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## Barbara Hardy (1924-2016)

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**Barbara Hardy (1924–2016)**

This will be a very personal obituary because in losing Barbara I lost one of the profoundest friendships of my life. Her demanding intellectual boldness and buoyant strength of mind were immediately striking. But she also had a capacity for warmth and joy and enthusiasm, a warmth that was evident in the home environment she created: to enter her Earl's Court flat was like entering a Matisse painting – full of colour, oriental carpets, bowls and pots, and paintings by her daughter, Kate. I was lucky enough to experience that warmth and energy less than a week before she died, when I visited her for the last time, though neither of us knew it was to be the

last time.

I think all the qualities I have described came together in her work. The power and precision of her mind, its largeness and energy and unceasing curiosity, were responsible for a formidable output of criticism and imaginative writing. She was a critic-creator. From the first book, *The Novels of George Eliot* (1959), through to the last, on Ivy Compton-Burnett, published posthumously this year, 2016, she wrote seventeen major critical books and edited countless collections of essays. Three volumes of poetry, a novel, and an autobiography, and a series of short stories picking up on unanswered questions and loose ends in Victorian novels, are intrinsic to her oeuvre. \* And this is not to speak of the energy with which she committed herself to conferences and symposia, travelling all over the world. She organized, latterly with the help of Louise Lee, a series of annual conferences on each of George Eliot's novels at the Institute of English Studies in London. Poignantly, the final conference was on Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

Barbara's work is so embedded in our critical history that insights she first reached have become such common knowledge they have ceased to be attributed to her. Hetty and Dinah, one mirror gazing, the other looking out of the window in *Adam Bede*, an insight in that first book showing narcissism and altruism, expressed through a formal dialogue between mirror and window, is taken for granted now, but it is an insight that goes back to her.

I first met Barbara in my twenties, and to encounter her after the misogyny of UCL was an amazing experience. Her feminism and left wing politics were inspiring. She wore her scholarship effortlessly, though it reached from Shakespeare to James Joyce. She could recall the finer points of Rider Haggard's *She*, once baffling a famous speaker with close knowledge of the novel, as easily as she could discuss Dickens. She was learned, a learning that had not come without a struggle. The chapters in her autobiography, *Swansea Girl* (1993), that describe her as a child washing in front of the kitchen fire in a zinc bath, her problems with learning and with class at the local grammar school, and her profound sensitivity to an absent father, give an illuminating insight into her early life. Welshness, and the crossing from Wales to England in her life, was crucial for her.

Detail and particularity were the living core of her criticism. She had an instinctive, demotic distrust of abstraction. We had many arguments about critical theory when it dominated the subject – it was the dialectic of our friendship. Her commitment to detail was partly born of a deep respect for the reader. Both *Tellers and Listeners*, as the title of her book of 1975 on the prolific creativity of story-telling has it, belong to the act of criticism, she believed fervently. But her love of particularity came also of a belief that the stuff of literature was human experience and feeling given form by the text. All of her writings exemplify this, but perhaps one of the most succinct and brilliant examples is an essay in her collection of essays on George Eliot, *Particularities* (1982). It is called 'The Surface of the Novel'. She argues there that the surface of the novel is neglected because critics disregard it in favour of 'deep' structures and symbolic inferences that abstract image patterns from the novel: she resisted the systematising of particularity. The imaginative immediacy of local detail is lost when such systematising occurs. The uneven significance of local detail is part of our experience of reading, she argued. Sometimes it is just casual, but just as significant for the life of the novel: sometimes, paradoxically, 'the superficial image is the important one'. She instances in *Middlemarch* the 'local vividness' of an image of Dorothea as marble, when Casaubon's illness is made known to her and comments, 'It is the local vividness that is

primary', not a structural contribution to image patterns. For her the 'detail of sense and feeling' and its 'subtle organisation' through form – form and feeling – is cardinal. For me this is a quintessential piece of Hardy criticism, supple and particular.

Barbara wrote on the novel and poetry, and in particular on *The Advantage of Lyric* (1977). She was a lyric poet herself, and ran a Poetry Workshop at Birkbeck well after her retirement, encouraging and supporting many fine poets. In retirement she ran a dynamic Writers' Workshop from her flat, often stringent but always generous in her readings and rulings. Her own poetry has that respect for particularity that she valued so much. Here is a poem from her first volume, *Severn Bridge* (2001), a title that refers of course to the crossing between Wales and England. It is about pushing a pram through Brompton Cemetery.

... we pushed out first pram past  
the mild Victorian dead  
Violet, Bertha, Herbert, Everard  
railed in rectangles  
praised for quiet and public rectitude  
over whose virtue the ivy tangles.

For me the laconic lyricism of her stunning final volume, *Dante's Ghosts* (2013), contains her finest poetry. It is typical of her intellectual curiosity that she made an in depth reading of Dante's *Divine Comedy* after learning Italian (she and her daughter, Julia, learned together), and then proceeded to write a series of poems on Dante's poem. I love 'Last Word', Virgil's farewell to Dante. As a non-Christian he cannot enter Paradise but in an act of imagination describes it to the younger poet.

'Light on your skin and all around you  
trees, flowers and tender grasses  
which need no gardener's care,  
she is coming and you are here'.

It is hard for me to read the words on Virgil in 'An Absence of Farewell'

who fades from the poem  
without a final goodbye to his pupil.

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\* Details of this work are in the bibliography in the festschrift, *Form and Feeling in Modern Literature. Essays in Honour of Barbara Hardy*, edited by William Baker with Isobel Armstrong. Oxford: Legenda, 2013. My Introduction (pp. 2-10) discusses her critical work in detail.