

Helen Gardner 1908–1986

To her last book, *In Defence of the Imagination*, Helen Gardner adds a brief *Apologia Pro Vita Mea* and by quoting Wordsworth asserts that she too would wish to be regarded as ‘a teacher or nothing’. Liberally interpreted this is an apt summary of her powers and an essential memorial. As tutor, lecturer, editor, critic, reviewer, broadcaster and anthologist she was, indeed, teaching at every turn and delighted to do so, endeavouring to uphold standards and proud to form and enlarge the public taste.

The lines of her career are simple and the main direction clear. She was born on 13 February 1908, the middle child and only daughter of Mr C. H. and Mrs M. R. Gardner of North London. Mr Gardner died when Helen was only 11; one seminal memory is recorded.

I remember how, after the air raids of the first World War, my father would return from patrolling the streets and would read an episode from *Pickwick Papers*, as a treat, while my brothers and I were drinking our hot milk before going upstairs to bed. The exhilaration I found when a little later I read Dickens for myself is still there whenever I re-read him. I find myself laughing aloud, invaded by a sudden sense of glory.

The children were brought up by their mother in their grandparents' home. Mrs Gardner, a very musical woman (and one who shared the family devotion to Dickens), exerted a supreme influence and if Helen was ambitious something was due to her mother's unceasing concern for the development and success of her gifted daughter. The stimulus of such encouragement could at times turn into a sense of strain. Helen's main education was at the North London Collegiate School. The most memorable part of the good teaching she received was the inspiration given by her English mistress, Florence Gibbons, to whom in later years her distinguished pupil paid grateful tribute.



H. GARDNER

Walter Bird

An initial application to Somerville College was not successful—she had too little Greek. At the end of her life Helen admitted to only one regret: ‘I wish it had been possible for me to have spent another year at school so that I could have been competent to read Honour Moderations in Classics at Oxford before reading English.’ However, by what proved to be one of her ‘lucky chances’ she was diverted on the offer of a scholarship at St Hilda’s to read for the Honour School of English Language and Literature. This brought her into the care of Miss Eleanor Rooke whose wisdom, eccentricity and insight made her for Helen ‘a tutor of genius’.

At Oxford she flourished exceedingly. Alongside the hard work that saw her safely into the First Class she indulged her love of acting and amateur production. For financial reasons this talent had to remain as a side-line and it may be detected in the liveliness of her style as a lecturer and in her reputation, in private life, as a raconteur with a fund of good stories, some at her own expense, recited with memorable gusto. From the age of 11 to 21 her education was funded publicly by the London County Council; while in private she acknowledged the generosity of a brother who was willing to stand down to ensure her her undergraduate years. A final grant enabled her to stay up for one year of graduate study. At the suggestion of Dorothy Everett she set to work on the text of Walter Hilton’s *The Scale of Perfection*. She did not, in fact, take the B.Litt. degree (later it was to be a D.Litt. that her learning merited), but the training in scholarly techniques that she received as she followed the B.Litt. course under Professor David Nichol Smith, Dr Percy Simpson, Mr Strickland Gibson and Dr E. A. Lowe, proved invaluable for what she was to use and pass on. Although the material she collected on her medieval author was ultimately to be handed over to other researchers the theological reading that was involved was to be put to good use especially in her work on Donne and Eliot. She did meanwhile publish two essays, ‘Walter Hilton and the authorship of *The Cloud of Unknowing*’ (*Review of English Studies*, 9) and ‘Walter Hilton and the Mystical Tradition’ (*Essays and Studies*, 22) and a substantial review of Dr Phyllis Hodgson’s study of *The Scale of Perfection* (*Medium Aevum*, 5).

