

REVIEW FORUM

The Language of Gender and Class: Transformation in the Victorian Novel,
by Patricia Ingham. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

DIVINE PRUNING

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“Divine pruning” (14) is Patricia Ingham’s own delicious phrase. She uses it to characterise the mitigating influences assumed in the early nineteenth century to operate on an aggressive organic nature. But to me, the expression perfectly captures the style and method and virtues of *The Language of Gender and Class*. Through three overview chapters, and through detailed analyses of six representative novels, the book disentangles—“untwines” is its tidier word—the visible and less visible connections, or “interlockings,” between the categories of class and gender in nineteenth-century discourses.

There is a remarkable economy in the writing and in the selection. The introductory and bridging chapters are models of precise exposition, marking out large patterns of transformation and plucking out just the right quotation to exemplify or develop the point in question. The same technique is deployed from the other direction in the chapters on individual novels, where the particularities of one text are neatly situated in various kinds of connection, such as contemporary reviews of the novel in question; nineteenth-century social history; the history of gender and class as categories that *The Language of Gender and Class* is in the process of narrating. An additional type of context is planted in terms of the future, as Ingham regularly provides comparative illustrations of late twentieth-century shifts of accent in the articulation of gender and class. Not the least merit of the book is that it will be perfect for students to read as a way into thinking historically about language, and about the inextricability of linguistic from social and sexual issues; yet this clarity is achieved alongside, not at the expense of, the complexity of its arguments.

Although she insists on the unpredictability of linguistic changes—there is no knowing in advance which neologicistic or neo-discursive seeds will take, or what exactly will grow from their sowing—Ingham does hold, quite resolutely, to a sense of progressive improvement through the century, actively furthered as well as passively exemplified by the language and plots of her chosen texts; novels are given a privileged place because “it is at the level of symbolism and rhetoric that ideological codings . . . can begin to break down” (27). So she gives us signs of incipient protest and expression on the part of middle-class women characters in the first half of the century—Brontë’s Shirley Keeldar, or Louisa Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, or Margaret Hale in *North and South*—which, by the time her story has reached the other end, will have issued in species of novelistic woman whose sexual and intellectual possibilities could not have been imagined, much less propagated, fifty years before.

Ingham’s reading of Louisa’s near-miss elopement is almost an allegory of this general structure. She is shown to be passionate, but the novel has to keep her formally in place so that instead of going the whole way of escape with her suitably unsuitable lover, she stops off at her father’s. As Ingham demonstrates, her partial sexual rebellion

is structurally linked to the fall of her husband's status and power, and by extension to that of ruthless capitalists more widely: "The dismantling of the crucial symbolic sign of the middle-class woman has effected the social revolution feared by the narrator when it lurked in the crowd of Coketown workers. Brought about through the figure of sexualised woman, it is recorded with satisfaction, even delight" (101). In these concluding words to the chapter it is hard to not divine the narrator's own delight: as though there is a pleasure in recording the slow but inexorable movements that are taking place or finding words.

Ingham tells a strong tale of the classes and genders which make their way through her century. Her starting point is with the ideology that assigned to domestic middle-class feminine virtue the task of calming the conflict between the classes; Ingham shows how this ideology came to be prised apart, even in narratives (such as some of the industrial novels of the 1840s and 1850s) which seem to endorse it. By the end of the century, Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* or Gissing's *The Unclassed* are seen to "capture a cultural moment when the interlocked systems of class and gender are at last untwining" (143).

Waiting at a further end of the story, in a future horizon that might be towards the far side of the twentieth century, are new signs and characters, female certainly and working-class perhaps (if class is still the relevant category) who are not constrained (or, for that matter, forcibly entwined) in the same ways, linguistically, socially or sexually, as were their nineteenth-century novelistic forebears. The question this raises for me is about the language of the language of gender and class—and, by extension, of *The Language of Gender and Class*.

The ultimate outcome of Ingham's divine pruning is to allow the development of individuals of either sex or of any social class who would not be constrained by the ideological entanglements of language and history that pin them down and twist them up together. So in *Jude the Obscure*, for instance, the "ineradicable tie" between Sue Bridehead and Jude Fawley, which is figured in their blood relationship as cousins and is situated somewhere beyond the recognisable terms of marriage or sexual attraction, "is a perceived analogy between two kinds of contemporary disvaluing of individuals that they separately suffer, one based on gender, the other on class" (166). And in other novels by Hardy in which comparable connections between women and working-class men occur, "anxiety, insecurity and self-doubt are common to both the man and the woman. Each is vulnerable to humiliation undeserved by them as individuals, because of the groups to which they belong" (167). The "individual" becomes, potentially, the unit that might be freed from subjection to the devaluations inflicted on him or her.

Ingham describes the process which leads from the social humiliation to the personal response in psychological terms. Of working-class men: "To an extent, as women do, they internalise this judgement, this category-based disvaluing of themselves, and have difficulty maintaining self-esteem" (166). Sue Bridehead "is a woman whose intellectual liberation is debilitated by the failure of emotions (conditioned by the artificial compulsions of her time) to keep up with her opinions" (176); "it is conditioning which has produced the guilt that unnecessarily destroys her" (182). The language of internalisation and conditioning gestures towards an individual who might be released from such "artificial compulsions," but who, for the time being—in the society in which he or she is historically situated—cannot resist them. It is through a particular twentieth-century psychological language that Ingham points the

way forward to a time when there might be characters free from the divisions produced or forced by such intolerable pressures.

In the chapter on *North and South*, Ingham quotes a wonderful letter of 1850 from Elizabeth Gaskell which she introduces as reflecting the author's own "sense of being a divided self" (56); it concerns, as Ingham puts it, "her feelings about buying a new and better house while so many [are] in poverty" (57). It's a passage that Ingham clearly loves herself, since she chooses it to conclude her introduction to the Penguin edition of *North and South*—so I take the liberty of quoting her extract in full:

That's the haunting thought to me; at least to one of my "Mes," for I have a great number, and that's the plague. One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian—(only people call her socialist and communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house. . . . Now that's my "social" self, I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience whh [sic] is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members? I try to drown myself (my first self), by saying it's Wm [sic] who is to decide . . . and his feeling it right ought to be my rule. And so it is—only that does not quite do . . . I long (weakly) for the old times where right and wrong did not seem such complicated matters; and I am sometimes coward enough to wish we were back in the darkness where obedience was the only seen duty of women. (57)

Ingham comments that Gaskell does indeed, in *North and South*, move out to confront "the 'complicated matters' of right and wrong in relation to class and gender . . . without a final compromise" (57). But what the letter also suggests to me is the recognition, in this case almost with a kind of pleasure at finding the language for it, of the coexistence and insuppressibility of those many "Mes" whose identity is partly maintained through their permanent conflict: "How am I to reconcile all these warring members?"

There might be pleasures as well distresses in a divided self; and indeed it might be that an undivided self—in the monochrome "darkness" of a single duty, of clear-cut identities for a sex or a class—inhabited a world without history or change, in which gender and class, among other things, were settled once and for all. Perhaps part of the appeal of Gaskell's letter is precisely that it has such a modern feel: with a few minor adjustments, this could be the language of a late twentieth-century expression of the multiplicity of women's identities—even down to the ambivalent imagining of a moment in the past when women's role was clear and single. Ingham's book superbly shows the divisions and joins, the twinings and untwinings, of gender and class in nineteenth-century languages. In doing so, it illuminates, even as it stems from, the divisions that continue to mark and make the mixed individuals of our contemporary social garden.
