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Sasaki, Toru, "'Hardy and Eliot': A Response" (1998). *The George Eliot Review*. 315.
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‘HARDY AND ELIOT’: A RESPONSE

by Toru Sasaki

In the last issue of the *Review*, Nicola Harris, in her Fellowship Prize Essay, discussed the different attitudes of Hardy and George Eliot to ‘moral perception’.¹ In the course of her argument she refers to an article of mine, published several years ago, where I dealt with the same passages that she considers. Having read her piece with great interest, I should like to make the following observations.

The reference to what I said occurs where Harris is comparing the description of Boldwood looking fixedly at the Valentine that Bathsheba has sent him (‘Here the bachelor’s gaze was continually fastening itself till the large red seal became as a blot on the retina of his eye’, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Ch. 14) with the narrative comment on Dorothea in Rome (‘In certain states of dull forlornness Dorothea all her life continued to see the red drapery...spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina’, *Middlemarch*, Ch. 20). In my article I first of all drew attention to a critical moment in Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (published in 1872-73, that is, immediately after the appearance of *Middlemarch*), where Knight, facing Elfrida in a stubble-field, becomes painfully aware of her past relationship with Stephen:

The scene was engraved for years on the retina of Knight’s eye: the dead and brown stubble, the weeds among it, the distant belt of beeches shutting out the view of the house, the leaves of which were now red and sick to death. (Ch. 34)

The retina, the colour red, and the idea of long-lasting visual impressions in association with bitter emotional experience: all this, I argued, recalls the *Middlemarch* passage. Extending this to the case of Boldwood, I commented:

Was Hardy, then, influenced by George Eliot on this point? ‘Influence’, or ‘debt’, seems to me too strong and simple a word. For Hardy might well have found in Eliot what was already present in himself. What is beyond dispute, however, is the fact that Hardy was sufficiently keen about this retina image to employ it once again in the very next novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), and that this time, as opposed to the one in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* where the effect is only locally striking, it is brilliantly related to the design of the novel as a whole, thus making the Boldwood passage a ‘moment of vision’ of extraordinary force.²

Essentially, I was arguing against critics who speak of Hardy’s debt to Eliot in a rather facile fashion. Harris, however, summarizes my contention thus: ‘Sasaki suggests that one of Eliot’s own moments of vision, that pertaining to Dorothea’s dissatisfaction with her honey-moon, ingrained itself into Hardy’s own inner eye (55). This sounds as if Hardy had become a Boldwood, and her phrasing unfortunately seems to imply Hardy’s indebtedness to Eliot, quite contrary to my intention.

I was interested in demonstrating a similarity in the two writers; Harris wishes to stress the difference: while Eliot has faith in the idea of objective reality. Hardy emphasizes the subjective,

‘idiosyncratic mode of regard’. I would go along with this as a broad generalization, but I have difficulty in accepting superiority in Eliot’s novelistic art. Regarding the two passages in question, Harris observes that while in *Middlemarch* ‘the formal fragmentariness is only just held back from total disintegration by the masterly skills of the omniscient narrator’, Hardy is ‘neither as controlled nor as successful in preventing such formal incongruities’ (55) in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. She goes on to talk about Eliot’s ‘formal coherence’ (56) and the successful combination of telling and showing. One wonders, however, where the line is to be drawn between success and failure in this respect. She speaks of Hardy’s ‘incongruous and incompatible scientific analogy’, and his ‘cold precision’ that threatens to ‘undermine the autonomy of experience’ (56). Again, this gives me pause. I do not think Hardy’s language is incongruous here. What is locally odd could be part of a larger design and, as I tried to show in my article, there is a unique kind of ‘coherence’ in a Hardy novel. Harris maintains that the indeterminacy of Hardy’s vision generates its own ‘drawbacks’ (52), but the truth of the matter is that Hardy and Eliot are employing different narrative techniques, with different purposes. A drawback in one kind of novel may be an advantage in another.

Harris argues convincingly for the importance of Ruskin as a common source of inspiration for Hardy and Eliot. She pinpoints various key passages in *Modern Painters*, and the use she makes of Ruskin’s phrase, ‘moral retina’, is telling. In my article I suggested the possibility that the retina image (or its germ) may have been already present in Hardy’s mind when he encountered the passage in *Middlemarch*. Harris has made a very good case for the likelihood that Hardy derived it from Ruskin. This, of course, is a speculation, and a most attractive one, in my view.

Notes

1. Nicola Harris, ‘Hardy and Eliot: the Eye of Narcissus’ Looking-Glass’, *George Eliot Review*, 28 (1997), 49-58.
2. Toru Sasaki, ‘On Boldwood’s Retina: a “Moment of Vision” in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and its Possible Relation to *Middlemarch*’, *Thomas Hardy Journal*, 8:3 (October, 1992), 60.

Nicola Harris replies:

It was with considerable interest that I read Toru Sasaki’s response to my paper, the core of which determines to clarify my misrepresentation of his argument. Sasaki offers that my misunderstanding makes Hardy sound like a Boldwood, which is not as incredible as he implies if one considers the passage from *The Life* (see ‘Hardy and Eliot’ 58, n. 12), and further says that my unfortunate phraseology suggests a debt to Eliot wholly contrary to his intention. I agree that the entire critical question of ‘influence’ and ‘debt’ is highly problematic, and since writing the article I have come across other possible sources with which both Eliot and Hardy may have been familiar (Brontë’s *Villette* [1849]: Lucy receives a ‘letter whose face of enamelled white and single Cyclops-eye of vermilion red...printed themselves so clear and perfect on the retina of an inward vision’ (Ch. 21); Tennyson’s *Maud* [1855]: ‘Tis the blot upon the

brain / That *will* show itself without' [II, iv, 8]. and reworked, consciously or otherwise.

Sasaki's second anxiety addresses my assigning Eliot superior status in matters of 'novelistic art', a topic which, because of its relativity, is not necessarily a helpful one to approach anyway. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that whereas Eliot is, comparatively speaking, stylistically orthodox (i.e., in keeping with received ideas governing narrative art at the time), Hardy is deliberately subversive. I still maintain that, ideologically and linguistically, Hardy is, in the passage in question, incongruous to the point of formal dissonance; intentionally or not provokes further cause for speculation. And here Sasaki makes a valid point: this local oddity is indeed a smaller part of a larger unique kind of coherence in the overall design. I would go further and say that the numerous inconsistencies at work in Hardy generate his fundamental formal strategy; he is a writer of consistent inconsistencies. Eliot, on the other hand, employing a different narrative technique as Sasaki indicates, formalizes, I feel, a narrative pattern of consistent consistencies. Whereas Eliot's art attempts to unify different elements, Hardy's fractures.

The entire question of 'possible relations' between such different artists is, as Sasaki persuasively contests, of considerable interest.