

## ***The Trumpet Major* – The Historical Novel That Paved the Way to Hardy’s Later Fiction**

Spiridon Kaloshev

**Abstract:** *The paper discusses the similarities and differences of Hardy’s middle period novel *The Trumpet Major* with his later novels *the Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. It focuses on the intense questioning of human existence and Hardy’s departure from the earlier novels of his period of apprenticeship. It also points the similarities and differences with the traditional historical novels of Scott and Flaubert.*

**Key words:** *Historical Novel, Sensitivity, Ordinary Characters, Sense of Time, War.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

During the nineteenth century and awareness of the individual as a historical person slowly began to grow up. It was not only in historians and in novelists but also in ordinary man and women living with a stronger awareness of the times. It was out of this awareness that *The Trumpet Major* was written. It’s a highly original contribution to the genre of historical fiction, which was very popular during the nineteenth century. Like the early novels of Hardy’s, more prominently *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far From the Madding Crowd* it studies ordinary people placed in a tradition of pastoral simplicity reminiscent of the poetry of William Wordsworth and the early novels of George Eliot. Like his later novels – *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, which have the focus around more extraordinary people, it’s a dark novel that has its roots in an intense questioning of the meaning of human existence in a world without Providence. It combines post-Christian disillusionment, historical nostalgia and tenderness for the unremarkable lives of those who rest in “unvisited tombs”, to use the George Eliot phrase.

### **MAIN BODY**

When we speak of Thomas Hardy’s historical consciousness we need to think of it as compounded of two different but related entities – sense of history and sense of time. The historical novels of Walter Scott and Gustave Flaubert are primarily social, even archeologic. Hardy’s historical novels, on the other hand, are novels of sensibility, products of his attitude to history and philosophy. Like George Eliot he calls himself a meliorist – a man who believes that improvement in society depends on the human effort and refuses to move from Christian optimism to pessimism. Like her, he takes an intense interest in the individual man’s awareness and unawareness of the conditions that determine his life, including the pressures of time, place, heredity and society. He records the changing pattern of custom, ritual and occupation, and returns constantly to a reflection on man’s ironical ignorance of the world that makes him. But whereas George Eliot tends to admire people with some sense of history, some sensitive awareness of their own difficulties, and some capacity for action, Thomas Hardy is strongly and lovingly drawn to characters who don’t have the faintest idea of what is happening to them. This is of course not to say that he confines his attention to limited sensibilities or intellects. Tess, Jude and Sue can stand with Dorothea Brooke or Daniel Deronda as instances of lives made creative and painful by radical imagination. In *The Trumpet-Major*, however, no one is remarkable for mind, passion or creativity, though the Trumpet-Major himself, as his skill and instrument imply, is the most powerful figure. But all the characters, including John Loveday, are ordinary human beings, leading lives over which they have virtually no control.

Those are ordinary people who lack name and fame and the lack is especially striking because they are placed at a time of historical crisis, are brought up against name and fame. They occupy the same world as people who have made history, the strongly felt

though invisible character of Napoleon and the highly visible George III and Captain Hardy. The little people are shown acting out their destinies and dying their deaths alongside the great, whose destinies and deaths are notable and crucial, whose tombs are visited.

In *The Trumpet-Major* almost everything the people do and say is directly affected by the wars and dynasties. Despite their shared meliorism, Hardy is quite different from George Eliot in her attitude to the past and the present. While *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* vibrate with the hope that a knowledge of the past may help us to create a better future. Hardy's conclusions are usually sombre, deriving little cheer from bright prospects or sublime deaths. His work is lit with pity for human beings, and not only does he frequently show their energies checked, frustrated and destroyed, but also his affection spreads, un-Victoriantly and disconcertingly, over ordinary people as well as extraordinary, weak and strong, moral and immoral.

When he reflects on the future, it is often to observe the disastrously premature careers of those born before their time, like Clym Yeobright, Jude or Sue, and his characters tend to be blighted in their creativity before it really gets started. Hardy leans towards pity, therefore, rather than admiration, though esteem and respect are strongly present through the novels. He is like Dickens's powerful anti-Utilitarian, Sissy Jupe, of *Hard Times*, in his refusal to be consoled by statistics and graphs of future improvements. His attitude to history is also like that of his own Tess, who retorts marvellously to Angel Clare's highly Victorian offer of history lessons that all history will show her is a long row of similar sufferers.

