

The Neurology of Narrative

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

By Kay Young.

The Ohio State University Press, 2010. xi +

218 pages.

Paperback. \$26.95.

Review by Elizabeth Chang.

This book, part of the press's "Theory and Interpretation of Narrative" series, seeks to demonstrate complexity in the seemingly self-evident claim that "the novel is an aesthetic map to and experience of the nature of the mind-brain." Despite the emphasis on aesthetics in both this explicitly-held statement of purpose and the title of the book itself, Young is mostly attentive to nuances of cognitive narratology in major novels by Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy. Followers of the work of Lisa Zunshine among others will find much of interest here, as Young thoughtfully explores what she terms "experiences of mind"—or more accurately the multiple and shifting efforts by these novelists to narrate individual minds, to chart the meeting points between two minds, and to demonstrate how one mind can imagine encounters with other minds not present. Those less convinced of the interest of modern cognitive science to the study of the nineteenth-century novel may be similarly less easily won over to Young's argument, or at least to her claim that it is modern neuroscience that compels us to attend to these widely admired novels. Indeed Young has quite a difficult task to explain why she has chosen these particular books—the writings of the Brontë sisters and Sir Walter Scott are also proposed as options—considering that "the nature of mind" can be said to be the focus of a good many nineteenth-century novels. Whether other scholars will take up Young's invitation to use her "models of mind with regard to the novel as a

genre at large" will most likely depend on the success of future scientific-literary collaborations in being more specific about their interdisciplinary aims.

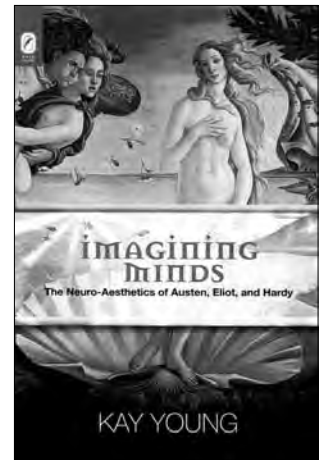
JASNA readers will be particularly attentive to Young's opening chapters, which examine *Emma* and *Persuasion* in sustained, detailed readings designed to prove that "Jane Austen's work introduces to the novel sustained, self-conscious reflection on the nature of the *self's mind*." In the case of *Emma Woodhouse*, this comes through a meditative relationship with futurity explained by *Emma's* status as the only Austen heroine whose imagination of future states receives direct authorial narration and attention. That the future states *Emma* imagines perpetually change as *Emma* navigates inevitable checks to her intended progress demonstrates both the flexibility and ultimate instability of these future states of mind—yet, as Young demonstrates, *Emma's* painful final self-consciousness can only occur once her experience with all intermittent and intermediary mind-states has been adequately pursued.

In contrast to *Emma's* youthful focus on the future, Young, like others, finds *Persuasion* to be a book of the past; the illuminating twist is that it is modern cognitive theory that makes it so. Both Anne Elliot and the novel itself are concerned with loss, retrenchment, and the dissociation of the mind and the body in ways that require more recent terminology of consciousness to adequately explore. Unlike *Emma's* deflating conclusion, Anne's happy ending comes when she returns to full consciousness of her own self as an embodied and perceiving union of mind and body. Young draws upon the cognitive theories of Anthony Damasio to argue that it is Wentworth's attention that allows Anne to recognize another recognizing her own mind, and so in that circuitous fashion to herself recognize her own embodied mind without intermediary.

Later chapters follow *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda*, *Tess of the D'urbervilles*

and *Jude the Obscure* to build and expand the pieces of this argument. For Young, Eliot's novels offer a space to explore the mental and physiological components of empathetic connection—in *Middlemarch*, through the experience of hearing sounds, and in *Daniel Deronda*, through the operations of shared and transformative metaphors of mind. Hardy forestalls such connections, Young argues, through various mentally destructive paths—Jude's impulsivity, Sue's mania, Tess's dissociation from her self. Hardy's novels, intent as they are on exploring the weak points of human connections, likewise spotlight the inability of human minds to succeed in forming the connections that they seek in any permanent or stable fashion.

Through *Imagining Minds*, Young displays admirable facility with theories of mind spanning three centuries. Her introduction alone moves skillfully from Descartes to William James to the advances of modern neuroscience. These connections are pressed further in her coda, "The Neurology of Narrative," a stand-alone piece co-written with the neurologist Jeffrey Saver dedicated to demonstrating the operations of narrative in the human central nervous system itself. This explicit focus on the general experience of narrative as the fundamental structure of autobiographical expression and memory ably broadens the focus of Young's study to include new scientific work; in doing so, however, it must necessarily make its roots in certain exemplary narratives—by Austen, Eliot, Hardy, and others—correspondingly shallower.



Elizabeth Chang is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Missouri.