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Review of Perspectives on Self and Community in George Eliot: Dorothea's Window

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Patricia Gately, Dennis Leavens and D. Cole Woodcox, eds., *Perspectives on Self and Community in George Eliot: Dorothea's Window* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1997) pp. vi + 280. ISBN 0 7734 8541 4

This is a modest book, edited by three people who are so modest that they reveal nothing at all about their identities. It is possible to discover from a footnote on p.159 that it is a product of a conference on George Eliot although further details of that event remain undisclosed. Two of its contributors, however, are well known in George Eliot circles: Barbara Hardy and Felicia Bonaparte. Their essays are certainly worth reading while all the other contributions have something new to say about Eliot's work even if they are by today's standards under-theorized. One looks in vain in the index for any reference to Bakhtin, Barthes, or Hillis Miller, Eagleton, Jameson or the French feminists (to cite but a few of the names one would normally expect to find). The book could almost have been written in the 1960s (it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that some of the essays were). But it is not without its merits.

The essays by Barbara Hardy and Felicia Bonaparte which open and close the book are characteristically impressive performances. Hardy explores the oft-noted similes and metaphors associated with windows in the novel, paying careful attention to detail and coming down strongly on lesser critics who make the mistake of locating Dorothea's vision of the 'largeness of the world' in the 'pearly light' of dawn in chapter 80 in the boudoir rather than the marital bedroom. Bonaparte maps the rivers of passion and time in *The Mill on the Floss*, charting the multiple worlds created by the complex musical and mythological allusions in the novel and teasing out the antagonism of valid claims which comprise the tragedy of this novel.

Some of the other essays are also illuminating. Susan Stiritz, for example, brings out the detailed significance of the sustained comparisons between Dorothea and St Teresa, exploring the question why 'a secular humanist ... would start a major work by invoking so sympathetically one of the most celebrated Catholic saints'. Stiritz provides some of the answers, noticing the revival of hagiography in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century as a result both of the Oxford Movement and of the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy. She also notes Eliot's particular interest in Teresa, whose untranslated *Vida* she bought in 1867 in Saragossa. Eliot, she observes, also copied extensive excerpts from Anna Jameson's books on saints which serve to explain the kind of saint and Madonna Dorothea is supposed to be (the Positivist Calendar, also copied into her notebooks, could also have been mentioned). Stiritz somewhat overstates her case, writing strangely of the 'Protestant bias in English studies' which 'marginalizes material specific to the Catholic tradition'. She should try telling that to Harold Bloom (who suffered from the Anglo-Catholic orthodoxies of the 1950s) or Jonathan Culler (who complains about the current revival of interest in Judaism on the part of literary critics whose business, he believes, is to fight superstition in all its forms).

Eliot's own interest in religion of all kinds emerges in Carolyn Dickinson's study of 'Amos Barton' which finds his wife Milly 'a kind of shekinah'. Dickinson doesn't explore this unlikely claim further (is she thinking of this term in relation to orthodox rabbinic Judaism, Jewish philosophy or the Kabbalah, in which Eliot was to develop a great interest?). She does, how-

ever, relate the discussion at the clerical dinner of the Epistle of Jude (designed to oppose the heretical doctrine of Docetism, which denied the real humanity of Christ) to the metaphors on the opening chapter of the biblical Book of Amos of Edom ripping women apart. Eliot, as Dickinson notes, would have been alerted to the demands placed upon women by the experience of her sister Chrissey, who had borne nine children in thirteen years. It is characteristic of her writing to employ biblical allusion to such unobtrusive but powerfully subversive effect.

Another essay in this volume to concern itself with Eliot's religion is Dennis Leavens's analysis of the contribution Feuerbach made to her opposition to systematic thought in *Silas Marner*. There is still much more to be written on Eliot's theology, in particular the importance of Strauss, whose understanding of the role of myth lies behind some of the satire in this novel. I find this more interesting than formal considerations of narrative syntax or free indirect style on which Joanna Marshall and Siward Atkins focus (although the former does offer a convincing challenge to the conventional view of Hayslope as an Eden and the latter explores some misreadings apparent in contemporary reviews of *The Mill on the Floss*).

There are interesting elements in all these essays, then. It is also helpful to preface each essay with a summary of its arguments. The introduction gamely attempts to find in these essays a common concern with perspective, in particular the conflict between individual and communal vision. This is an enduring concern of Eliot's, a concern to which all of these essays can to some extent be related. But the essays should have been brought more up to date theoretically and been better proof-read. In taking issue with Beryl Gray about music Felicia Bonaparte consistently refers to her as 'he'. There are an unacceptable number of typing errors (like all Mellen's books, the volume has been typeset) so we are told of a philosopher called Huse, the theologian David Friederich Strauss, a volume entitled *Paretga und Paralipomena*, a movement labelled Evangelicalism, a Tabourer whom Dorothea sees in the fields and other errors enough to keep Casaubon busy for a year. The title page announces that this is volume 22 of a series of 'Studies in British Literature' when it appears in the list at the end of the book as volume 32. Perhaps this explains the reticence of the editors, who in this respect have a lot to be modest about.

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