In 1937 an invitation from Professor Ernest de Selincourt to fill a temporary gap in the English Department brought her to the University of Birmingham. To accept meant sacrificing a small grant for a further year’s research but she reckoned that the change of plan turned out to be another of those ‘lucky chances’ she was fond of identifying retrospectively. After an interval of three years spent in a residential post at the Royal Holloway College she was asked to return to Birmingham, to the city and University she found so stimulating and congenial. She valued the association with older scholars of such distinction as E. de Selincourt and A. M. D. Hughes;

she made many friends and particularly the family of Mr and Mrs Duncan-Jones; she enjoyed the challenge and amusement of colleagues—Auden and MacNeice were about at that time—and Helen shared their social and political interests to the full. Though never a Communist she did canvas energetically for the Labour Party in a predominantly Conservative city. She felt keenly for those suffering in the Spanish Civil War and was ready with help for academic refugees from Germany. Wartime conditions brought opportunities to lecture outside the strict university range; her enterprise was roused and acquaintance with very different audiences was much to her liking. It was at Birmingham that her discovery of the poetry of T. S. Eliot proved the source and spring of what was to be a constant endeavour to proclaim and explore the originality of his genius. Henry Reed, one of her cleverest pupils, had sent her a copy of the Easter Supplement to the *New English Weekly* containing a poem by Eliot, *East Coker*. 'I shall never forget my first reading of the poem on that dreary day in March 1940. It was the most dispiriting period of the War. We had nerved ourselves to endure hideous calamities. . . . I found myself reading a poem that offered no easy comfort, but only the true comfort of hearing a voice speaking out of the darkness without cynicism, without despair.' Birmingham was so absorbing and satisfying that, on her own admission, she hesitated in 1945 when a chance to return to Oxford came her way. However, guided once again by Dorothy Everett's advice she accepted an invitation to succeed Miss Rooke as Fellow and Tutor of her own College, St Hilda's.

Work as a college tutor with its demands on wide reading and close argument and the personal contact with pupils of her own choosing and in her continuing care made the next 13 years into a period she looked back on as her 'golden years'. She took advantage of the relatively open choice of courses for lectures and developed her interest in the Metaphysical poets and even ventured further in offering lectures on Eliot.

As a tutor Helen Gardner was formidable. She exhilarated the boldest, but intimidated others less able to stand up to the wit and severity of her criticism. One recollection of numb terror mixed with lively admiration was occasioned by the dismissal of an essay on the poetry of Pope followed up in the next week's tutorial by an exposition of the merits of his period so persuasive that conversion has lasted a lifetime. This single instance of an ordeal and reward may speak for many who came to her room from other Colleges. In a more informal way Miss Gardner was willing to discuss her own lecture with those who had attended over a friendly cup of coffee. For her own St Hilda's pupils there are memories of a care that called out all their best, a jealousy to realize their potentials, a care that extended to concern with fears and hopes, follies and successes well outside strictly

academic bounds. 'She really cared about us, and we knew it, and we know it still.'

In the bitter winter of 1946 a skid on an icy pavement in Broad Street caused a Pott's fracture that meant six weeks' immobility with a broken leg. The accident was yet another chance that turned to advantage. She obtained a folio of Donne's Sermons (the LXXX [1640] and L [1649]) and lying on her sofa she read the lot. In this way she laid the foundation for all her subsequent work both as editor and critic. Admiration of Donne's prose drew her to work closely with Mrs Evelyn Simpson as she laboured to complete her great edition of the *Sermons* after the death of her collaborator, G. R. Potter. Later, in 1967, Helen together with Mrs Simpson and Tim Healey edited *Selected Sermons*. Meanwhile, on a humbler level, the Bursar of St Hilda's who looked after her creature comforts appreciated how jolly she was as a patient. Later in life she had much pain and discomfort from hip-replacements to make the work-load heavier to bear.