Hardy's late novels concentrate on social injustice. Some of his early ones give more emphasis to the fatality of daily existence, the seeming injustice of everyone's life and death. While he shares the moral assumptions and reformist hopes of his three great predecessors in Victorian fiction, Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot, his sense of the shortness of life seems connected not only with his criticism of society, but also with his doubts about the fairness of nature. This haunting sense of time and death makes his novels especially anxious and melancholy. It may also have something to do with his moral toughness and tolerance.

Turning to Hardy after Dickens and George Eliot (perhaps not so much after Thackeray, whose moral expectations are pitched fairly low) we may well be struck by the absence of intensity and concern about moral merit and defect. This is not to say that he doesn't have moral preferences, and he is clearly alive to the ironies of the survival of the coarse-grained Arabella and Vilbert in *Jude*. He is also aware of the fineness of John Loveday, compared with his brother Bob, but he refuses to put people into very clear-cut moral classes and groupings. In *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *The Trumpet-Major* his moral tolerance is close to his sense of levelling death, which waits for everyone, strong and weak, stupid and intelligent, constant and fickle. We do not feel that the cupidity of Squire Derriman, for instance, is especially rebuked by death, as that of old Featherstone is in *Middlemarch*, because Hardy makes it crystal clear that everyone else in the story is rebuked by death too.

Hardy's characters, like their author, frequently sound the elegiac note. Marty South laments the death of Giles, "a good man, who did good things", but the Mellstock Quire in *Under the Greenwood Tree* speaks with respect of a more dubious character, Sam Lawson, "good, but not religious-good", and the epitaph makes no bones about his lack of virtue. What turns up as a moral feature in the characters commonly derives from the quality of the author's imagination. *The Trumpet-Major* joins elegiac melancholy with moral tolerance. Being sharply aware of death's end made Hardy imaginatively permissive. The deaths in the novel do not exactly render life meaningless, but certainly shift our view of success and failure, personal or political. Death in this novel is no entrance to glory, either heavenly or secular, for the individual or society. Dickens's last pages often contain the heartening organ-notes of a better world; George Eliot often expects us to cheer up at the

thought of joining the choir invisible, and contributing to the larger good of the world by a bit of good road-building, improved woods, or the message of a novel. Hardy refuses to end with these enlargements of vision, though Tess and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* end, Shakespearianly, with a limited suggestion of better lives, though only for individuals. But *The Trumpet-Major*, like the late novels, ends most startlingly and unreassuringly by assimilating the sense of the fiction's ending to the fact of death.

The Trumpet-Major tells the saddest story, that common human story which always has the same ending, that of death. Most novelists tell unhappy or happy stories which end prematurely, with emotional, material, or moral, success and failure. At times Hardy uses death, as in Tess or Jude, to emphasise the sadness of the actual life, but in *The Trumpet-Major* death is there to level success and failure. It is beside the point to distinguish or compare the private and the public endings of this novel, as critics sometimes do, because they are subsumed by the remorselessness of the mortal end. Hardy, unlike most novelists, seems to feel that he must include the fact of death because he is writing a historical novel. Perhaps this is to state the case with a pedantry alien to Hardy, so let me put it another way: we might say that Hardy felt a particular compassion for his characters because they were dead. Part of his feeling about history involves the sharp imagining of people dressed differently, in some ways conditioned differently, but exactly like us in their deaths. He could not write about real or imagined people, who lived so long ago, without feeling their mortality. His sense of death is created by his thoroughgoing imagination.

Death is present in the novel in many ways. Hardy employs strict accuracy in showing some dead people still alive in memory, like Anne's father, the landscape-painter, and old people afraid of death, like Squire Derriman, who is the only person to die a civilian death in the present action of the novel. But by far the most impressive and original sense of death is connected with Hardy's special invocation of past and future.

The image of the worn-out millstone is marvellously contrasted with the shorter and flimsier life of the weathervane, in itself an image of changeableness, and made even more changeable by its reference to the shift from soldier John to sailor Bob and then by its own unreliability. It had often been observed that the weathervane does well to stand for Bob, whose fickleness is to justify his actually being called a weathercock. But the image also stands for the common round of love, and its many shifts in this story. It stands too, as the worn-out millstones make clear, for the general whirligig of Time.

The sense of time is strong in the love-story. Private and public worlds are both limited and contained by time, and are eventually erased by it. In *The Dynasts* Hardy emphasises the passing of dynasties, powers and principalities, and in *The Trumpet-Major* he emphasises the passing of the ordinary people, the unhistoric men and women who lie in their unvisited tombs, but are no deader than George III, Nelson or Napoleon. This novel is Wordsworthian not merely in its chronicle of rural life, but in its scrupulously imaginative portrayal of ordinary people.

