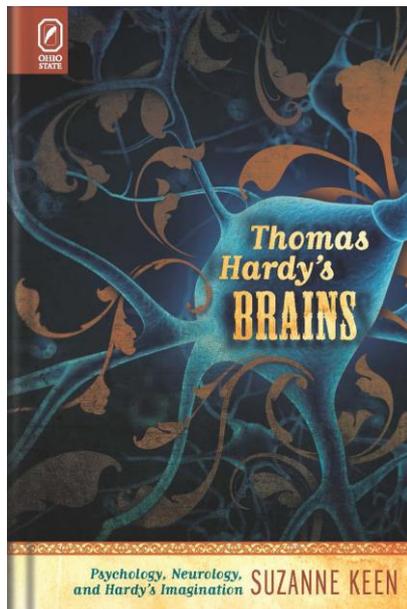


BOOK REVIEW

Thomas Hardy's Brains: Psychology, Neurology, and Hardy's Imagination, by Suzanne Keen (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014). 236 pp. Hardback, \$64.95. Paperback, \$25.95. Multimedia CD, \$14.95.

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An innovative, interdisciplinary scholar in the fields of narrative theory, neuroscience, psychology, and affect theory, Suzanne Keen has few parallels. Her most recent book, *Thomas Hardy's Brains: Psychology, Neurology, and Hardy's Imagination*, was shortlisted for the 2015 Phi Beta Kappa's Christian Gauss Award for Literary Scholarship or Criticism. In it, Keen builds on her previous work in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) to present a smart, provocative examination of Victorian psychology, neurology, and affect in Thomas Hardy's novels and poetry. Despite attempts by scholars to examine the brain and neural network imagery in Hardy's oeuvre, most noticeably in *The Dynasts* (1904-8), which Keen describes as 'one of the first modern texts to represent the monist idea of the universe in explicitly neurological imagery of hyperastronomical scale' (p. 6), no significant study that considers Hardy's theory of the mind and development of an affective psychology through his personal program of reflective reading in psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, and evolution has previously been published.

The impetus for Keen's project is twofold: to contribute to ongoing historical research that contextualises Victorian sciences of the brain and Hardy's extensive reading about the brain, and to contribute to the

intersection of literary criticism, cognitive historicism, and literary cognitive theory by testing the 'claims of literary cognitivism with regards to the works of a writer who was well aware of the psychology of his day' (p. 13). The first chapter examines with insight Hardy's reading 'about human brains and behavior, nerves and their diseases, cognition and emotion' in the writings of Auguste Comte, Joseph Fourier, George Henry Lewes, Théodule Ribot, Aldous Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, and Henry Maudsley (p. 20). In his *Literary Notebooks*, Hardy kept careful notes on his responses to the popular scientific, psychological, and philosophical texts of the day. One notable absence from his notebooks is Freud, but as Rosemary Sumner has argued in *Thomas Hardy: Psychological Novelist* (1981), 'Hardy anticipat[es] Freud in his depiction of neurotic characters or those who struggle against inhibition' (quoted in Keen, p. 45). Keen is adamant that critical attention to Hardy's anticipation of Freud and Jung has occluded recognition of his earlier insights into human behavior, and she stresses that Hardy's reading habits are important because of their diversity: 'he habitually sought confirmation of his interests and hunches in disparate sources' (p. 185). For example, Hardy found in his reading of Comte and Ribot confirmation for his own theory of altruism. Hardy's was a mind in constant communication with other minds. The image of a network or community of brains in communication with one another or working together to solve problems intrigued Hardy, and he explored that image at both the microscopic level, portrayed by the village communities in his novels, and the macroscopic level, with his vision of humanity in *The Dynasts* connected through a cosmic, universal brain.

One of the central paradoxes for Hardy's psychology is that 'he could not help understanding through his feelings even though he could see that feelings motivated most peoples' thoughtless actions. He never gave ground on the centrality of lovingness even as he documented human cruelty' (p. 168). Can true altruism exist in a world where all living things are connected? In his narrative theory, Hardy endeavours to develop a narrative strategy reliant upon altruism and empathy. In chapter two, Keen examines 'the intersections of communal knowledge and individual states of mind' (p. 71). She asks: what power does

intermental, or communal, thoughts possess that intramental, or individual thought, does not? In novels such as *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), Hardy contemplates the ability of communities to discern readily the thoughts of individuals, even as individuals fail to perceive their own thoughts. Keen offers four case studies as evidence of Hardy's narrative techniques that demonstrate individual nescience (Hardy's term for 'unknowing') amidst seemingly omnipotent communities. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), the narrator's psycho-narration reveals 'the conditions of ignorance, unknowing, or failure to apprehend of major characters, as it clarifies mood states and recognized motives' (p. 77). For Hardy, thought report is the ideal narrative technique to account for the complex psychology of a feeling individual manoeuvred by unseen forces (such as instinct) and frequently at odds with the collective thinking of groups or communities.

