Barbara Hardy: Recollections

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Harris, Margaret, "Barbara Hardy: Recollections" (2016). The George Eliot Review. 353.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/353
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The last time I saw Barbara Hardy was in November 2014, at the Middlemarch day held at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Senate House, London, when she gave a characteristically rich paper on Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot. She had turned ninety that June, and while she was physically diminished and the voice less bell-like, her intonations and gestures were as ever, and her responses to questions as sharp.

There was a sense in which Barbara might have given that paper, which depends on intimate knowledge of the texts and their authors, argued through illuminating discussion of detail, at any time in the previous sixty years. This is not to imply that she was overcome by critical sclerosis. She maintained the spirit of her initial position influenced by the Leavisite practices of close reading that were coming into vogue at the outset of her career, but eschewed the rancour that disfigured Leavisism, and went into her chosen texts with a different kind of intensity – and considerably more generosity. It is not to imply either that she was unaware of the contending currents of Marxist and feminist criticism, or of deconstruction,
poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and new historicism. She simply abstained from ‘Theory’, keeping across discussions of the day though inclining to refer to them obliquely rather than to engage directly.

Her particular originality inheres in the extent to which she inhabits the works about which she writes, and anatomises the reading experience. While it is undoubtedly the case that Barbara’s insistence on demonstrating the centrality of technique in George Eliot’s writing constitutes the most important aspect of her critical achievement, what is now apparent is the extent to which her contribution is not simply formalist. With the wisdom of hindsight, it is possible to see criticism as having again come round to her, particularly since the trend in recent years to consideration of Affect. Current discussions of Affect define their terms more assiduously than Barbara does, without necessarily achieving greater critical penetration. I think of her essays from the early 1960s through to the centenary of George Eliot’s death in 1980 collected in *Particularities: Readings in George Eliot*. In the introduction she describes her shift from championing George Eliot’s art in the face of criticism ‘dominated by Jamesian standards of economy, concentration, and conspicuous elegance’ to an emphasis on ‘the affective pressure of her form, language, and imagination’. The nine essays in *Particularities* demonstrate an extraordinary assimilation of and attention to detail, and depend on a grasp of George Eliot’s oeuvre based on saturation in it, with implications well beyond the particulars in play. The significance of these critically pre-emptive moves now becomes more fully evident. A later instance is *George Eliot A Critic’s Biography*, which she described as an anti- biography, where her attention to detail of narrative technique extends through the novels and poetry across journalism, letters, translations and other writings in a virtuosic redress of the usual privileging of fact over critical analysis even in literary biography.

In a different way, the stories in *Dorothea’s Daughter and other nineteenth-century postscripts* demonstrate the same authority and alertness. This late book – one of her forays beyond critical discussion into poetry, fiction and memoir – again epitomises her distinctive strength. It takes off from the perception she argued in one of her earliest and most-quoted essays, ‘Possibilities’, that a defining feature of Eliot’s fiction is that ‘There is a strong and deliberate suggestion of the possible lives her characters might have lived.’ *Dorothea’s Daughter* has analogies both with the ubiquitous genre of sequels, and with the erudite parlour game devised by John Sutherland of discerning puzzles in literary texts (hence *Is Heathcliff a Murderer? Puzzles in Nineteenth-century Fiction* (1996) and its successors). In her preface, Barbara laid down her own path, declaring that her stories based on novels by Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy are

postscripts rather than sequels because although they enter into dialogues with the original narratives by dwelling on suggestions not developed in the novels, and detain the characters for a little while after the end of their story, they respect the authors’ conclusions – the deaths, marriages, births and reconciliations which form the grand finales in nineteenth-century novels. Some readers find any kind of sequel intrusive, but I am not making additions to the novelists’ work or changing the pattern, only drawing the eye to artistic detail, or drawing out loose threads in the original fabric to weave a little new material.

It requires a particular kind of affinity to embark on, let alone succeed in, such an undertaking. It was in connection with her George Eliot work that I first met Barbara Hardy. I am
unsure of the exact date, but it has to have been in the early 1960s that I read The Novels of George Eliot, in the course of writing a Master’s thesis at my alma mater, The University of Sydney. Before long I headed off to London to do a PhD on George Meredith which Barbara supervised, my candidature being contained entirely within her time at Royal Holloway College, University of London.

My first meeting with her in person was in her Earl’s Court apartment (ironic, since those were the days when the suburb was known as Kangaroo Valley), though we did sometimes meet at Royal Holloway, then newly co-educational – a mutation that was still bemusing to some of the older academics. These postgraduate years were formative for me. London was swinging, Barbara entering her prime. I remain grateful to one of the handful of tenured women in the Sydney Department in my undergraduate days, Miss Thelma Herring, whose lectures on both George Eliot and George Meredith launched me definitively into the world of Victorian fiction. But I had never known a senior female academic, let alone one like Barbara, barely into her middle years, a charismatic teacher and cutting-edge critic, with school-age children, and real style. Licence to discuss extracurricular concerns such as clothes and cooking was just one stimulating element in Barbara’s expansive sociability, then and thereafter.

Always available at need, Barbara was not a hands-on supervisor and her practices would not pass muster in today’s more regulated environment. But she was encouraging and supportive, writing illegible comments on my drafts, and offering pertinent suggestions and remarks in passing that were often telling and influential. A random instance: her observation that the first seven-eighths of Sylvia’s Lovers is one of the greatest novels in English revealed to me an Elizabeth Gaskell beyond Cranford – as well as being an intimation of her championing of Gaskell, still unparalleled. At a late stage of my candidature she slashed a Gordian knot by proposing that I change my thesis topic to one that was less inclusive and hence capable of completion in a finite time. This instructive approach to red tape has fortified me subsequently. Some scholars regard their teaching responsibilities as a necessary evil: not Barbara, whether with her undergraduates or postgraduates. And while at the time I didn’t make much of the fact that I was one of three of her students to take her viva on consecutive days, it does now seem to me remarkable testimony to Barbara’s guidance.

I returned to a lectureship at Sydney almost immediately after the viva (in those distant days there were jobs). Contact with Barbara was maintained by sporadic correspondence. I would always try to see her when I was in England – every few years in the seventies, more often later – though it wasn’t always possible to coincide with her given her increasing commitments to lecture tours and visiting positions. When I began to work again on George Eliot in the 1990s, we were in more frequent touch. Her taking to e-mail in recent years made possible a different kind of conversation that was at once enjoyable and invigorating. Ivy Compton-Burnett was one thread in it, in which she pointed me to Dolores, describing it (accurately) as ‘a truly bad novel’ though with the fascination of being a rewrite of Dorothea and Casaubon by a Royal Holloway graduate in classics.

While Barbara continued to take a generous interest in my career, my doings were never above reproach. In particular, reference in The Journals of George Eliot to G. H. Lewes as George Eliot’s common law husband occasioned reprimand in perpetuity. (A common law union is one in which both parties are free to marry but choose not to: Lewes of course was already married.) Her review of George Eliot in Context was quite the most exhaustive and
searching accorded to the book, and one which took no prisoners as she made justifiable objections particularly to the omission of literary context from its spectrum of essays. A fair complaint, though I stand by my editorial decisions. The point of mentioning this review, however, is it was so typical of Barbara: knowledgeable, rigorous, and just, with a lovely footnote pointing to George Eliot’s ‘small slip’ between chapters 6 and 20 of *Adam Bede*, concerning the deal and oak tables in the Poyser kitchen.?

It is absolutely fitting, and a form of closure vouchsafed to few, that Barbara Hardy should leave this world full of years, and with a book in press.

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Notes