The critical services Helen Gardner gave to the two poets with whom she is popularly associated and will surely be longest remembered, John Donne and T. S. Eliot were conducted concurrently. These were two strong strands in her scholarly work. Each major publication—the two editions of Donne and the two pieces of masterly criticism of Eliot—was prepared for and followed up by frequent notes, articles and reviews and broadcast talks as occasion required. Helen Gardner liked to draw attention to the fact that she had no book to her credit before she was 41. This slow maturing had her considered approval and is reflected in later advice to young graduates. In dealing with Donne's *Divine Poems* the intention to replace Grierson's edition was quite deliberate and apparently at one stage had been amicably discussed with the older scholar. Helen Gardner reckoned she had the advantage of a greater number of manuscripts. She was determined to conduct an equal, and even stricter, scrutiny. She was excited to follow up an ingenious argument for the rearrangement of *The Holy Sonnets* which was to lead to fresh interpretation involving recognition of the influence of the discipline of Ignatian Meditation. The General Introduction is a fine and lasting piece of criticism. The textual introduction expounds an elaborate method; the commentary is courageous in its unflagging refusal to dodge difficulties whether of metre, reference or motive. The comment on 'The Litanie', a poem she particularly admired, would serve to exemplify both her analytic skill in penetrating subtleties of implication and the strength she commanded by her long acquaintance with her author and his period in support of the hypothesis envisaged in her presentation. Her most eminent reviewer (Pierre Legouis) paid tribute to her 'indefatigable industry,

intelligence and love of poetry'. A revised edition in 1978 took account of some discoveries and criticisms gathered in the intervening years but confirmed all the substantial decisions and arguments of 1957.

Application of the same method and reasoning to Donne's secular verse resulted in 1965 in a matching edition of *The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets*. In this she proposed some revisions of the canon and arrangement of the *Elegies* and offered conjectural dating for some of the love poems. The quality of the Introduction and Commentary makes the book a perfect complement to the edition of *The Divine Poems*. The admitted selectivity made in her confidence in her established system and mature taste nerved her to print some readings which were inconsistent with her declared editorial principles. These did not go unchallenged and were in turn robustly defended mainly in letters to the *Times Literary Supplement*. Helen Gardner's authority in Donne scholarship fitted her for the honour of organizing the Memorial celebration to him in St Paul's in 1972.

The work on Eliot appropriately took a different form. *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (1949) was actually her first major publication, preceding the edition of *The Divine Poems* by three years. It provides a thoroughly helpful introduction to and exploration of poems that were challenging and to many readers obscure to the point of being forbidding. It enables understanding and invites respect and exemplifies how the exercise of sympathetic imagination for both style and substance can release honest enjoyment. The first and last chapters concentrate upon *Four Quartets* and form a frame for the consideration of the variety of Eliot's earlier output. What is modestly offered as an 'approach to meaning' is made primarily by a critique of style, displaying the effect of rhythm and cadence and metrical experiment, by drawing attention to the master images and by tracing the emergence of the final pattern. By liberal quotation, sensitive description and paraphrase layers of meaning are revealed without intellectual straining so that the very nature of poetry is preserved. The *Art* is in its own right a beautifully written book, evidently composed *con amore* with discernment that apparently commanded the poet's permission and approval. It has lasting value. Helen Gardner followed the development of Eliot's writing, his criticism, his comedies and special aspects and literary connections of his poetry in articles and broadcasts and continually alluded to him when dealing with other authors. She returned to reconsider *The Waste Land* in the light of Mrs Eliot's publication of the early drafts in 1971. Her last important contribution took the form of a study of the *Composition of 'Four Quartets'* made possible by the release of manuscripts revealing the evolution of the poem. Her general experience as a critic and her specialist's knowledge of the author's work equipped her for this

undertaking. The chance to watch a poem grow and thereby to be drawn more closely into the mind of its maker was irresistible. A few years earlier in 1972 she had offered to talk on 'Poems in the Making' for the Gwilym James Memorial Lecture at the University of Southampton. On this occasion she acknowledged her debt to Professor Steffan as she dealt with Byron and to Jon Stallworthy for his work on Yeats before leading up to what research had yielded for Eliot. While the preparatory process of composition fascinated her the reader is never allowed to lose sight of the proper object of the exercise, that is of the better understanding and relish of the final state of a poem wholly and truly itself.

