

IMAGINING MINDS: THE NEURO-AESTHETICS OF AUSTEN, ELIOT, AND HARDY by Kay Young. Ohio State University Press, 2010. 218 pgs. \$25.75 (pb)

Kay Young's *Imagining Lives* is as creative and rewarding as her title is apt and resonant: Young is at work imagining the minds of three 19th century novelists – Austen, Eliot, Hardy – as they imagine characters that are sometimes mentally sure-footed, more often faltering, sometimes blinded or deaf to what is external to their own egos, sometimes seemingly unconscious of themselves as selves. Young claims “that the novel writes about the nature of mind, narrates it at work, and stimulates us to know deepened experiences of consciousness in its touching of our own integrated minds.” Thus the novel does the “mind-work” of joining the narrator and the character with the reader as it evokes self-consciousness. Closely reflecting upon boundaries and interpenetrabilities among the characters’ external worlds as well as among characters, their minds and their senses of themselves, Young employs the insights of William James and the neurologist Antonio Damasio to underpin her incisive readings. Beginning with James’s *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), Young works to establish important parallels between theoretical and fictional representations of the mind.

Starting from an introductory chapter, Young delineates the territory she wishes to explore and begins to fill in the psychological landscape within which the novels develop. The book is divided into three parts: “Jane Austen and Self-Consciousness,” with particular focus on *Emma* and *Persuasion*, where the radically different consciousnesses of Emma and Anne Elliot are especially instructive early in the book; “George Eliot and Other-Consciousness” in which Young studies *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, in the former focusing innovatively on sound rather than, as is more typically argued, sight as the dominant sense differentiating characters’ consciousnesses, and in the latter offering a fascinating argument about metaphor as the central instrument of that novel’s consciousnesses. Finally, in “Thomas Hardy and Nonintrospective Consciousness,” Young focuses on Sue Bridehead from *Jude, the Obscure*, and the eponymous Tess Durbeyfield.

In moving her reader’s attention from these two “embodied,” hardly self-conscious women toward her concluding chapter that considers the relation between brain and mind -- the mind-body dichotomy -- Young dwells on Tess’s mouth – its sound, its shape, its lips; the image

of the mouth is powerfully evocative for representing various relations between the self and other, even of course the primal relation of self and mother which Young discusses in evolutionary terms.

Though Young begins her study of the novels with an illustrative scene centered on the self-deceiving Emma Woodhouse, Jane Austen provides another moment which encompasses what seems to me central to Young's project *throughout* the book by highlighting self-consciousness in mid-transition. This is the familiar, indeed key moment in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth Bennet, having come to Darcy's Pemberley before he unexpectedly returns, is touring the home with her relatives the Gardiners under the guidance of Darcy's housekeeper. They are in the picture gallery when Elizabeth, feeling far more favorably impressed with Darcy as a result of Mrs. Reynolds' high regard, "beheld a striking resemblance of Mr. Darcy, with such a smile over the face, as she remembered to have sometimes seen, when he looked at her...." Returning to it as the group retraces its steps, "she stood before the canvas, on which he was represented, and *fixed his eyes upon herself* [emphasis added;] she thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of gratitude than it had ever raised before...." Here we have Austen explicitly indicating that Elizabeth positions herself at the point on which Darcy's eyes are focused, modifying her sentiments about him and herself: redefining herself through his eyes (and Young attends to Lizzie's "fine dark eyes," as Darcy perceives them and appreciates her), a redefinition dependent as well on her sense of the world he occupies at Pemberley, how it reflects him and how he inhabits it. As Young cites Damasio, "we become conscious when our organisms internally construct and internally exhibit a specific kind of wordless knowledge – and our organism has been changed by an object..." This strategic scene reveals Elizabeth's recognition: "at that moment she felt, that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!"

The book concludes with a "Coda," almost exploding with additional sources from the sciences of the mind and the brain, called "The Neurology of Narrative," in which Young collaborates with Jeffrey L. Saver, M.D. This section, she tells her reader in the introduction, was actually her starting point for her thinking about narrative: "that we think in narrative because our brains are hardwired to do so." The three main parts of her book resulted from her study of "the relations of mind and the novels" she discusses. She argues powerfully that "the novel is an aesthetic map to and experiencing of the nature of the mind-brain. The ideas and their expression of James and Damasio when set next to those of Austen, Eliot, and Hardy make

evident their connection”: a connection between a description of “the nature of mental processing” and fictional portrayals that “bring that processing to embodied, feeling, relational narrative life.”

But Young is far more ambitious here as well as exceptionally generous with her readers: she is not merely adding corroborating data from some scientific work to her own astute readings; rather, she is aiming at identifying the sources and nature of narrative, of a variety of consciousnesses, as well as reflecting on how reading a novel affects the mind-body of the reader. In doing so, she has produced an exciting interdisciplinary study.

*Phyllis A. Roth, Professor of English, Emerita
Skidmore College
paroth@skidmore.edu*