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2013

Review of Form and Feeling in Modern Literature: Essays in Honour of Barbara Hardy

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Armstrong, Isobel and Baker, William, "Review of Form and Feeling in Modern Literature: Essays in Honour of Barbara Hardy" (2013). *The George Eliot Review*. 637.

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Isobel Armstrong and William Baker (eds), *Form and Feeling in Modern Literature: Essays in Honour of Barbara Hardy* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), pp. xiii + 211. ISBN 978 1 907975 37 0. £45.

Does criticism move in circles and cycles? Perhaps, like a Yeatsian gyre, it progresses by revolving and rotating. If times have changed utterly since the appearance of Barbara Hardy's first book, *The Novels of George Eliot* (1959), then it is also hard to ignore how some new directions in criticism appear to be rediscovering matters close to this great critic's heart. Form and feeling, certainly, are both back. Professor Hardy used these two unfussy terms to describe, respectively, literature's structured way of happening and its potential to arouse or enrich a reader's felt experience; now, in the more modish guises of the 'new formalism' and the 'turn to affect', these same topics can be found being ruminated over at numberless sessions of academic conferences and in special issues of top scholarly journals, on both sides of the Atlantic. This situation is not a case of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* but rather an illustration of the unquantifiable influence of Hardy's work and a prompt to reopen her seminal pieces of criticism. As this new volume of essays shows, to celebrate her achievement properly means acknowledging the way it opens itself to the future – the way that, far from aspiring to be a last word on any of the novelists and poets she writes about, her writing seems to invite the possibility of new forms of understanding.

In that spirit, it is fitting that the volume's editors and contributors, many of whom studied with Professor Hardy or became her colleagues, mentees, and friends, have themselves gone on to shape how we read Victorian and modern literature. There is consequently a serious ethic of friendship in these pages, and a sense of the way understanding matters most when, in being shared, it overcomes the walls of the individual ego – something that George Eliot would have appreciated. The nature of the gift that Hardy's list of published work represents (and gift seems the appropriate word, given its ethical and affective insistence) is explored in a short opening section titled 'Barbara's Work', which features two illuminatingly personal reflections by Isobel Armstrong and Sybil Oldfield. Both essays are characteristically compelling, but especially so for the way they move so deftly between private recollection, Hardy's life and writing, and nineteenth-century literature itself. They form what Oldfield rightly envisages as a 'conversation' (17), echoing the way L. C. Knights used that term to describe the true task of criticism. William Baker adds a near-comprehensive bibliography of Hardy's works to that conversation, which is a remarkable literary map of its own, not to mention the result of enormous labour, running to almost twenty pages and detailing her numerous conference addresses and public broadcasts as well her many scholarly volumes, critical editions, articles, and books of poems.

Subsequent sections focus on narrative, on poetry, and on the subject of women and children. A short section on 'Fictions' includes new writing by Janet El-Rayess and Sue Roe, and draws welcome attention to Hardy's nurturing of creative writers. George Eliot does not dominate the essays, as one might be forgiven for expecting, but rather forms the explicit subject matter of three chapters. George Levine's exploration of *The Mill on the Floss* and Victorian capitalism takes on the question of Eliot and money with typical brilliance, and focuses on the troublesome ending of the novel, which he says 'feels, aesthetically, like a surrender' (72). Raising the uneasy issue of money allows Levine to recast the hypothetical question of what kind of a novel it might have been if Maggie had not been necessarily cast

out beyond its social horizon. Margaret Harris, on quite different territory, looks at the 1924 Hollywood film adaptation of *Romola*, and, in doing so, sheds valuable light on the American reputation of Eliot and her curious posthumous relationship to the moving image and popular culture. The discussion builds on extensive primary research and, like Levine's piece, feels inspired by a subject relevant to Hardy's political instincts. A later essay by Alain Jumeau tackles *The Mill on the Floss* again, this time in relation to *Silas Marner*, on the subject of children and childhood – a topic of increasing critical interest among literary scholars and another indication of Hardy's prescience. Eliot, Jumeau plausibly suggests, 'is perhaps the first novelist to take quite seriously not only the joys of childhood (which Rousseau and Wordsworth had done before her) but its sorrows and anguish' (156).

The breadth of literary interest in the rest of the book helps to convey something of the intellectual disposition of the critic it honours. There are fascinating essays on Wilkie Collins (William Baker) and Dickens (John Rignall, Beryl Gray, Michael Slater). The missing dog that Gray finds in *Great Expectations*'s persistent canine allusions is part of an inventive and rewarding reading of Dickens's novel, one that helps to impress just how important this other great Victorian novelist was to Hardy herself. Some notable non-Victorian writers receive detailed treatment from other contributors: Shakespeare (Loraine Fletcher), Scott (Martin Dodsworth) and Carol Shields (Coral Ann Howells). Some pieces move out from the literary into intellectual history and theoretical territory, such as the characteristically inspiring essays by Isobel Armstrong and Hilary Fraser. Perhaps most striking of all is the section on poetry, where a surprising account of Yeats and Oisín really takes the volume in new directions, and a wonderfully unusual piece on 'Poetry and Magic' by Deryn Rees-Jones takes the form of an enlivening hybrid of critical and poetic energy, which seems to enact creative processes in artfully discontinuous ways.

For one volume, this variety might be regarded as problematic, but in fact the result is rewarding abundance. Barbara Hardy helped subsequent generations to see that the expansiveness of nineteenth-century novels had more artful form than 'fluid puddings', as Henry James had called them. This volume is no baggy monster either. It attests to the vibrancy of Hardy's vision for the nature of literary criticism, for creative literary art itself, and for the ethical task of attending to ideas and to language with communicable sensitivity and clarity. The book's gesture of 'tribute' (7) is well achieved: its spirit of imaginative breadth, conversation, friendship, illumination – in contrast to more recent critical habits known by the troubling term 'interrogation', say – is precisely evident in its range of interests and variety; this is the form of its feeling. Like Hardy's own books, it forms a hopeful bridge with the future.

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