Work on Donne and Eliot may be seen as twin foci in the wide field of her reading. She lectured extensively on Shakespeare and on Milton, wrote on Herbert and briefly on Spenser, showed her relish for Byron and by sporadic quotation proclaimed her devotion to Dickens. She enjoyed the novels of Hardy, Trollope and especially Henry James. There is an admirable piece on Joyce Cary in *Essays and Studies N.S.*, 28 (1976). In 1959 she collaborated with G. M. Storey in an edition of *The Sonnets of William Alabaster* and was responsible for the commentary. Helen regretted now and then that she had not had time to achieve a comprehensive book on Shakespeare, but she had no need to reproach herself in the light of lectures and essays on illuminating criticism of the highest quality on *Lear*, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *Richard II* and *Macbeth* and on Shakespearean tragedy generally. The British Academy lecture on 'The Noble Moor' and the Coffin Memorial lecture on *Lear* find her at the height of her powers of discernment and eloquent exposition. There is a masterly account of recent writings on *Othello* in *Shakespeare Survey*, 21, which takes the matter further than a reassembly of the opinions of other scholars. Nor did she shirk the drudgery involved in revising and editing F. P. Wilson's *Shakespeare and the New Bibliography* (1970). The Alexander Lectures delivered in Toronto concentrated upon *Paradise Lost*. Here and in an essay on 'Satan and the Theme of Damnation in Elizabethan Tragedy' (*Essays and Studies* [1949]) she rejoiced in chances to throw a steady light on a great poem, respecting its essence and wholeness. This contribution to Milton studies loses nothing in the re-reading. She admitted to a fondness for her selection of *Metaphysical Poets* (1957) and it gratified her to notice a third edition in 1972 as giving assurance that the book was still serving its purpose, as by virtue of the excellent introduction it certainly should. She paid her tribute to Herbert separately in a preface to the World's Classics edition of his poems.

Her reputation as a lecturer brought her many invitations. In addition to the series already mentioned she is connected with some 15 foundations, viz:

The University of London
 The British Academy
 Reddell Lectures (Durham)
 W. D. Thomas Memorial Lecture (Swansea)
 Byron Foundation (Nottingham)
 Royal Society of Literature
 John Cotton Memorial Lecture (London)
 Ewing Lectures (Los Angeles)
 Messenmer Lecture (Cornell)
 Robert Spenser Wilson Lecture
 Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society
 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lecture (Canterbury)
 Johnson Society (Lichfield)
 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures (Cambridge, Massachusetts)
 Adamson (Manchester)
 Darwin College (Cambridge)

Over the years she contrived to lecture in Rome, Belgrade, Liubliana, Zagreb, Amsterdam, Leiden, Bowdoin College (Maine), Princeton, Yale, Harvard, The Pierpont Morgan Library (New York), Tokyo, Kyoto, Hong Kong, Nancy, Dijon and Paris.

Helen Gardner's chief critical publications comprise series of lectures. In *The Business of Criticism* she combined a revised version of a series delivered in London in 1953 under the title 'The Profession of a Critic' with the Reddell Lectures on 'The Limits of Literary Criticism' (1956). The Alexander Lectures were printed in full as *A Reading of Paradise Lost*. The volume *Religion and Literature* (1971) presents lectures given in the University of Bristol, 1965, revised for the T. S. Eliot Memorial Lecture at Canterbury, entitled 'Religion and Tragedy', together with the Ewing Lectures of 1968 on 'Religion and Poetry'. Helen Gardner was never afraid of tackling great authors and large topics, such as, the relationship of literature and religion; the nature of tragedy; the profession of criticism and its limits; the art of literary biography. While she was well able to step out from among the trees to envisage the size and shape of the wood she saw to it that theory and generalization did not float without the ballast of precise examples, and telling contrasts. All was well salted with her wit.

