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Review of George Eliot's Dialogue with John Milton

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**Anna K. Nardo, *George Eliot's Dialogue with John Milton*
(University of Missouri Press, 2003), pp. xii + 278. ISBN 0 8262 1465 7**

This, despite some blemishes and limitations indicated in passing below, is an examination of selected writings by Milton, the stories about him, and the engagement with his life and works which is reflected in the life and works of George Eliot. Nardo's primary aim is to show how Eliot's 'strenuous dialogue with Milton's life and art ... animated the epic novels she wrote for an age of unbelief' (1). Immediately we are struck by the large claims implied by 'animated' and 'epic' and the convenient but dubious definition of 'an age of unbelief'. The statement does scant service to the quality of Nardo's own strenuous dialogue with her subjects. The claims she makes are large, though Eliot's affinities with Milton and later revisions and departures are cogently addressed. Eliot appreciated that Milton's 'readiness to defy contemporary beliefs and customs matched her own.' (6). *The Spanish Gypsy*, as might be expected, receives close attention – parallels with *Paradise Lost* are tellingly delved – there is some penetrating analysis of Miltonic associations and reference in *Middlemarch*, and Nardo's range throughout is impressive, since she takes in Milton's prose, for example the treatises on divorce and *Areopagitica*, in order to demonstrate the depth and detail of Eliot's own familiarity and conscious assimilation. Nardo examines the 'Milton cult' (26), and takes central issue with the critical concept that 'reading Milton had a debilitating effect on nineteenth-century women writers' (26). She doesn't merely chart influences, but looks at what was written and believed about Milton. Though I am not sure that this is really relevant, Nardo believes that the legends about Milton [as lover and father] 'hover beneath the surface of both *Romola* and *Middlemarch* (and, to a lesser degree, *Adam Bede* and *Felix Holt*)' (65). The image is inverted though the sense is evident, but in the chapters dealing with those texts one is aware of some straining on Nardo's part. For example, one can accept that Milton 'tinted the lens through which Eliot viewed even Renaissance Florence.' (67), but I find it much more difficult to sense, let alone believe, that Savonarola's meeting with Romola outside Florence has overtones of the 'erotic' and that 'Romola's conversion has become, in part, a seduction' (76).

Due emphasis throughout is rightly given to Eliot's reviews of Keightley's 1855 biography of Milton, but occasionally one feels that the quality of this detailed study is not matched by the quality of its footnotes: thus Dr Brabant is described as being middle-aged in 1843 at the time of Marian Evans's infatuation with him (he was in fact 62), while Mark Pattison is dismissed as 'the pedantic and egotistical biographer of both Milton and Isaac Casaubon' (88) without any indication that both studies were written after the publication of *Middlemarch* (1871-2), being issued in 1875 and 1879 respectively. The above description of Pattison is glib and superficial.

But 'Testing the ways of Milton in *Middlemarch*' is a sustained investigation of the marriages, with Miltonic parallels, analogies, derivations, revisions, reworkings all traced and examined: this is followed by a chapter on 'Eliot's challenge to Milton in *Adam Bede*', including her cunning assimilation of the structures of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. Nardo believes, and here she is nothing if not convincing, that in *Adam Bede* Eliot 'viewed reality through the lens of the poet whose vision she rejected' (165). In *The Mill on the Floss* Nardo asserts that Maggie's story is a recollection and revision of *Comus*. Again I find the depth of her work here impressive, as she demonstrates the subtle ironies which Eliot brings to bear on theme and

characters: once again there is some deft reference to *Areopagitica*. *Felix Holt* displays Eliot's use of Samson, Esther and of course *Samson Agonistes*: Nardo feels that Eliot combines 'biblical typology, Miltonic heroism, and gender reversal in her novel about the contemporary plight of England's workingmen' (215). The second unMiltonic part of this puts Nardo's judgements into perspective. *Felix Holt* is certainly about politics (past and contemporary) and the unenfranchised bulk of the population, but it is about so much more than that. Felix and Esther, to follow Nardo's main-line Miltonics, are in some ways the least interesting part of the novel. There is a considered stress on 'Paradise Regained in *Daniel Deronda*' (216), Eliot obviously in part stimulated by Masson's 1874 edition of Milton and her annotations of *Comus*, for the latter 'hovers beneath the surface' (218) of the novel which, as readers will doubtless recall, ends with four lines from *Samson Agonistes*. Nardo concludes that 'For Daniel, paradise is regained – a secular paradise redefined as the capacity to love and work' (231). Again we query the authority of the statement against the open-endedness of the novel.

In her conclusion Nardo returns to the idea that reading Milton is thought by some to have had a 'debilitating effect' (247) particularly on women writers. Thus she analyses the effects of Maggie Tulliver's reading, stressing the fact that she is not recorded as reading Milton and discovers no liberation, but asserts that 'Conversely, through reading Milton, Eliot herself discovered a heroic deliverance for Maggie' (260). The final sentence of this study makes the most complete claim: 'Through acknowledging and assimilating Milton's words, George Eliot liberated her own' (ibid). We might also suggest she acknowledged and assimilated the Bible, Feuerbach, Dante, Shakespeare to name but a few of the many. Nardo's is a detailed and worthwhile study which enriches our knowledge of an aspect of Eliot's reading and its effects on her creative output, but it contains an element of strain and a tendency to push towards diagrammatic rather than inherent conclusions. Bearing that in mind, it is still a must for the Eliot student.

Graham Handley