

Jitka Fantová, *Pictorial Art in The Return of the Native by Thomas Hardy* (BA thesis)

Supervisor's report

Jitka Fantová chose a very difficult topic for her thesis – to examine in what way Hardy uses the technique typical of pictorial rather than verbal art in his novel and what role references to art and artists play in the text. Though addressed by various critics, the topic, it seems, has never been dealt with thoroughly and Hardy's dependence on his knowledge of art and his ambition to become an art critic has never been properly explored.

The thesis is divided into two distinct parts: the first one consists mostly of an overview of different art conceptions that influenced 19th century art (from the Horatian “ut pictura poesis” to Impressionism), the second is devoted to the discussion of the passages from *The Return of the Native* in which the pictorial can be found. I believe those parts where Fantová attempts to read the text closely and comment on how the pictorial is applied, though not all her interpretations may sound convincing and sometimes the application seems mechanical, are the best of the whole thesis.

On the other hand, what I find problematic is her inability to make clear, without omissions and contradictions, how the artistic conceptions relate to Hardy's writing theory and practice. Thus the idea of “ut pictura poesis” is only very briefly sketched at the beginning, never to be mentioned again. It is not necessary to return to it, indeed, provided that we learn in what way and with what intensity 19th century debates tended to revise Lessing's strict division of verbal and pictorial representation and how this was pursued in literature and art. The chapter dealing with the sublime does not refer to painting; Burke himself discusses the concept in psychological rather than aesthetic terms and relates to natural objects and scenes as they work upon man's perception and mind, rather than to art. Its application in pictorial art should be duly presented. The critique of traditional understanding of aesthetic criteria neglects the formal principles (harmony, symmetry, proportion), which in the new conceptions give way to more subjective oriented ideas. The references to baroque art (pp. 22 and 26) seem to be at variance with the claim that Hardy responds to the conceptions and ideas of modern art – this discrepancy should also be explained.

More generally speaking, what seems to me absolutely unresolved in the discussion is the distinction between seeing reality as an artist would probably see it and artistic representation of it. Some scenes are discussed in terms of how they appear to the eye, not how they allow “reading” them as works of pictorial art. Though I see a very good point in the assertion that Hardy tends to stop action to characterize figures, scene or atmosphere, making the narration

“pictorially” static in this way, yet I understand it not just as a matter of representation. In my opinion, Hardy is polemical with the view of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite painters concerning the “truth of the eye”. Hardy seems to disclaim that what the eye sees is of necessity true and that the artist should apply an “innocent eye” to capture the essential meaning of reality, moral implications included. He rather supports the idea that what an individual sees is his personal, subjective vision, which may be illusionary, and that this vision is the actual subject-matter of art. Implicitly he defends modern artists such as Whistler and opposes Ruskin's tenet that by seeing unencumbered by conventions we are able to discern general laws and principles of existence. I would recommend to extend the discussion on p. 30 with this context.

Some chapters seem irrelevant: the accounts of Clym's appearance and Wildeve's reappearance on the scene add little to the topic. It would be desirable to restructure the interpretive part of the thesis and include scenes which offer more material for discussion (e.g. the moon-eclipse scene). This reservation also applies to such parts as “References to Art” and “Attention to Colour”, which state rather than explain/explore the fact.

There are occasional inaccuracies: the Turner that inspired Hardy is, arguably, the later one rather than “the Romantic artist of the turn of the century”. Sometimes even the language should be corrected (e.g. the sentence “An unforgettable description of Eustacia presents the chapter 'Queen of Night'” betrays the influence of Czech).

My conclusion is that the thesis only partially meets the goals which the author has set to pursue. Nevertheless, I recommend it for the defence and suggest it to be marked as “velmi dobrá” (very good), at best.

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