Twice in her life Helen Gardner took on the taxing and often thankless task of an anthologist. Yet it appears that this was labour 'so delighted in' that it 'physiced pain'. The smaller collection was for the *Faber Book of Religious Verse*. The span is from the *Dream of The Rood* to R. S. Thomas. The scope is not confined to Christianity though Christian authors predominate. It is a lovely collection and usefully annotated. The larger

undertaking was to put together a *New Oxford Book of English Poetry*. Helen regarded the earlier collection of 1900 as reflecting Q's concentration and so to be of its period. She went ahead to expand the area (1250–1950) and set out to glean not only lyrics but verse that was didactic or political or light. Lear's *The Owl and the Pussycat* finds a page. Drama was not included. The wide sweep of her reading, and her remarkable memory were matched by a control that did not neglect what had an already established value. Nor did she shirk finding a place for poems or passages of poems that had hitherto not been given such prominence. The selection of items from within the plenty of such poets as Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Tennyson, Browning, Hopkins and Eliot is as skilful as the primary choice of lesser poets to represent periods and styles. It is an anthology that was a decade in the building and it is built to last.

As a reviewer Helen Gardner felt competent to assess the importance of a considerable number of her peers; to name but a few she dealt conscientiously with important publications by H. S. Bennett, C. S. Lewis, L. Martz, E. M. W. Tillyard, Austin Warren, George Williamson, R. E. L. Strider, Steffan Bergsten, W. K. Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, D. C. Allen, Christopher Ricks, John Buxton, John Sparrow, William Empson, Kenneth Muir, George Williams, Morris Weitz, Wilson Knight, Blair Leishman, Fredson Bowers. She had a reputation for being outspoken to the point at times of ruthlessness but she was wont to account for her severity by pointing out that all her reviews were signed. Her strictness was backed by details industriously discovered. Her sarcasm was not malicious and her praise was reckoned as praise indeed.

As a critic Helen Gardner was proud to stand in line with Dryden, Johnson, Arnold, not necessarily to agree with their opinions but to feel herself discharging the same function, that is, intent to enable understanding and promote enjoyment of writings already certified as excellent, to keep them bright and beyond this bravely to salute and test what was presently thrusting into view. She was not herself an innovator but rather, a preserver and consolidator. Criticism was to be regarded as a serving art. Ending a review of Morris Weitz in the *Shakespeare Quarterly* of 1965 she quotes a definition of his that might well be her own: 'Critics have no primary aim, task or function, except the secondary one or general goal of facilitating and enriching the understanding of a work of art.' Her taste was catholic and not confined to poetry though poetry was her first love. It extended to drama, novels and biography. Her balance of judgment was the result of habits of argument and demonstration. With her author, Donne, she might have said, 'I hate extremes', and she kept to the crown of the road, well aware of excesses and deficiencies, confident in common sense and of a footing in a great tradition. Her favourite unit of

composition had the dimensions of a lecture, or a long essay, or a substantial review or again of the obituaries for C. S. Lewis and Herbert Davies, made for the *Proceedings* of this Academy. These show the size, shape and style that she found most comfortable. Each piece was firmly constructed and cunningly introduced and concluded: precision made for elegance and what had been first orally delivered—and she had an attractive voice and was proud of it—was revised with scrupulous care. As a result she commanded a beautiful prose that is a pleasure to read and to read aloud. She had perfect syntactical control: long supple sentences for exposition; sentences short and direct for summarizing. Her good ear gave her the rhythm and cadence that she so much admired in the writers who had tuned it. She used quotations amply and had a knack with glancing reference. Her vocabulary stayed as clear of pedantic terms as of jargon: it was simply devoted to ‘getting it right’. All these are, in a sense, rhetorical accomplishments to be suitably employed but they give place on occasions to passages of real eloquence when she speaks from the heart as well as from the mind to salute the supreme values she found in Shakespeare’s tragedies, in Donne’s sermons, in *Four Quartets*, in *Paradise Lost* and Herbert’s *Temple*. She published no poetry of her own but the ‘exercise in verse translation’ of the *Dream of the Rood* is a notable contribution to the *Festschrift* for Lord David Cecil (1970).

