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Review of George Eliot

Pauline Nestor

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Having recalled George Eliot's central position in the pantheon of nineteenth-century thought and belief, Pauline Nestor begins this fine, closely argued book by considering Eliot's relevance today. Was John Bayley, for example, right when he said in his 1999 review of Katherine Hughes's *George Eliot: The Last Victorian*, 'George Eliot can reveal much to us today precisely because she and her mindset and her philosophy of life seem so far off, so irrevocably in a past which has become and will no doubt remain totally a matter of history'? No, Nestor says, 'the landscape of Eliot's fiction is neither so distant, nor so unrecoverable'. The importance Eliot placed on sympathy is surely not irrelevant or old-fashioned just because we live in a new millennium. 'More importantly, Eliot's exploration of ethics in fiction turns not just on the issue of sympathy but, specifically, on the question of difference', and that remains a contemporary concern – witness our own 'debates on the representation of race and gender, which equally turn on a belief in the consequentiality of the word or image'. There is, then, still much to learn from Eliot's realist fiction, 'an extended, particularised and dramatic investigation of fundamental ethical problems'.

The bulk of Nestor's book considers that investigation in *Scenes of Clerical Life* and the novels. *Scenes* attempts to force sympathy for ordinary characters but is marked by an uncertain narrative voice – 'subsequent works manage their didacticism with more grace and flexibility' – and a limited conception of sympathy, or more accurately pity, which, instead of confirming similarities to Eliot's characters, accentuates differences. *Adam Bede* is structurally and ethically more interesting. Groups of seemingly oppositional characters (Adam and Seth, Adam and Arthur, Dinah and Hetty) are gradually discovered to be more alike than different; consequently, there is a new focus on genuine sympathy and an ethics aimed at preventing, not reacting to, suffering. *The Mill on the Floss* explores the limits of sympathy. The self-regulation advocated in *Adam Bede* and imposed on Maggie Tulliver by family, St Ogg's and herself is admired, because ties of family and community have validity; but it is also undesirable, because Maggie's renunciation, in fact, serves as a healthy antidote to the 'Rhadamanthine' Tom. Her tempernament 'offers the only hope of social and ethical progress'. However, in solving Maggie's dilemma, Eliot imposed 'a form of fantastical euthanasia' on her heroine, thereby faltering in her realism. *Silas Marner* examines the 'ethics of contiguity rather than of genealogy or identity', involving those who can (or fail) to make 'an extra-rational leap', akin to religious faith. *Romola* may appear to contrast Christianity and paganism, but it 'actually explores a more fundamental [ethical] divide between a world of partisanship and false simplicities and one of non-partisan openness and diffidence'. In contrast, *Felix Holt*, Eliot's ostensibly political novel, is really 'a novel about secrets... less concerned with the machinations of party politics than the working out of a politics of morality', seen in the stories of Felix and Esther, Harold and Mrs Transome. In *Middlemarch*, the 'ultimate ethical challenge... is to live vigilantly conscious of the fact that the other has [what Eliot's narrator calls] "an equivalent centre of self"', achieved by, say, Dorothea when she learns to become sympatheticly aware of Casaubon's own awareness of his failure.

Whereas Eliot's fiction up to and including *Middlemarch* is concerned with the inevitable failure of self-determination, *Daniel Deronda* marks a new departure: 'Gwendolen Harleth
inhabits a realm of realism and determinism, while Daniel Deronda dwells in a space of epic and prophecy'. However,

Whereas Eliot’s previous fiction consistently tested the limits of that most fundamental ethical problem – the negotiation of difference – *Daniel Deronda* ends with the evasion of that problem and the justification for an embrace of likeness.

Chapter 11 of Nestor’s book is called ‘Conclusion’ but it is more accurately a summary of Eliot’s critical reputation from the time of her death to the present day. In particular, it highlights the fall and rise of Eliot’s reputation between circa 1881 and 1948, the various attacks that her realism came under from poststructuralist critics and how these were answered, why feminist critics of the 1970s responded ambivalently to her fiction, and why recent New Historicist criticism has been so interesting. The latter has shown, Nestor says, how and why Eliot’s fiction is still relevant today.

And so has her book. *George Eliot* is well written and based on close readings of the texts. Chapters 3-10 are characterized by accessible, detailed and interesting analyses of the stories and novels. Suitable for readers not familiar with the whole of Eliot’s canon, therefore, it also offers the specialist the added bonus of lucidly tracing Eliot’s evolving insight into individuals and groups negotiating difference – and proving that such ideas remain important.

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