The very love-lives of the characters are enmeshed with the story of a society, its restrictions and opportunities. Hardy's later novels are more concerned with this kind of history, focused and made articulate in characters given a fair measure of sophisticated consciousness. But his simple pastoral novels, including the historical-pastoral *The Trumpet-Major*, are after something rather different. In them he shows the everyday life of the time through the lives and eyes of very simple people, whose ordinariness is scarcely yet dated.

For it is love, as well as death, which is treated as a constant element in the novel. Although Anne is sometimes described as "quaint", her combination of primness and capriciousness belongs to most of Hardy's heroines, just as the irrationality and the toughness of all the Lovedays and Garlands can be found in most of his novels. The people are all fairly simple, and Hardy plays down their mental life, though not so as to reduce them to simple-mindedness. On at least one occasion Anne is given a trace of historical consciousness, and so, more surprisingly, is Bob:

*Anne now felt herself close to and looking into the stream of recorded history, within whose banks the littlest things are great, and outside which she and the general bulk of the human race were content to live on as an unreckoned, unheeded superfluity. [2, p. 123]*

*. . . The spectators, who, unlike our party, had no personal interest in the soldiery, saw only troops and battalions in the concrete, straight lines of red, straight lines of blue, white lines formed of innumerable knee-breeches, black lines formed of many gaiters, coming and going in kaleidoscopic change. Who thought of every point in the line as an isolated man, each dwelling all to himself in the hermitage of his own mind? One person did, a young man far removed from the barrow where the Garlands and Miller Loveday stood. The natural expression of his face was somewhat obscured by the bronzing effects of rough weather, but the lines of his mouth showed that affectionate impulses were strong within him - perhaps stronger than judgment well could regulate. [2, p.119-20]*

Apart from the unhappy instance of Festus, the characters possess a candid simplicity far from simple in its action. It may be associated with courage, as in Miller Loveday, whose admission that he is going off to war without any shot exasperates Bob, but who is endeared to the reader through his determination to 'bagnet' the enemy, if the worst comes to the worst.

The other comic soldier, the militia drill-sergeant, is a more admirable and endearing figure, whose difficulty in telling his right hand from the left, reflect with delight on the awkwardness of militias, as well as making a small Falstaffian contribution to the satirical deflation of war. It is through comedy that the terrors of war are often presented. The pikes in the church terrify Anne but only on Bob's behalf, invoking his grim comment, as she shifts from fear to the cold remark that John has the same chance as for the others, 'Yes - yes - the same chance, such as it is.'

Another brilliant stroke was to assimilate the historic event or the historic object, without flaunting it as a museum-piece but allowing it to make itself strongly felt, through dialogue. Hardy has a marvellous ear for small-talk, and does not seem to have needed to historicise his style. The nuggets of social and historical information are effectively and naturally set in the stiff conversation between the three women:

*'Apples are plentiful, it seems. You country-folk call St Swithin's their christening day, if it rains?'*

*'Yes, dear. Ah me! I have not been to a christening for these many years; the baby's name was George, I remember - after the King.'*

*'I hear that King George is still staying at the town here. I hope he'll stay till I have seen him!'*

*'He'll wait till the corn turns yellow; he always does.'*

*'How very fashionable yellow is getting for gloves just now!' [2, p. 152]*

## CONCLUSION

Among such scenery the characters move, candid, capricious, but strong enough to survive for a time. The depths of the simple story of amorous cross-purposes and change are not those of subtle analysis, nor those of violently expressed passion, but they are movingly plumbed. The qualities shown in love are also those shown in war, and so link the private and public worlds. They are also animating qualities which insist on the common human nature of Hardy's ghosts. The ghosts are undignified, unsublime, even comic, and are sadder and more substantial ghosts for all that. Hardy's great achievement, here as in *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, is to edge melancholy with amusement, toughness with pathos, and blend them together, in Shakespearian fashion. Even on that last page we feel the particularities of love and survival in sadness and humour. Hardy brings together the courage and sacrifice of John,

in his brave acting of the amorous soldier's part, the coarse-grained happiness of Bob, and Anne's wry, thorough sense of the way things are. In her character we see traits that will be further developed later in Tess and Sue.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Hardy, B. *Introduction to the Trumpet-Major*, London: Macmillan, 1975.
- [2] Hardy, Th., *The Trumpet-Major*, London: Macmillan, 1974.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Spiridon Blagov Kaloshev, Department of Bulgarian Language, Literature and Arts, University of Ruse, E-mail: skaloshev@mail.ru