In 1954 Helen Gardner was promoted to a Readership in Renaissance Studies. She then replaced her undergraduate teaching by the supervision of graduates and continued to lecture to both grades. She took on more administrative responsibility in the planning, maintaining and control of courses for the degree of B.Litt., B.Phil. and D.Phil. She worked hard to build on the foundation laid by her preceptors and continued by her predecessor, Professor F. P. Wilson. She made no secret of the work-load involved in conscientious supervising. The numbers directed and examined were remarkable, still more so was the quality of the attention they received. She once boasted that in 22 years no D.Phil. student of hers had failed to achieve the degree. There were some, it is true, who though they may not in the end have failed to obtain a degree, remember times of puzzle and dismay *en route*. For others the exhilaration of the experience was invaluable. It is described by one of the ablest: ‘The great thing she taught all of us was a share in her own intolerance of slovenly work. You had to get it right, or at least as right as could be, and if you didn’t she literally could come down like a ton of bricks. To hear her say something you had written was “inadequate” was like being kicked in the head. . . . She had the same toughness about her own work, which I learned when I read proof for her. The careful shading of a sentence, sometimes as slight as a shift in punctuation, was the kind of thing she did to her own work and

taught us to do to ours. For training scholars she had two great gifts. She had the sense of the essential, and succeeded in communicating it—she told me at one time that the purpose of wide reading was absorption not citation; the other gift she gave to all of us was her sense of excitement at ideas, and even twenty years later I can still feel that. The mind mattered, scholarship mattered, accuracy mattered, and a sensitivity to the poetic text one was dealing with also mattered. None of us were ever allowed to forget this as we worked with her.’

In due course Helen herself had to take a knock. She took it hard that it was not until 1965 that a second chance came to be elected to the Merton Professorship of English Literature. By University convention this honour required a transfer of Colleges. Lady Margaret Hall was proud to receive her; St Hilda’s made her Fellowship Honorary and continued to command her affection and loyalty. Her distinction as the first woman to hold this Chair gave her immense satisfaction and supplied the expenditure of energy she gave to the extension of her work. The Inaugural lecture, *Literary Studies*, gives a fine survey of the growth of the Honours School of English Language and Literature, with indications of what was expected of it and a clear statement of the relative values of undergraduate and post-graduate studies. ‘Whatever other manifold and important social functions the universities perform, their highest and ultimate service to the world is to remind man that although, as human, he must attend to “his station and duties”, he must also, as potentially divine, cherish the divine spark within himself and recognize, even if he cannot always pursue it, that the life of contemplation is higher and better than the life of action—is indeed the final justification of the life of action. If I were asked what is the central discipline of English studies for undergraduates, I should reply that it is the training in the art of listening to what is said, of trying to understand as fully as possible that “communication of the dead which is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.”’

A remarkable passage pays tribute to the American contribution to the healthy development of English literary studies. Professor Gardner no doubt had in mind her debt to the Universities she knew well and in which she had benefited from academic hospitality, notably the University of California at Los Angeles, Harvard and Pennsylvania. ‘I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that in almost every branch of the subject I profess for one good English book I can point to two, and in many cases far more than two, good American ones, and that in some branches we really offer no serious competition. Many tares grow among the American wheat, but the quality of the wheat is superb. Whether we look for model editions of dramatists, poets, novelists, letter-writers, for full-scale critical biographies, or for literary history many of the standard works and many of

the most truly seminal works of the last thirty or forty years have come from American Universities. And if we turn to criticism, to theories of poetry and the novel, to exploration of methods of analysis, and to debates on critical premises, the battles in America have been conducted at an intellectual level and with a range of reference that make many of our critical quarrels seem like the squabbles of schoolboys.'

