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Review of Imagining Minds: The Neuro-Aesthetics of Austen, Eliot and Hardy

Kay Young

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**Kay Young, *Imagining Minds: The Neuro-Aesthetics of Austen, Eliot and Hardy*
(Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), 218 pp + x.**

Imagining Minds sets out to read nineteenth-century fiction in the context of modern theories of human cognition and of the mind/body relationship, making the central contention that ‘*the novel is an aesthetic map to and experience of the nature of the mind-brain*’ (9; Young’s italics). Young takes up concepts from a range of modern psychological theories, especially those of Antonio Damasio, and also makes frequent reference to the revolutionary, and still seminal, work of William James, as a framework within which to investigate how the three major novelists of the title represent the mind’s problematic relations with the world as well as its necessary and intimate connections with the body. The resulting analysis deliberately sidelines historical contextualization to concentrate, instead, on the continued pertinence of fiction even to current scientific psychological concepts, but also on the insights which it offers any reader into his or her own subjectivity.

Having outlined relevant theoretical approaches to the mind which she goes on to deploy in her discussion of the fiction, Young turns first to *Emma*, reading the story of its heroine’s personal development in the light of psychological concepts such as Damasio’s ‘extended consciousness’, which moves beyond simple consciousness of the self to a fuller location of the self in the context of the past, the future, and of other people. James’s insistence on the distinction between rational knowledge and more profound, bodily awareness comes into play in Young’s charting of Emma’s maturation, and his wider sense of the inseparability of the mental and physical is used in the subsequent discussion of Anne Elliot’s necessary reconnection with her bodily self in *Persuasion*, as she reunites with Wentworth. Later, Young examines *Jude the Obscure* in relation to James’s comments on the importance of particular objects of ‘interest’ in subjective life, and in connection with modern theories of manic behaviour. The psychoanalytic reading of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, which forms the final chapter, takes up an approach to the novel which has, of course, been used before, but Young’s discussion is new particularly in that it is also rooted in modern neuroscience and psychology.

The section on George Eliot begins with an interesting discussion of the importance of sound in *Middlemarch* as a means of achieving sympathetic resonances between characters on both physical and psychological levels, such as in Dorothea’s ‘cry of soul to soul’ which affects Lydgate so powerfully. As Young points out, attention to the aural in Eliot’s fiction is not entirely new, but she draws valuable connections between this and modern research into the physiology of empathy. References to the work of Hermann von Helmholtz, the pioneering nineteenth-century theorist of the psychology of hearing, are made to good effect here, even if it therefore seems strange that little mention is made of George Henry Lewes’s theory of the mind/body relationship. Young then turns to *Daniel Deronda*, which she sees as offering a more hopeful vision than does Eliot’s earlier fiction of the possibilities of overcoming the barriers between individual minds. There is an exploration here of Eliot’s use of metaphor, simile and symbol which, Young argues, are foregrounded in Eliot’s final novel as means of dramatizing how felt, subjective experience may be made accessible to the experience of other subjects by being figuratively embodied, as in, for instance, the pawned necklace which takes on various shared meanings for Deronda and Gwendolen. In her readings of both novels, Young draws some convincing comparisons between fiction and theory, even if some of her

statements may over-emphasize the contrasts between these late novels and Eliot's earlier work: while it is true, for example, that in *Deronda* the 'physical' and the 'metaphysical' (105) are perhaps more closely bound up than ever before in Eliot's writing, nonetheless the inseparability of the two is a theme which is explored in different ways throughout her fiction. I would also note that, as I read it, the description of Maggie in *The Mill on Floss* as 'like a small Medusa with her snakes cropped' (Ch. 10) comes from the narrator, and not from Maggie's mother, and it is either the narrator, or perhaps Mrs Tulliver, and not Tom who compares Maggie to a 'Shetland pony' (Ch. 2; see Young 98).

Young's interdisciplinary and explicitly ahistorical approach points to some exciting possibilities for connecting literature and modern science, and this seems especially timely in an era, such as our own, in which the relevance of the Humanities as academic disciplines is being questioned. Inevitably, such an approach brings with it some obvious possible drawbacks. The innovativeness of James's theories, for example, would be much clearer with some brief discussion of how his work reacts against the theories of figures such as Spencer, Bain, Huxley and Clifford – it was disappointing in this respect to find no reference in the book to my *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (2006), which contains extensive discussion of James in relation to Eliot and to his contemporary scientists of mind. It would also be useful to have some more indication of precisely why these novelists have been chosen for discussion (which is not to imply that they should not have been), and of how we might add Young's insights to our understanding of how the novel form was developing in the nineteenth century. Young's frame of reference necessarily leaves relatively little scope for attention to the many contrasts, in form, theme and ideological content, between the three novelists themselves, and to the important differences between fictional and scientific accounts of the self.

Young's argument is avowedly personal and boldly and emphatically made, and her written style deliberately informal, and this makes for a generally accessible, if intricate, discussion which minimizes the use of jargon. At times, that boldness may leave readers feeling the need to be reminded a little more of the precise connections being made between specific features of the novels and specific psychological concepts, so as to underline the distinctiveness of Young's discussion: that distinctiveness, for instance, is evident not in the observation that Emma Woodhouse's mind '*must change*' (46; Young's italics), but rather in the fresh connections which Young draws between the narration of Emma's development and modern theories of mind.

Imagining Minds, which is attractively presented and available in paperback as well as hardback, makes an interesting contribution to what is still a relatively new turn in literary studies towards matters of human cognition, and will also appeal to readers outside academia. Its approach and argumentative style carry with them some potential pitfalls, but they also bring much that is fresh to our reading of nineteenth-century fiction.

Michael Davis
University of the West of England, Bristol