Barbara Hardy on Dickens

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Barbara Hardy on Dickens

1970, the centenary year of Dickens's death, saw a flood of books published on the novelist including several by distinguished writers and critics ranging from F. R. Leavis to J. B. Priestley. One of the best, and most ground-breaking, of these latter was Barbara Hardy's *The Moral Art of Dickens*, published by the Athlone Press of the University of London. A collection of essays no more than 155 pages long, this book, elegantly and lucidly written like all of Barbara's work, was followed over the years by other critical studies from her pen that were to have a profound and lasting influence on the development of Dickens criticism and scholarship. After decades of celebrating the great entertainer, the master of melodrama and the grotesque, Dickens's readers now found their attention directed to an aspect of novel-writing that it had hitherto seemed far more fruitful to explore in the work of George Eliot or Henry James, i.e. the portrayal of the moral life. Her chapters on Dickens's depiction of 'the change of heart', from Scrooge in the *Carol* to Bella Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend*, were especially illuminating and, as is the case with all Barbara's critical work throughout her career, they were the fruit of her remarkable powers of close reading. No-one before her, to take a couple of examples, had ever noted the significance of Dickens's alteration of the words of the actual carol featured in *A Christmas Carol* (the one the boy tries to sing through the letter-box of Scrooge's office-door) or had demonstrated the moral significance of the many scenes depicting meals and the sharing of food in *Great Expectations*.

It was in 1970 also that Barbara contributed a brilliant seminal essay to a collection called *Dickens 1970* edited by myself. Under the title (a challenging one for those days) 'The Complexity of Dickens' she examines his extraordinary ability to mingle comedy, pathos and moral earnestness in his novels and in so doing greatly enriches (for example) our reading of the endings of *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit* and *Great Expectations*. In 1975 she published *Tellers*
and Listeners. The Narrative Imagination, arguably her finest, most in-depth and illuminating, study of the Victorian novel. I note here just two examples of how in this book Barbara enriches our appreciation and understanding of Dickens’s art. Readers of Bleak House might find little Esther’s nightly confidences to her doll overly sentimental but Barbara points us to its psychological truth – we all have a need for someone to whom we can, as she puts it, ‘tell the story of the day’. Similarly in Little Dorrit she shows how richly layered with meaning is the interaction between narrator and listener in the scene in which Little Dorrit tells Maggie the story of the Princess (Book I, ch.14).

In 1977 Barbara gave a memorable speech at the annual banquet of the Dickens Fellowship in which she spoke about how ‘other writers cannot leave [Dickens] alone’, discussing his presence in the work of such great later writers as James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell and noting how they do not imitate him but let him assert himself in their work ‘in a full reminiscence of his individuality, power and humanity’ (the speech may be found in full in The Dickensian, vol. 73 [1977], pp. 123 -26).

In 1985 was published Barbara’s Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction which includes a most illuminating discussion of Dickens’s so-called ‘sentimentality’, especially in regard to his famous death-bed scenes. She teaches us how to read, with maximum understanding and appreciation of the great novelist’s art, such scenes as the death of little Paul Dombey or that of Jo in Bleak House showing how Dickens always manages to ‘stay on the right side of the dangerous verge between sentiment and sentimentality’. Dombey and Son, that great turning-point novel of Dickens’s career, seems to have been the one of all his works that most regularly engaged Barbara’s critical attention, from her ground-breaking discussion of Edith Dombey in The Moral Art of Dickens to her sensitive and wholly persuasive imagining of a final meeting of mutual understanding and forgiveness between Edith and Mr Dombey in her highly original and fascinating Dorothea’s Daughter and Other Nineteenth-Century Postscripts (2011). Just three years previously she had published her last major study of Dickens, Dickens and Creativity, which, like all her work on him, enhanced and enriched our understanding and appreciation of his work – here with particular regard to Dickens’s interest in imagination, ‘the processes of the creative mind’, a subject very little touched on in previous Dickens studies, multitudinous though these had by this time become.

A word should be said in conclusion about Barbara’s wonderful lectures. Many readers of this tribute will have had the pleasure and privilege of hearing her speak and will have marvelled at her ability to deliver such eloquent lectures entirely without notes and with a seemingly magical ability to pluck, at just the right moment, a relevant quotation out of whatever book she was holding in her hand at that point. As regards Dickens, her lectures for over a quarter of a century on whichever was the novel of the year were always a high point of Birkbeck’s ‘Dickens Days’ beginning in 1986 with the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the first publication of Pickwick Papers. It was through this remarkable series and through many other lectures (given all over the world) as well as through her scholarly books and articles that Barbara did so much to enlarge and deepen our understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the novels of Dickens.

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