Arguably the most compelling in its originality, chapter three examines 'the intersections of emotion and thought, mindsight and nescience, in individual lyrics on a human scale and in vatic utterances on the nature of the cosmos' (p. 107). Through his poetry, Hardy elucidates a theory of the mind that accounts for man's emotional vulnerability. He demonstrates a distinct desire to return to a state of 'unknowing', what Hardy terms *nescience*. Keen close reads several Hardy poems including 'The Mother Mourns' and 'By the Earth's Corpse', both from *Poems of Past and Present* (1901-2), in which Hardy anthropomorphises nature, which laments man's development. The volume's title, *Past and Present*, is indicative of Hardy's greater preoccupation with time. His unresolved struggle to reconcile human time with cosmic time would lead Hardy to compose surprising poems like 'The Aerolite', in which he characterises the 'germ of consciousness' as an alien infection (p. 128). These later poems express man's desire 'to live without knowing that he does, in a natural body [...] To retain embodied experience without emotion and feeling would lead to desirable states of not-thinking and not-feeling' (p. 129).

The final chapters, 'The Neurological Turn' and 'Empathetic Hardy', mature Hardy's evolving theory of the mind. In his later narratives and

poetry, he relies on strategic empathy and *Einfühlung*, a German aesthetic based on ‘the projection of feeling into inanimate objects’, such as Hardy demonstrates in his poem ‘The Convergence of the Twain’ (p. 170). Hardy employs such empathy in three narrative modes: bounded (empathy for members of one’s group), ambassadorial (empathy on behalf of distant others), and broadcast (empathy for ‘universal objects of concern’) (p. 190). Keen demonstrates that, in his later novels *Two on a Tower* (1882) and *The Woodlanders* (1887), Hardy uses more explicit neurological imagery to examine man within universal space. In part, it is an experiment of time, space, and the embodied consciousness set against the magnitude of the universe. Keen demonstrates that Hardy’s interest in the brain in the 1880s helped him to formulate ‘the possibility of a cosmic brain, the link between individual minds and this neural network, and the power of minds to create ejects’ (p. 145). Hardy’s reading in 1880s psychology led him to the idea of ejects, a method by which the mind ‘creates the world that surrounds it through projection of its perceptions’ (p. 151). Ejects take the shape of ‘ghost-like projections’ (p. 151), but Hardy’s larger concern was how the individual mind negotiated a physically confined consciousness in its efforts to traverse the distance between itself and another consciousness. Hardy grapples with these limitations of the individual in his later novels, but in *The Dynasts*, he would turn to consider consciousness on a cosmic-scale.

One of the chief image-schemas for Hardy is that of the brain as a container, ‘from the small (skull-sized) to the vast (on the scale of the cosmos)’ (p. 102). Each chapter of *Thomas Hardy’s Brains* could therefore have been presented as a finite container of information, but Keen acknowledges that Hardy did not compartmentalise knowledge in this way. He was insatiably curious, frequently returning to authors, texts, and ideas and re-examining them anew as science uncovered new evidence. Perhaps this explains, why Keen’s analysis of *The Dynasts* is not confined to one chapter but stretches across her volume, like a neural web of information. This structure may frustrate some readers, but it demonstrates how Hardy’s theory of the mind developed across the decades of his career, culminating at last in the epic poem.

The overarching thesis of Keen's study is that Hardy 'intuitively coalesces imagery from neurology and psychology to figure forth his central paradox, a cosmic Theory of Mind consisting of an unfeeling, unwitting but motive universe inhabited by human creatures tragically evolved to feel' (p. 16). In the face of such an all-encompassing thesis, Keen's book is surprisingly brief. There is material enough for several books. However, the brevity of *Thomas Hardy's Brains* is a testament to Keen's deft writing and her ability to organise vast amounts of information into comprehensive lists, the kind of lists perfectly befitting a Victorian study. Lists abound, but they serve Keen well in moving readers swiftly through material that in lesser hands could quickly turn cumbersome. Readers of *Thomas Hardy's Brains* will find a compelling, interdisciplinary volume that merges fields of narrative theory, cognitive culture studies, affect theory, and literary cognitivism, offering new insight into Hardy's influences and Victorian neurology.

Bibliography

Keen, Suzanne, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Sumner, Rosemary, *Thomas Hardy: Psychological Novelist* (London: Macmillan, 1981).