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## Review of The Effective Protagonist in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel: Scott, Bronte, Eliot, Wilde

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**Terence Dawson, *The Effective Protagonist in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel*: Scott, Brontë, Eliot, Wilde (Ashgate, 2004), pp. 300. ISBN 0 7546 4135 X**

Let me declare my critical prejudices from the outset. Terence Dawson's study is a work of psychological criticism, of post-Jungian criticism to be exact, and I am frequently left unconvinced by such critical inquiry. As Dawson admits, 'it is often held that the weakness of psychological analyses of literary works is that they require the reader to accept their premises. This both is, and is not so.' In the case of Dawson's book, I can't help but feel that it is so, and by the end of a dense, if often suggestive, study, I remained unpersuaded as to the merits of this particular post-Jungian interpretation. As a reader always keen to learn more about George Eliot and her writing, I was left disappointed in the relatively scant attention paid her. The only work by her discussed at length is *Silas Marner*, although to say that it is discussed at length may misrepresent things; in fact, in a study of some 300 pages, George Eliot's novel warrants only 26 pages. Although the subtitle to the study suggests a far wider sweep – Scott, *et al* – the crux of Dawson's argument rests on readings of single novels by each author: *Ivanhoe*, paired up in discussion with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; *Wuthering Heights* paired with *Silas Marner*. I'll come on to the unusual pairings in a moment, but for now, suffice to say that Dawson's project is not a sweeping one, so much as it about showing in very close detail how one might read these particular texts using quite specific post-Jungian ideas.

Dawson makes the case for his project in the Introduction, which is worth reading carefully because he's good at laying out exactly what he's taking from Jung and Jungian-minded critics, and explaining the terms and concepts (*anima/animus*, compensation, archetypes, in particular). It is in the Introduction – usually clearly and directly – that he maps out what he'll do. He coins the term 'effective protagonist' to mean

an axial character to which *all* the events of the novel can be related, *without exception*: even those events in which the effective protagonist takes no part reflect an aspect of a process affecting him or her. In other words, the effective protagonist is *the character that determines both the structural and psychological coherence of the entirety of the narrative question*.

In the case of *Silas Marner*, the effective protagonist turns out to be Nancy Lammeter, and, 'by extension, she is also the "carrier" of a major aspect of the author's unconscious personality, and the novel thus gives expression to a psychological dilemma pertinent to George Eliot at the time of writing.' Well, okay, but I'm never really convinced about why I should *care* about the author's unconscious at the time of writing the novel.

A Jungian interpretation of a text is about wholeness and absolute coherence, about being able to explain all that happens in a text in its entirety. Dawson tells us that such an approach

is built on the premise that *everything* in a text reflects an essentially *imaginal* reality pertinent to an aspect of the writer's inner world and, by extension, also to his or her personality. In other words, both the setting and *all* the interactions described in a text are viewed as the expression of *an identifiable psychological process*. In other words, whatever care a writer might have taken to make his or her characters credible social types, the Jungian critic assumes that they can

*also* be viewed as personifications of different aspects of the writer's personality, and that the course of their interactions gives expression to a significant psychological dilemma facing the author at the time of writing.

The Jungian critic can make whatever assumption he like, but if his reader simply doesn't accept those assumptions from the outset, then there's not much of a critical conversation that can take place. Dawson suggests that 'one of the most disturbing characteristics of recent literary criticism is the increasing tendency to build an argument on only a handful of isolated textual moments', which, however 'intriguing', does not serve as a proper basis for a 'reading of the text as a whole'. There are a couple of points I think are worth querying here: firstly, what exactly does Dawson mean by 'recent criticism?' He doesn't cite a single example of the type of criticism to which he objects. Secondly, is providing a 'reading of the text as a whole' always what we want to do as critics? Why is trying to understand *everything* and *all* that there is in a text as part of a single, coherent *psychological process* a worthwhile thing to do? I'm afraid I'm on the side of the poststructuralists in believing that texts are more open than closed, and that criticism is about suggesting possible meanings of texts rather than providing answers to queries about an author's psychological dilemma at the time of writing.

There are other assumptions Dawson makes that don't fully convince me. In discussing criticism/readings of narrative fiction, he says 'we tend to see in a text *only* what our own critical assumptions enable us to. And because we assume that what *we* see is an objective fact about the text, we are suspicious of any claims based on *other* critical assumptions.' Again, no evidence is cited here for the generalised claim, and, frankly, I just don't agree with it. At another point, in discussing that always unconvincing Jungian binary opposition anima/animus, he tells us that 'men do not usually write well about women, and vice versa.' The temptation is to start naming all the fine men and women who write about each other 'well' (whatever that means), but it's not a game I'm willing to play. Simply put, that's a sweeping generalisation too far for me.

When Dawson finally gets to the Jungian analysis of *Silas Marner*, he's out to prove that *everything* in the novel can be related back to Nancy. He tells us he has two aims in pursuing his Jungian interpretation so doggedly:

First, to illustrate how the combination of structuralism and Jungian theory can provide a useful means for unmasking a novel's structural patterns and their psychological significance. And secondly, to uncover the possible origin of the dilemma that gave rise to the novel.

So his reading of the novel is all about unmasking and uncovering the psychological truth, about Nancy on the one hand, and about George Eliot on the other. In understanding the way in which Nancy is the 'effective protagonist', around whom all else revolves, we learn something about her creator:

[Nancy's] instinct to withdraw into herself and to cross-question herself mercilessly was shared by her creator, who was unusually depressed throughout 1860, occasioned at least in part by society's continued refusal to accept her related with Lewes....There is ample evidence to suggest that the

dilemma we have identified as confronting Nancy is comparable to that which faced George Eliot in 1860.

Maybe. And maybe not. And even so, what does it matter? My problem with Dawson's book is that I simply have no interest in trying to use her fiction in order to analyse George Eliot's psychological state in 1860. There may be ample evidence 'to suggest' and there may be certain affinities with Nancy, perhaps even 'comparable' dilemmas, but what exactly does that prove? I can see how this book might be of interest to other Jungians – or to those who are interested in finding psychological structures in narrative. But this book won't tell you much about George Eliot, a few speculative suggestions aside, and it won't actually tell you all that much that is very useful about the novel. I remain among the sceptics of psychological for whom the final question, at the end of a long and painstaking study, is simply, so what?

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