John Kucich

From Paternalism to the Welfare State: Felix Holt and Social Problem Fiction

Recent efforts to rescue Victorian social problem fiction from charges of conservatism cite its enthusiasm for argument, construed as a democratizing rhetorical medium within a two-class model of conflict. But these novels actually staged political arguments within organic social models, conceiving society as a finely graded hierarchy in which each rank contributes to the common good. Rather than invoking an anachronistic paternalism, they transformed organicism into a social-democratic conception of the state, promoting modes of argument congruent with centralization. Kucich’s reading of George Eliot’s *Felix Holt* documents nineteenth-century literature’s contribution to increasingly widespread conceptions of state action as beneficent.


Co-sponsored by the English Department