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A Forgotten Critic: Abba Goold Woolson's George Eliot and Her Heroines: A Study

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I feel that one should draw attention to the fact that in 1886 an American woman established certain emphases which succeeding critics followed, developed and extended in the twentieth century. This small book (published by Harper Brothers, New York) is a serious investigation of George Eliot’s art, even employing the kind of language (‘Data Necessary for an Estimate of her Mind and Works’) which links the scientific and the literary as a kind of consonance with George Eliot’s own practice. As early as the second page there is an unequivocal assertion of the nature of her greatness - ‘the name of George Eliot promises to hold, among the female novelists of England, that preeminent place which in France has long been conceded to that of George Sand’. In a succinct evaluation Abba Woolson attributes this to George Eliot’s characterization, her observations of life, her ‘searching analysis of motive’, her humour, her wide learning and her depth of thought. She then proceeds to a more detailed examination of these, noting growth and development in character and the considered - what today we might call formal or structural - use of contrast.

Woolson believes that in the later novels there is notable development in the nature of George Eliot’s art. She praises the conception of Grandcourt and the maturity in the presentation of Gwendolen, which shows ‘a precision of touch, and a refined, delicate sympathy of appreciation which she has never surpassed’. Impressive too are the portraits of children throughout her work (she is superior to Shakespeare here), but in case we should feel that she is not even-handed in her judgements she mounts an attack on the character of Savonarola as given by George Eliot: instead of an inspirational if flawed leader, she considers him ‘a petty, inconspicuous, intermeddling monk’, failing to see the subtlety and the psychological intensity of the portrayal.

Woolson also registers George Eliot’s lapses into melodrama, instancing Deronda rescuing Mirah, and ‘the crashing peals of thunder that accompany the love-declaration of Ladislaw and Dorothea’. She stresses George Eliot’s ‘richness and profundity of speculative thought’, though she objects to her introduction of excessive ‘extraneous material’ in her novels. She anticipates in her appraisals some of the commonplace of twentieth-century criticism, as when she says of Daniel Deronda that ‘The book is cut in two from beginning to end’. This late nineteenth-century Leavisite finds Scenes of Clerical Life ‘crisp and lucid’, but Middlemarch is ‘full, elaborate, and unimpassioned’. These statements reflect Woolson’s own succinct style. She finds George Eliot ‘preeminently the German type of mind - omnivorous, thorough, reflective’, but occasionally she gets carried away herself, and undertakes an elaborate deductive definition of George Eliot’s nature and practice:

But she was not able to reconstruct her mind, or to pervert its native bent. In seeking to give what was demanded, she could not refrain from giving a deal of what was not. Thus the certainties of nature and the mysteries of the soul
seem never absent from her thought. She remains the scientist and the seer, even while wielding the light wand of the improvisatrice; and, half hidden beside her, as she chants her tale of love and sorrow, we discern the abandoned crucible and the tripod overturned.

Although arguably this is somewhat self-indulgent, it is a remarkable statement to find in a work of criticism published some six years after George Eliot’s death and only a year after Cross’s ‘reticence in three volumes’, his *George Eliot’s Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*.

Woolson is the first of the feminists, claiming that George Eliot is ‘the interpreter of the woman’s lot as we see it to-day’. She qualifies this persuasively:

the ancient fetters that she cannot break she makes appear both contemptible and unjust. For hers is a voice that uplifted in behalf of her sex, which no hearer can disregard; a strength exerted for their deliverance which commands the respect of mankind.

Although she praises the presentation of the heroines she observes unswervingly that ‘in all cases [they] fail utterly of attaining what they seek’. She writes tellingly of Gwendolen’s difference here ‘since she has not, like the others, an untroubled conscience to sustain her in the wreck of all her hopes’. We in our turn note that this consciously or unconsciously echoes the motto from Chapter XIV which defines Gwendolen’s determination and with sublime irony undermines it: ‘I will not clothe myself in wreck - wear gems / Sawed from cramped finger-bones of women drowned’. She feels that the heroines are all ‘mismated’, thus including Dorothea and Ladislaw in her judgement. And then comes this:

With all these young women, then, society has had its way. It has limited their education, hampered their efforts, prescribed their marriages. Under such guardianship the narrow-minded and prosaic thrive, the original and intellectual struggle and perish.

