

BOOK REVIEWS

Peter Widdowson

HARDY IN HISTORY: A STUDY IN LITERARY SOCIOLOGY

London & New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1989. Pp. 260

Reviewed by Terence Dawson

This is one of those studies which one might strongly urge one's students to read, but with which one can equally strongly disagree. Criticism, Widdowson claims, has manufactured a "realist" Thomas Hardy by foregrounding those aspects of his fiction which most nearly approximate to humanist realism, and by suppressing or rejecting those which run counter to or challenge it. The first part of the study traces the way in which Hardy has been shaped by critics, by the demands of school examining boards and, more recently, by the media, especially television and film adaptations. The second part seeks to show us, by way of an analysis of *The Life*, and *The Hand of Ethelberta*, that there is another Wessex and another Thomas Hardy, much more centrally concerned with gender and class divisions than is generally recognized. Widdowson's aim is to replace the critical commonplace of the author as a great modern tragic humanist and rural annalist whose minor works are flawed with a "radical Thomas Hardy."

The first part is usefully provocative. It presents a great deal of evidence to support its claim and undeniably achieves its purpose, but it does so by a sleight of hand. The pun that Widdowson employs to underline his argument that we all create our own Hardy (my 'TH' = MYTH) also betrays him. He is not really interested in the works: his concern is with a hypothetical author. By drawing evidence for his argument from *The Life*, which he claims is Hardy's last prose fiction, and *The Hand of Ethelberta*, the subject of the study becomes the cast of Hardy's consciousness. In short, this is a thinly disguised form of biographical criticism, as is clear from the conclusion to chapter five in which Widdowson claims that *The Hand of Ethelberta* is a novel deeply marked by the alienating class experience of its author. However, the claim that this is also a crucial issue in the major works is undermined by the argument, which moves from claims about "Hardy" to claims about his fictions. Thus, no matter how corrective it is to look again at one of the so-called minor works, the conclusions arrived at should not be allowed to serve to construct "another" Hardy (Widdowson's myth?) by which to read *Tess* or *Jude*.

A further feature of this study that gives rise to some doubts is its simultaneous insistence that Hardy is not a realist, yet is a social novelist. Although Widdowson concedes that Wessex is "a landscape of the mind," he argues that the issues with which this mind was concerned are essentially social. His purpose is "to lay bare the mechanisms by which the fiction of gender/class

'difference' operates at the ideological heart of liberal-bourgeois society." Hardy, in short, is merely an excuse to do this. Hardy is a "socially inferior intellectual" and, therefore, supercilious (151), he fears women "in terms of their threatening upward social mobility" (217), and therefore his works must reveal similar tendencies. Not only is this indifferent psychology, it is appalling critical logic.

The first part of this book should stimulate some lively discussion, but its critical methods leave much to be desired. There is little new in the findings except the emphasis that Widdowson places on the currently fashionable issues of gender and class: the rest is much ado about nothing. Towards the end of chapter one, Widdowson takes a swipe at what he sees as some fundamental contradictions in Donald Davie's critical position: he is perturbingly unconscious of the contradictions inherent in his own approach.

Peter Collier

PROUST AND VENICE

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989

Reviewed by Anthony R. Pugh

Proust's great novel is indeed inexhaustible. No matter from what perspective one approaches it, one can always find patterns which are astonishingly coherent in themselves, while at the same time they illuminate the deep concerns suggested by the text. It is surprising that nobody before Peter Collier has submitted the motif of Venice to the same intense scrutiny that has been applied with success to other themes. Now that we have Collier's study (which first appeared in an Italian translation in 1986), we can no longer neglect the insight that contemplation of things Venetian can bring.

"Things Venetian" because Collier does not restrict himself to the visit to Venice in *La Fugitive*, but follows up all the clues, in paintings, costumes, metaphors. The "séjour" itself is of course crucial; Collier argues that it is as important a stage on Marcel's way as the better-known "privileged moments." He treats this passage in his eighth chapter, and insists on the motif of baptism, which permeates the text at this point. The visit to Saint Mark's, like Christ's visiting the Jordan where John was baptizing, becomes a symbol of the imminent realization the Narrator will have of his artistic vocation. The visit therefore becomes the most important turning point in Marcel's slow journey towards his final revelation. But the Venice episode also (and this is one of Collier's greatest strengths) can be shown to pick up suggestions strewn throughout the earlier parts of the novel. Thus Collier can write that "the whole of Combray is regenerated in Proust's description of Venice . . . and the church [Saint Mark's] becomes a gospel, prefiguring Marcel's own book" (9).

What distinguishes Collier's account is the thoroughness with which he explores all possible associations latent in the text. He has prepared us for this