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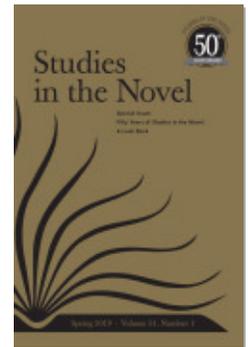
An Imaginary Paradise of Individuals

Annette Federico

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AN IMAGINARY PARADISE OF INDIVIDUALS

ANNETTE FEDERICO

Introducing Elizabeth Langland’s “A Perspective of One’s Own: Thomas Hardy and the Elusive Sue Bridehead,” first published in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 12, No. 1, spring 1980, pp. 12-28.

In *The Art of the Novel* (1986), Czech writer Milan Kundera claims that it is only when we lose the certainty of truth, when we can no longer depend on the unanimous agreement of others, that we become individuals. In a wonderful phrase, Kundera calls the novel “an imaginary paradise of individuals.” Because the novel possesses its own wisdom, even beyond the intentions of the novelist, it is incapable of ideological servitude. The novel occupies that crucial territory “where no one possesses the truth...but where everyone has the right to be understood” (159).

In “A Perspective of One’s Own: Thomas Hardy and the Elusive Sue Bridehead,” Elizabeth Langland conscientiously works through a set of formal problems in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895)—inconsistencies in focalization, narratorial interjections, uneven character development—in order to respect one fictional character’s right to be understood. Langland’s article is not a landmark in 1980s criticism or a pioneering work of theory. Her methodology does not gesture toward a bold new direction for studying the nineteenth-century novel. But to me, the motive toward *understanding* and Langland’s articulation of why this matters for criticism speaks to my own ruminations about how we write about and teach the novel today. Her essay models a nuanced ethical intelligence, great literary sensitivity, directness, and intellectual clarity.

Many critics have described Sue Bridehead, one of the most decidedly “modern” women in Victorian fiction, as inconsistent, elusive, or just problematic in an especially frustrating way. Sue is a character who has been “understood” primarily within a familiar set of critical matrixes: she functions

schematically as one half of Hardy's thematic focus (spirit/flesh, reason/feeling), or she is presented as a sociological type (the New Woman, the Girl of the Period), or as a psychological case study (masochistic, frigid, hysterical). These readings are convincing and illuminating, and they have had a long critical life. And yet, there is something pat and diminishing about them, too. Sue refuses to be read as merely a device. And, at least for a few critics, when it comes to private intuitions about Sue apart from the "grinder of analysis," she may not seem maddeningly erratic at all. She may instead seem to be "utterly charming and vibrant" (Irving Howe), someone "rather wonderful" (A. Alvarez). "The critical need to construct a coherent and logical character out of Sue," writes Langland, supervises a more generous reflex toward an autonomous and dynamic individual (25). Just as we have to make an effort to see Sue from a perspective not enmeshed with Jude's limited point of view, we may have to work to slip through the nets of our own critical mindsets. For responses to Hardy's heroine expose a puzzling inconsistency in the way we approach literary interpretation—the contradiction between the *judgment* of the critic and the *feelings* of the reader.

Langland does not write about Sue naively, as though she were a real person—and yet, in a way, she does. She argues for the character's integrity, her autonomy and cohesiveness as a personality, her desire for "an identity of her own" (23). Indeed, Langland's title, "A Perspective of One's Own," directs us back not only to Virginia Woolf, but to Elaine Showalter's groundbreaking *A Literature of Their Own*, from 1978. Langland's article was written at the start of a decade that would see an explosion of feminist criticism. Many of those books and articles would challenge all kinds of assumptions about critical practice in the academy—starting with assumptions about voice and identity, and about whose perspective is privileged and whose is marginalized, unstable, or out of step.

Langland does not explicitly frame her argument in the terms of feminist critique—indeed, she never pointedly identifies her theoretical orientation or her politics at all. Her reading is almost New Critical in its tight focus on Hardy's narration and on the discussions that have surrounded his conception of Sue. Her elegant reflections about the multi-dimensionality of a single character in a single novel stand almost as a caution against categorical thinking, a warning about the perils of forming large philosophical or theoretical pronouncements about any literary work—or about any person. And if we all require, and have a right to, a perspective of our own, perhaps subjectivity should not be banished entirely from the enterprise of interpretation. More than ever, we need all the human tools we have. As Langland's essay implies, perhaps the critic should sometimes also be a reader.

In Hardy's tragic novel, Sue Bridehead has a pivotal role in underscoring "the pathos of limited human understanding." *Jude* was Hardy's last novel, and the one "in which judgments and pronouncements are not so easy" (25).

Today, mass media, social media, new technologies, and unending ideological rhetoric rely on simplifications and reductions to explain complexities, or else deploy large framing perspectives where our sense of ourselves as coherent, free individuals isn't much regarded. As Kundera reminds us, against this reductive pressure we have the novel, and the spirit of the novel is *complexity*. "Every novel says to the reader: 'Things are not as simple as you think.' That is the novel's eternal truth, but it grows steadily harder to hear amid the din of easy, quick answers that come faster than the question and block it off" (18).

Literary criticism of the novel cannot be merely an extension of mass media and ideology, shrinking the richness of the literary experience to abstract power struggles, moments on historical timelines, diagrammatic answers. Langland's essay, written almost forty years ago (when I was still a college undergraduate, and trying very hard to find a perspective of *my* own), affirms the value and pleasure of novel reading and novel criticism by reminding us that we are fatally limited in our perspective, that there's always more to understand about other people. Her essay reminds us that things are not as simple as we think.

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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