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JEROME BEATY, 1924-2000

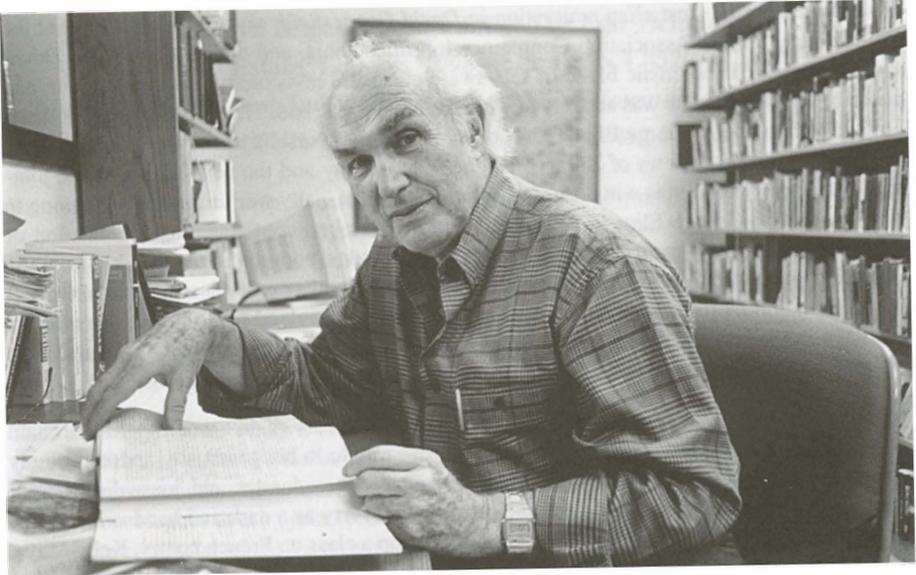
Jerome Beaty died on 30 January 2000, at the age of 75, after a year of illness during which he was working actively on Dickens and George Eliot. He was a fine Victorian scholar and critic, an editor, and a pioneer in the field of George Eliot textual studies. His book *Middlemarch from Notebook to Novel* (Urbana, 1960) analysed the genesis and composition of one of the most complex English novels, revealing that what seemed a seamless whole, more praised than studied, had its origin in two separate narrative beginnings and plans. He showed the painstaking scissors-and-paste which put together the separate enterprises, *Middlemarch* and *Miss Brooke*, neither of which took off creatively until, once pointed in each other's direction, the twin conceptions joined in a perfected whole. The scholar's careful, minute reading of manuscripts, proofs, texts and letters turned out to be a study of imagination, its unpredictability, chanciness, wayward and mysterious subterranean or lateral motions. It was a proof that what may begin as distinct texts can cohere through the integrity of an artist's imagination, in form, language, psychology and theme. The innovative study of revision was continued in an essay he wrote for *Middlemarch, Critical Approaches to the Novel*, which I edited for the Athlone Press (then of the University of London) in 1967.

Critic as well as scholar, Jerome Beaty's textual work always showed a large intelligent literary judgment: for instance he examines variations and revisions of authorial commentary in *Middlemarch*, while never lapsing, as even later scholars occasionally do, into condescension towards that favourite Victorian narrative mode and figure. He wrote in a lively individual language, less unusual than now, but exceptionally personal in style, writing as he talked, with enthusiasm tempered by humour, never solemn or reverent or self-involved. His work on George Eliot, Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, was speculative as well as factually exact, analytic as well as textually precise and socially aware. He never forgot that the artist's imagination is a product of what Wordsworth called the very world in which we live, the world in which editors play a part in the final text, in which a publisher's house style will alter an author's punctuation.

He was unusually well-equipped to write a biography of George Eliot, but I suspect was too close to the work of Gordon Haight, of which he was generously appreciative and in some measure critical. A perfectionist who found fault with his work as soon as it seemed finished, he started to revise his *Middlemarch* book for an English edition commissioned by the Athlone Press, but never finished it to his own satisfaction, and remained less well-known in the UK than he should have been.