The decade before her Professorship had brought two increases of honour and responsibility. In 1958 she was elected a Fellow of the British Academy and was later to serve on the Council. She made sure of attending and enjoying its social functions. In the following year she began a long term of office as a University Delegate at the Oxford University Press. She sat as the first woman on its Council and the first member of the English Faculty. To both Councils she gave notable and characteristic attention. As a Delegate she was jealous of the programme for the production of sound texts for minor as well as major authors. She watched over openings for the publication of studies by younger scholars for whose merit she could certainly vouch: many expressions of gratitude for her advice and support catch the eye in prefaces and acknowledgements testifying to the aid at several stages she had provided. Her energy in recommending suitable advisors both directly and indirectly was remarkable and when something took her fancy she spared no pains to improve or commend. She could also ride roughshod over the individual in pursuit of literary excellence. At times her zeal was exerted beyond her own field and the reach exceeded the grasp. In recognition of her work for national education she was awarded the CBE: in 1967 a DBE gave her title to Dame as well as Professor. Helen Gardner unaffectedly enjoyed her Honours. She collected no less than nine honorary degrees besides her Oxford D.Litt.: Durham, East Anglia, London, Birmingham, Harvard, Yale, Warwick, Aberdeen, Cambridge.

In 1961 the Prime Minister invited Dr Gardner to join the Committee on Higher Education under the leadership of Lionel (later Lord) Robbins with the task 'to make recommendations covering the whole untidy system—or lack of system—not only at universities'. She accepted with alacrity and found that the rigours of twice weekly meetings in London were compensated for by the fun of travel which took the group to Switzerland, Sweden, West Germany, France, Holland, the Soviet Union and the USA. Her enthusiasm for the plans for huge expansion was only slightly dimmed in the period that followed. She continued to defend the essential purposes in spite of the practical difficulties that have since appeared.

There is inescapable interplay between personal and professional quality proper to the function of a tutor in an Oxford College coming at

times close to the exchanges in good conversation. The relation between lecturer and audience involves, proportionally, a similar connection which even the trimming of scripts into print does not altogether dissolve. Helen's strong personality suffuses all but the most formal citation of facts. It was as hard to resist her *viva voce* as it is to stop reading her on the page. Literature was her element and she was a strong, expert swimmer. It is not easy to fault her judgment or discount her sympathies where they have been considered, tested in argument and tidied up for publication. In other connexions this was not always the case. In committees she could be alarming largely because her reactions were unpredictable. She was not always right and the vehemence as she urged her views could be disconcerting. John Harington records with humour and acumen what it had been like to be among the courtiers of Queen Elizabeth: 'when she smiled it was pure sunshine, that everyone did choose to bask in, if they could, but anon came a storm from a sullen gathering of clouds, and the thunder fell in wondrous manner on all alike.' Many friends, colleagues and some pupils elevated by Helen's praise, withered in her disapprobation. The experience of being in her company offered a bracing but not a relaxing pleasure. It was not only fools whose remarks she did not suffer gladly, friends do not entirely forget the abrasive retorts and some scars still ache. Yet for most this was perhaps a fair price to be paid for the strength of her leadership in academic enterprise and the entertainment of her talk. She was no feminist but a woman liking to be in a man's world and holding her own without favour or fear, justifiably proud to be able to demonstrate what could be done given the will to take a chance, even a risk, to labour as hard as any, and more than most, in her vocation. She liked to be the focus of attention, sparkling at her best, possessive and arrogant on less happy occasions. When she stopped to think about it she had the moral courage to realize the temptations of her own cleverness and temperament. A close friend recalls how after some parties she would quote Phyllis McGinley's skit *Reflections at Dawn* reciting mournfully the end of the last stanza:

But when I ponder how last night
 I laid the law down,
 More than to have the Midas touch
 Or critics' praise, however hearty,
I wish I didn't talk so much,
I wish I didn't talk so much
I wish I didn't talk so much
When I was at a party.

She was ready with her sympathy for distress and imaginative with her generosity, taking trouble to consider the tastes and views of those she

wished to help. From early days at St Hilda's she had seen the possibilities of its lovely site for choice gardening and with the co-operation of her friend Miss Tomlinson constructed a rock garden. Later in her own home at Eynsham, thanks to the skilful help of her own invaluable housekeeper Mrs Gordon, she had indeed cultivation to be proud of. She enjoyed good food and drink; she liked to dress with style. She rose to parties and characteristically left a bequest to her College to endow a feast on her birthday. Travel was a great delight to her, especially in Europe and most of all in Italy after her retirement. It had been particularly gratifying to be made a Trustee of the National Portrait Gallery.

