

This time, however, Taylor is infuriated not with the critics but with de Guérin herself. She writes: "Is it true that we are so placed on this earth that our life arranges itself without us? That we may wisely remain passive, assured that a superior power directs events? So far from it that there is no one so weak and incapable that their own exertions will not modify their condition."

When Charlotte Brontë wrote that Taylor "encouraged me and in her own strong, energetic language heartened me on," and later that "Mary's price is above rubies" she was pointing to the strengths that make Taylor an extremely appealing subject for a biography. She was indeed energetic, did not suffer fools gladly, and considered that women could without question hold up half the sky; Bellamy has wisely allowed her to speak copiously in her own voice, and this, together with contemporary letters and comments on Taylor's career and opinions, makes this biography a valuable addition to Brontë studies and nineteenth-century women's studies generally.

Barbara Garlick

***Mediating Criticism: Literary Criticism Humanized*, by Roger D. Sell.
Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2001.**

In a prior book (*Literature as Communication: The Foundations of Mediating Criticism*) Roger Sell offers a detailed critique of twentieth-century literary theory, clearing the decks for a theory of his own, startling in its simple cogency and common-sense: that literature is an attempted relationship, a communicative venture inviting the reader sympathetically to inhabit the beliefs, assumptions, experience of the writer. The task of the critic, then, is essentially one of mediation, which identifies the writer's historical situatedness, and enlists the reader's engagement, from the vantage point of his own time and place, with the writer. Now, a year later, comes the sequel in which Sell puts his theory into practice, unfolding the vision of "a generously humanizing literary appreciation," one which might rescue reading from the "conspiracy against the laity" he finds current in schools and universities. While he acknowledges a debt to many twentieth-century literary critics, he finds in the formalist tendencies of modernism a habit of de-personalising and de-historicising literature, and in structuralism and post-structuralism, a de-centring of the human subject that transfers agency and responsibility from real writers and real readers to language, society or culture.

He is not alone. As literary theory established itself as orthodoxy, the ancient debate about the moral value of literature began to be re-invigorated. Sell's is one of a growing number of voices calling for a renovated humanist criticism that restores the honest-to-goodness pleasures of reading. (Valentine Cunningham's recent *Reading after Theory* is another.) In finding in literature "the catalyst to human

growth,” Sell is not wanting to turn the clock back towards some belles-lettrist universalist notion of humanity. On the contrary, his approach is not inconsistent with some basic emphases of new historicism or of reader-response theory: “a reader cannot truly empathize with writers of any merit without recognizing the precise moral valency of their historical deeds of writing” or without an awareness of the “co-adaptations” between the social and the individual which those deeds embody. Sell’s close readings recuperate writers as well as values. The novelist William Gerhardie and the poet Andrew Young, undervalued by an early twentieth-century readership unaware of the literary traditions within which they were writing, make exemplary case studies in the marginalising effects of canon formation. Sell’s readings of Young and of Henry Vaughan convincingly demonstrate the readerly pleasure to be had by such a mediation as he espouses. The poetry of Robert Frost, and of the Eliot of *The Waste Land*, he argues, have been subjected to modernist readings that point up grimness, impoliteness, unpleasantness; today’s readers will find other qualities, and a richer text. The modernist reading of Henry Fielding, drawing attention to his naturalist view of human nature and society, tends to highlight what his contemporaries would have thought of as Tory pessimism. But what of the Fielding whose “see-saw temperament” throws up a Whiggish optimism, an un-modernist, irrepressible, delight in the comic?

Readers of this journal will be most interested in Sell’s substantial chapters on Dickens. Both Victorian society, he contends, and Dickens’ attitude to it, were more complex than twentieth-century literary scholarship (through which he threads his way), has allowed. While on the one hand Dickens “endorsed bourgeois ideology,” on the other “he crucially exploited it, stepped outside of it, and worked to change it.” Drawing on Bakhtin, Sell points to Dickens’ “ecstatic immersion in the polyphony of a richly differentiated cultural reality” as an immediate sign of this complexity. Granting the lapses into melodrama and mawkish sentimentality in the characterisation of Edith and Florence, in *Dombey and Son*, Sell argues that they may well have done Victorian women a service, reflecting Dickens’ keen sense of the ways in which his society victimised women. The repeated adjective “Wordsworthian” needs a greater degree of Sell’s mediation than it receives, especially as it is invoked in the cases of Paul Dombey and of Mr Dombey’s change of heart. “The imaginative loyalty to a past that has been outgrown” is as incomplete an account of the Wordsworthian, it seems to me, as some of the more obviously debased appeals he notes in Dickens’ appropriations.

The woman question, so large an obstacle in twentieth-century responses to Dickens, most notably for feminists, surfaces again in the discussion of *David Copperfield*. Drawing attention to the degree to which Dickens’ cultural formation shapes his characters (“Of course they were Victorian!”), Sell sees this as the very ground on which the mediating critic will ensure two-way dialogue between then and now. David’s relationship with little Emily, from early erotic experimentation to rivalry for Steerforth, to David’s inability to confront her departing figure at the

novel's end, shows Dickens' awareness of Victorian class and sexual tensions getting in the way of human decency. Sell is not the first critic to see characters surrounding David as projections of his own unacknowledged impulses, but he advances the case in several directions, in arguing, for example, that David's Murdstonian treatment of Dora is a factor in his blockage about Agnes, that in the projection characters of Wakefield and Micawber, the novel itself anticipates twentieth-century criticisms of Agnes, just as Rosa Dartle throws into question any view of David as unequivocally masculine and heterosexual. Yet the "modernistically psychoanalysed" David has blinded us to his "sincerity of purpose, his moments of generosity and tact, of spontaneous trusting loyalty." The erosion of the last great twentieth-century taboo, Sell believes, "the taboo against recognizing human goodness and achievement," will allow a new David, and a new Dickens, to emerge. These words sound as radical, in the context within which we are reading, as anything that came out of the theory wars. Roger Sell's book will be music to the ears of anyone who enjoys reading, who appreciates subtle and attentive critical analysis, and who continues to find value in the teaching of literature.

Jennifer Gribble

***Unknown London: Early Modernist Visions of the Metropolis, 1815-45,* edited by John Marriott (General Editor) and Masaie Matsumura and Judith R. Walkowitz (Consulting Editors). 6 vols. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000.**

Introduced in 1851 following the Great Exhibition, the "Knowledge of London" is the course of study that must be completed by anyone seeking to obtain a London taxi driver's licence and badge. Today it requires prospective licensees to learn some 400 routes through the city, including all places of interest, museums, hospitals, police stations, cinemas, statues, monuments and so on. Those who seek the "Knowledge" may be seen weaving through the London traffic on bikes, the telltale *A to Z* affixed to their handlebars. While not quite so preoccupied with questions of topography, *Unknown London: Early Modernist Visions of the Metropolis, 1815-1845* displays a similar concern to master the complex totality of London and render it legible. Edited by John Marriott (co-editor of the Pickering and Chatto edition *The Metropolitan Poor, Semi-Factual Accounts, 1795-1910*), this six-volume set is an anthology of literature, graphic illustration and play texts chosen to show the transformation that occurred in perceptions of the metropolis in the early nineteenth century. The collection is a timely one in terms of recent developments in the study of Victorian visuality and its relation to the history of modernity. While the metropolitan writings of Dickens and Mayhew are well known, *Unknown London* includes works by Pierce Egan, George Smeeton, James Grant, W.T. Moncrieff and others that laid the foundations for later urban explorers. The texts reproduced here