Much of his writing was US centred because he devoted much time and work to Norton introductions and anthologies and teaching books, like the subtle and sensitive *Poetry from Statement of Meaning* (New York, 1965) which he wrote in collaboration with William H. Matchett.

He was influenced as we all were in the mid-to-late fifties by the New Criticism but was never a party-liner. In seminars and conference papers in the early-sixties Jerome Beaty was never bound – as the story sometimes says all New Critics were – by a sense of solid, self-standing and cut-off text, but insisted on modifying the fashionable concept of spatial form by attend-



Jerome Beaty

ing to experiential processes of temporal and revisionary readings, which later on made him genuinely responsive to Iser and Reader Response theory. His essay 'The "Soothing Songs" of Little Dorrit: New Light on Dickens's Darkness', in which he shakes the novel free from the idea of a prison as ruling image, is a model. One of the other stories recent criticism tells about New Criticism concerns its lack of historical sense. One of Jerome Beaty's best articles, a contribution to *Victorian Studies* (1, 1957), discussed 'History by Indirection: The Era of Reform in *Middlemarch*', and is a fine example of an informed and imaginative movement in and out of text and context. His historicism was more than an academic interest: it was related to his keen interest in the ideas and personalities and clashes of politics – even English politics, which he loved discussing – and to his feeling for his own roots in the working-class and Jewishness, his political idealism, his old-fashioned socialism.

His last book *Misreading Jane Eyre* (Columbus, 1996) shows another of his strengths in historical scholarship, a knowledge of the forgotten and minor novels which were context for reader and author – like foundling novels, governess novels, and vampire stories. (As a supervisor of graduate students he encouraged such retrievals and study of sub-genres.) This brilliant book could almost certainly have been written earlier, and more simply, especially in the introductory parts, without reference to Iser, Bakhtin, and other popular theorists, but his conscientious deference to recent theory involved a new scholarly contextualization, and with it, to some extent, an increase in the abstraction and standardization of his critical language. But it is still witty and amusing, touches the nerve of reading, and is one of the best books on the subject. After it, characteristically, he continued work on all three Brontës.

His recent paper on Australian emigration in *David Copperfield*, given in March 1999 at the 19th Century Studies Association Conference in Philadelphia, and the essay on *Little Dorrit* show the same characteristic blend of self-aware close and revisionary reading, humour, and historical knowledge. He was actively at work, right up to the end. Three days before his death I talked to him about George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. Of course it was always George Eliot: he was working on reviews of Kathryn Hughes's biography and the new edition of the journals – as a reviewer he was witty, shrewd, tolerant, and unusually well-informed – planning to give the annual George Eliot Fellowship lecture in October, contemplating a collection of George Eliot criticism from the last four changing decades, and continuing the big book on George Eliot he was always writing in his head. But it was never only George Eliot: a student of the great and the minor Victorian novelists, he came to England twice in the years before the diagnosis of his cancer, to read a paper at a Brontë conference and work in the Victoria and Albert Museum on the manuscript of *David Copperfield*, which he was editing.

At his memorial service in Emory, where he spent 40 years of his working life, Ronald Schuchard and Paul Turner, American scholars, paid tribute to his generosity and inspiringly high standards as a colleague, as did the distinguished broadcaster and journalist Russell Baker, who had been a fellow-student and remembered Jerry as a dark and handsome ex-serviceman coercing the French department into setting up a class on French poetry. Kelly Mays, a former student, paid tribute to his powers as a teacher, and Eugene Winograd, a professor of psychology, spoke knowledgeably about Jerry's love of baseball, which he knew as a good player – short stop, if I've got it right – as well as a fan. John Fuller, Jerry's accountant, spoke of him as a good friend, and this he certainly was, a delightful companion, lover of sport, food, children – his four, Shawn, Andrew, Meaghan and Caelin, by his marriages to Laurel and Elaine, and even other peoples' – fun, puns, and French poetry. He was – still is, in his lively work – one of the most attentive, widely informed, amusing, and laid-back, Victorian scholars.

Barbara Hardy