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An American Tribute

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Isobel Armstrong begins her wonderful obituary for Barbara in the *Guardian* by noting how Barbara loved a good argument. No consideration of what Barbara Hardy has left us can get anywhere without recognition that she was a feisty woman. She was also an extraordinarily warm and inspiring one.

I owe her a lot. I first met her when, as an assistant professor still very wet behind the ears, I was lucky enough to spend a research year in London. Barbara took me in as though I were a serious scholar. She helped me find my way around London, was generous to me and my very young family, filled me with exciting ideas about George Eliot and Victorian fiction, took me to lunch a few times near the British Museum, and finally, in what I thought was a recklessly trusting way, asked me to teach a course in the summer session of Middlebury College in London, which she was running. She invited me to write for a collection of essays she edited about George Eliot. She made me believe in myself as a scholar, when I had every reason to doubt.

All of this almost overwhelmed me not only because of her generosity but because I was already in awe of her writing. Her book on George Eliot made my dissertation possible. Trained in the New Criticism, I was struggling with ways to justify my enthusiasm for George Eliot. She taught a whole generation how to recognize the formal qualities of Victorian fiction, and how to think about their differences from modernist work. She made the connection between form and life in ways that still require attention. Her book, *The Appropriate Form*, became a kind of bible to those of my contemporaries, trained in intensely formal criticism, who wanted to extend the canon deep among the Victorians, and find ways to account for what did not formally fit.

When Barbara lectured, she was magical. She would emerge on stage with nothing but a copy of the books to be discussed, would speak elegant and moving sentences spontaneously, and would read selected passages with fresh and sympathetic understanding. Every lecture was an education. Every lecture made the pleasures of the texts palpable and became a vindication of the significance of literature and of my commitment to it.

Like many others who loved and respected her, I eventually felt the wrath of the argumentative Barbara Hardy when, in a rather laudatory review of one of her later books, I paused to note sadly that Barbara absolutely did not attend to any of the developing modes of criticism that were changing the critical landscape in the 1970s. Her books were like her lectures, based firmly and absolutely in the texts themselves; she didn’t have time for theory, or time to waste explaining why she didn’t have time for theory. She was a critic, a poet as well, a novelist, an autobiographer. She produced I don’t know how many books and was at work down to her last days. And to be fair, her anger with me was typically Barbara — not because I criticized her refusal of recent criticism but because I made the criticism without ever speaking to her about it beforehand. She was angry not because I was negative about something in her work but because I had avoided the personal argument about it.

Barbara was strong in her opinions. Her closest friends knew that better than her general reading public. It was a great loss to me that our relationship cooled after my mistaken failure to tell her directly what I would publish to a broad audience. I never did have the literary fight I’m sure she would have welcomed. As a result, I did not see her for many years. But I remained in awe of her all that time, and I remained permanently indebted to her both
intellectually and personally.

Her intellectual fierceness and combativeness was the other side of a passion for literature that was illuminating and enchanting, and that marked itself permanently in my memory. The most representative moment in our friendship was also the most memorable. Several of us, including Philip Collins, were driving with Barbara from a conference in Leicester celebrating the *Middlemarch* centennial. Philip’s very young son asked what the conference was about. *Middlemarch*. And what’s that? Well, said Barbara, it is the story of a young woman and her sister. And as we drove back Barbara unfolded all of the book’s first chapter in a voice so enchanting and musical that I could see the jewels in front of me and hear Dorothea’s voice, and Celia’s too. Barbara made that wonderful scene part of all of our lives; no scholar of George Eliot has ever so fully absorbed or felt that scene; the enchantment of George Eliot’s prose emerged in the enchantment of Barbara’s voice. With Barbara’s going some of the magic of literature passes too. When Barbara finished telling the story of the two sisters there was only silence – and awe. It is what we feel now in her passing.

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