When Helen Gardner was occupied with her two major authors it was not an intellectual exercise alone, rather it was an experience spiritual as well as aesthetic. She was a devout and disciplined Christian holding to the Anglican tradition as she understood it from the writings of Hooker, Andrewes, Donne and Herbert and in the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer. Among the divines of a later generation it is known that she had a high regard for Bishop Hensley Henson. There is a telling anecdote of the time when she served on the Robbins Committee. She dumbfounded her host on the visit to Moscow by insisting on time off for and transportation to services on Sunday morning. She preached in Cambridge in Great St Mary's and for her University Sermon in Oxford the text she chose was 'The Great Cloud of Witnesses'. When she gave the W. D. Thomas Memorial Lecture in Swansea she disclosed some personal reasons for choosing to talk about Edwin Muir which are, I believe, deeply revealing. 'I have chosen Edwin Muir for my subject for two reasons. He is one of the great poets of this century that I read and re-read. He has a voice that awakens echoes in my heart. His poems are poems that I remember when lying awake at night, when out on a walk alone. . . . I find myself referring to them in discussions that touch on my own inner life and deepest experiences. . . . Muir's great strength as a poet is his humanity, his sense of the universal relevance of his personal experience, his sweetness of temper and humility, . . . his integrity of mind and feeling and his wisdom. Wisdom as distinct from knowledge, intellectual brilliance, or technical competence, is something we look for in poets, or should look for. . . . Of all the poets of our century, none has, with less pretension or with more gentleness, made us more truly aware of the pathos, the grandeur or the mystery of our common humanity.' In the choice and treatment of Muir she confides both directly and indirectly her recognition of spiritual and religious qualities that contrast with and so, in a sense, complement her own. Such a response may perhaps be taken as evidence of her fundamental humility as creature to her Creator without trespassing on 'the individual mind that keeps its own inviolate retirement'.

Early in her retirement in 1978, surfacing after the long labours of compiling her big anthology, she accepted an invitation to deliver the four lectures published as *In Defence of the Imagination* to which she added the *Apologia* upon which this Obituary has freely drawn. It throws valuable light on how she viewed her career and assessed her success. By this it is the easier to discern how beneath the variety of her tastes and interests there is a level at which her writings are all of a piece; the many repetitions are not of details arguing a poverty of resources but are reiterations of principles and values. Both terms of her last title are significant, indicating a disposition to defend the evidence in language of the creative powers of the human mind. She did not take time to define the 'imagination' but seems to have rested on the insights of Coleridge (especially in his *Biographia Literaria*) and the vision of Wordsworth and the admissions of Keats. Imagination stood for all that was noble and lovely, all that extended the reason and exhibited the worth of man's understanding of his world. The awareness of history never left her. With Johnsonian common sense she too was willing to concur with the judgement of excellence testified over generations and to get on with her part to strengthen understanding and sharpen enjoyment. From this base she was ready to salute originality as it appeared in her day and to give reasons for associating the new voices with those already acclaimed. She had a knack for using telling contrasts and comparisons. The defensive stand is characteristic. (Had she not stood up to be counted in the 'Lady Chatterley' case?) Here the emphasis on defence is paramount. She had woken up to the state of English studies in criticism, drama, poetry and education. She deplored, indeed attacked, the new fashions in critical method and theatrical production that had taken over since she had kept up with developments in a direction for which she frankly admitted she was not prepared. She took pains to inform herself as best she could at somewhat short notice and braced herself to reaffirm her old values by argument and example. The positive parts of the book—the greater part—is the better reading as the praise of authors and works she had always believed in takes over and warmth offsets the icy ironies of her disapproval. The wind blows hard but the air becomes clean and bracing. *The Defence* is not as sweet-tempered as its Sidneyan predecessor, or as impassioned and far-ranging as Shelley's *Defence* but it can be seen to be in that tradition as the last effort of a lifetime's endeavour by industry and rational argument to improve understanding, and by unflinching reverence to celebrate the mystery of the human imagination that was indeed 'the master light of all her seeing'.

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