether he had ever actually read Hardy or Meredith (as opposed, one presumes, to casually browsing through pages and checking impressions against a generally "received opinion"

— well, Conrad *had* met Hardy personally, which may possibly indicate that he had bothered to look into at least one or two of his novels.

If Conrad *had* looked into *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* he would surely have found much of vital interest to his creative concerns, even in the nature of a rejection. In certain ways Tess Durbeyfield is the strongest and most vivid tragic character in all Hardy's fiction, with the author's weighty emphasis on the striking and peculiar blend in her character