But for Woolson George Eliot is fundamentally despondent, and she accounts for this by referring to her nature (or what she feels she knows of it), citing the much-quoted anecdote from F. W. H. Myers about the preeminence of Duty, and also looking across at her uncompromising put-down of *Jane Eyre*. But when she comes to consider the Eliot-Lewes ‘marriage’ she shows how clearly she herself is the product of her time. She in fact examines George Eliot’s moral attitude towards her union with George Henry Lewes arguing, not without subtlety, that it represents a reversal of Jane Eyre’s attitude towards the married Rochester. But all Woolson succeeds in doing here is to reveal her own narrow-mindedness. She counsels respect for the marriage law and adds,

neither reverence for genius nor charity for wrong-doing can demand that we shall call things by other than their real names, or recognize two diverse standards of conduct, one for the simple-minded, and another for those who are more richly endowed.

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The splendid critical objectivity we have seen in the literary judgements is not matched by the blinkered quality of the (supposed) life appraisal. While she acknowledges that George Eliot's own morality embraces the simple truths of her upbringing, she asserts that in the light of her 'later convictions' they were 'rather the more strenuously enforced'. But she is certainly wrongheaded when she says that George Eliot's heroines 'ascertain, rather than feel, the difference between right and wrong'. Woolson's tendency is to be simplistic, and to foist the diagram on to tremulous human experience. She believes that George Eliot embraced 'submission to inevitable evil, and of despairing devotion to right', but that she was always intent on alleviating the lot of her fellow men. She stresses George Eliot's sympathy for her fellow beings, but believes that she is lacking something because unlike the practising Christian she does not share her sympathy with God. This is the nub of Woolson's own limitations, yet at the beginning of her conclusion she once again asserts the primacy of George Eliot: greater writers may come in the future but

their most brilliant portrayals of the society around them can never supersede the pictures she has given to the world. Her novels will possess a permanent value, not only as literary masterpieces but as glowing transcripts of such phases of woman's advancement as belong to the history of our century. In their profound study of that social and intellectual progress which the author was privileged to see, they will serve as a more vivid illustration of the development of woman's mind than any mere historian could supply.

Honest to the point of near contradiction, she reverts to her own thesis in order to confine her praise within reasoned limits, saying that George Eliot's 'interpretation of human life stopped short of the utmost truth; since a lack of spiritual insight blinded her vision to the limitless outcomes of endeavour, the final adjustments of time'. Despite this, perhaps attributable to her own inheritance of beliefs which did not admit of change, Woolson's criticism is remarkably mature, written with insight, verve and independence of judgement. For sheer intellectual quality of appraisal - perspective, width, learning, imagination, taut discipline - this criticism falls short of a major contemporary evaluator like, for example, R. H. Hutton. But to my knowledge it is the first important transatlantic contribution to George Eliot studies, if one excepts the intelligent (and verbose) reviews of Henry James, and certainly it is light years ahead in terms of its feminist affiliations, making Woolson a feminist before feminism. She is limited by her view that a positive and compelling spiritual dimension should exist in the work of the greatest of writers, or perhaps it is that what she fails to see is the spiritual elements untied to creed which characterize the work of George Eliot. But what Woolson has to say is said for the most part with directness and clarity, her learning sits lightly in her measured prose, and she speaks to us easily, naturally and without the esoteric politicism which disfigures - I think invalidates - so much modern writing about the literature of the past. It seems strange to be writing what is effectively a review of her contribution one hundred and ten years after the publication of her short book but it would be wrong to ignore it; as far as I know, hers is an unvisited tomb, but her faithful words should not, I think, be hidden.

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