Heady, Emily Walker


The challenge of accurately telling the story of one’s spiritual conversion was hardly a dilemma exclusive to the Victorian writer. The Victorian novel, however, was a frequent stage for depicting the growing tensions between public and private, individual and community, romance and realism these conversion narratives ultimately expose. Emily Walker Heady’s *Victorian Conversion Narratives and Reading Communities* reveals how Victorian novels locate communities of readers that help capture “the emotive, theological, and cultural work” of the conversion experience. Heady’s study reinvestigates the ability of narratives once thought too emotional to reflect the cultural and ideological moment in which they were created. Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Joseph Conrad, and Oscar Wilde all struggled to negotiate between the individual and communal process of conversion through “narrative hybrids” that revise conventional modes of storytelling and reader response. In her intricate analysis of specific literary texts, Heady illustrates what is truly at stake, personally as well as collectively, in such religious transformations. Rather than understanding conversion as solely personal and internal, Heady’s study examines acts of “spiritualized storytelling” that can expand human emotions toward larger social change.

Heady’s chapter on Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* clearly establishes the relationship between the familial and the financial as the unlikely key to greater social reform. In “How a Capitalist Converts,” Heady explores what previous critics of this novel have not: namely, that Dombey’s conversion depends upon his ability to understand theological language in a prosaic setting. Previous scholars, she explains, have simplified Dombey by missing the richness of his spiritual education within a realistic, capitalistic landscape. Making a distinction between education and change, Heady shows how Dickens strives to educate rather than change Dombey by teaching him how to integrate scripture into the world around him. The parable of the Prodigal Son, for example, exposes Dombey’s difficulty in seeing real-world equivalents of spiritual narratives. By revealing how Dombey learns to speak more harmoniously with his fellow characters, Dickens draws attention to the potential for individual change to produce larger cultural transformations.

Heady draws some convincing parallels between the converts and conversion narratives she treats in each chapter. In “The Ethics of Genre in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*,” Heady demonstrates an interesting link between Dickens and Brontë by considering how negative reviews of their novels reflected a need
to monitor closely public reactions to and involvement in conversion narratives. Critics of their novels focused on the difficulty of finding appropriate ways to show emotion and of narrating the conversion experience in any linear or coherent way so as to produce a sense of trust in readers. Brontë, like Dickens, suggests how individuals could embrace and learn from their immediate environments. In *Villette*, the novel's lack of closure showcases Lucy Snow's transformation by lingering in "the middle parts of history." Such focus on midpoints instead of end points emphasizes the transitory nature of conversion itself. More specifically, it illustrates how identities are formed in the "in between" spaces of parable and conversion testimony.

If Dickens and Brontë highlight the recursive relationship between "inner change and public narrative," Eliot and Conrad question conventional rhetorical modes that fail to express conversion experiences or address the Victorian crisis of faith. Heady reads Eliot's and Conrad's accounts of conversion as integrally dependent on one another. In "Gambling on Conversion," she describes how Eliot takes risks in *Daniel Deronda* that few novelists took at this time: she shows how the act of conversion, the daring leap of faith that her characters take, is more important than the eventual effects of this conversion. In "The Aesthetics of Truth in *Heart of Darkness*," Heady illustrates how Conrad takes up Eliot's challenge to communicate impassioned beliefs to the greater public while also realizing that personal truth need not be inextricable from the public act of narrative. The style of Marlow's story, especially its ironic use of both realist and romantic devices, exposes a self-conscious inability to express the truth without in some way altering it. Yet Conrad continues to rely on familiar literary tropes, even though he knows they cannot accurately convey the truth his characters have seen. As a result, truth becomes more and more "incomprehensible," a word that appears repeatedly throughout Conrad's novel. Heady reads Conrad as a prophet rather than a novelist, a convert himself who watches his story unfold but cannot accept the horrid truth it reveals.

Heady's final chapter, "The Afterlife of Oscar Wilde's Conversion ...," focuses not on the Victorian novel but on the writer himself and, more specifically, on his most confessional and autobiographical works. This chapter opens with a discussion of Wilde's tendency to define his success according to his public reception. For Wilde, spiritual transformation required not only introspection and a rejection of a materialistic life but also a broader evangelism that extended beyond himself. This chapter stands as a culmination of Heady's previous chapters, for it is here that she most clearly demonstrates the necessity of merging individual experience with communal response. True conversion, she explains, requires a larger structure of symbols than one's interior consciousness can provide. Wilde appeared to have realized this late in life, an