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GEORGE ELIOT AND THE VICTORIAN ART WORLD

By Leonée Ormond

Reading the letters and diaries of Victorian practitioners of the different arts reminds us that their social world differed markedly from that of artists today. In nineteenth-century London the number of people involved was sufficiently small for artists of all kinds to meet each other regularly.

Among the public functions at which such meetings could take place were the various events at the Royal Academy, held in the National Gallery building in Trafalgar Square until 1868 and, after that, in the Academy’s grand new residence at Burlington House in Piccadilly. The Private View of the summer exhibition in May was not only an important opportunity to sell paintings and sculptures, but also the traditional opening of the London ‘season’. A fashionable soirée was held later in the exhibition, and, at the other end of the year, the opening of the winter Old Master exhibitions, inaugurated in the 1870s, again drew together a large group of powerful and talented people as artists, writers, painters, and composers mingled with politicians, aristocrats, and senior civil servants. Men and women attended these occasions, but George Eliot’s presence is not recorded.

George Eliot and George Henry Lewes were regular visitors to exhibitions at the Royal Academy and elsewhere, but they generally went after the show opened and when the regular public was admitted. Both had been exhibition and gallery goers for many years, and they continued the pattern together.

George Eliot’s closest friendships with painters were, however, with those who were either not involved, or only unwillingly involved, with the Academy. It is clear that, on a personal level, she preferred visiting studios privately, or entertaining artists quietly to lunch or at the Sunday ‘at homes’ which she held with Lewes. With very good friends, like Edward Burne-Jones and his wife, George Eliot would pay social calls, but this was the exception rather than the rule. A note from George Henry Lewes to John Everett Millais, written in April 1877 when Millais was a successful painter living in a large house in Kensington, puts the case succinctly: ‘Mrs Lewes and I should much like to see your pictures if it could be done when there were no other visitors – which is what makes her shrink’.

Writers and artists also met through the processes of illustration. Illustrated books and journals were an important feature of the period, and, in some cases, the writer and illustrator would discuss the illustrations together. In 1862, George Eliot was delighted to hear that Frederic Leighton, then in his thirties and an up-and-coming painter, best-known for his scenes from the Italian Renaissance, was to illustrate Romola: ‘by far the best man to be had in England’, as Lewes told his son Charles (Letters, IV, 37). George Smith, the publisher of the Cornhill, made the decision, and the choice of Leighton as illustrator was apparently part of the deal which Smith negotiated with the author. Leighton was not an experienced illustrator. Trained in the German late-Nazarene style, he was a superb draughtsman, but had so far published only two illustrations, both for Smith and the Cornhill, and both for poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.
Two days after the decision was made Leighton called on Lewes and George Eliot. Like many others, they were evidently (and literally) swept away by the dashing painter. Lewes’s journal records that Leighton ‘went out and ordered a Brougham to take us to the Royal Academy, our anxiety to see Leighton’s pictures being considerable. They surpassed expectation, especially the Michael Angelo tending his dying servant’ (Leighton House; Letters, IV, 37). This painting would have been of particular interest, as it draws on a historical period close to that of Romola and takes up a subject from the Lives of the Painters by the sixteenth century artist and writer, Giorgio Vasari, among George Eliot’s own sources for her novel. In a letter to his father about the project, Leighton explained: ‘Miss Evans (or Mrs Lewes) has a very striking countenance. Her face is large, her eyes deep set, her nose aquiline, her mouth large, the under jaw projecting, rather like Charles Quint; her voice and manner are grave, simple and gentle. There is a curious mixture in her look; she either is or seems very short-sighted. Lewes is clever. Both were extremely polite to me; her I shall like much.’

For weeks after this Leighton and Eliot were involved in discussing the drawings. Both strayed over the boundaries of the individual responsibility of writer and artist. Having spent three years living in Italy, Leighton criticised Eliot’s use of certain expressions as anachronistic for the period of the novel. She thanked him, but took no notice. On her side, she criticised his illustration for ‘The Blind Scholar and his Daughter’: ‘Her face and hair, though deliciously beautiful, are not just the thing – how could they be? Do not make yourself uneasy if alteration is impossible, but I meant the hair to fall forward from behind the ears over the neck, and the dress to be without ornament’ (Letters, IV, 40). Leighton evidently replied explaining the reasons for his presentation of the heroine and Eliot, who had talked with George Henry Lewes, was persuaded that the ‘exigencies’ of his ‘art must forbid perfect correspondence between the text and the illustration’ (Letters, IV, 41). Later she told him that she understood that ‘illustrations can only form a sort of overture to the text’ (Letters, IV, 55). Once confidence was established, Eliot consulted Leighton about historical details, asking him to check the Domenico Ghirlandaio paintings in Florence to make sure that her descriptions of clothes were accurate. By the time that the serialised novel was completed, writer and artist were happy with each other’s work: ‘I am much pleased that you like Mr Leighton’s illustrations’, Eliot told Sara Hennell in July 1862, before embarking on a sympathetic account of his problems with the engravers (Letters, IV, 49).

Nearly two years later, on 4 April 1864, George Eliot went to Leighton’s studio at 2 Orme Square to see his Royal Academy pictures for the year, which included an Italian Renaissance subject, Dante in Exile (Lord Lloyd Webber): ‘Dante coming down the stairs of his host in exile – the stairs so “hard to tread”’ (Letters, IV, 143). Another painting in the studio was Orpheus and Eurydice (Leighton House): ‘not knowing the command that Orpheus is not to look at her, clings to him in pained wondering entreaty, while he turns his head away in anguish’ (Letters, IV, 143). George Eliot does not mention Leighton’s third work, Golden Hours (private collection), an idyllic scene where a man plays the piano to a young woman. It was partly as a result of the success of these three paintings that the artist was elected an associate of the Royal Academy in that year.

This visit took place on a Monday, rather than the traditional show Sunday when artists’ studios were thronged with friends, invited to see their paintings before they were sent in to the
Academy, a further indication of George Eliot’s wish to see paintings privately. At this point in his career, however, Leighton had only a small studio, quite unlike the grand one in Holland Park Road where he began building a house in the same year. Considerations of space may have governed the scale of his invitations.

There are references in Lewes’s journal to meeting Leighton at dinners in the 1870s, but George Eliot was not present. Leighton’s own dinners, at 2, Holland Park Road, were for men only. The artist did, however, persuade George Eliot to come to his studio on 16 March 1877, for one of his famous music parties. On this occasion the great violinist, Joseph Joachim, played together with Alfredo Piatti, Agnes Zimmermann and George Henschel. ‘Many people we knew there’ George Eliot reports (Letters, VI, 348). They were at another of Leighton’s music parties, on 16 April 1878, when Joachim and Piatti played once more. On this occasion, Lewes talked with John Millais. 3

In the year of that second music party, 1878, Leighton was elected President of the Royal Academy and knighted as Sir Frederic Leighton. Fifteen or so years before, he had been closely involved with a group of young artists. All were, in different ways, outsiders, and they formed themselves into the Hogarth Club. Through those contacts, Leighton met members of the former Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Set up in 1848, this was a society of seven, which came to focus on three very talented painters, all trained at the Royal Academy Schools, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais. The Pre-Raphaelites’ original aim was to paint with truth to nature, to paint exactly what they saw in front of them, and, at the same time, to free painting from what they believed to be the theatrical excesses of art after Raphael. Their period as a close-knit group was very short, with Dante Gabriel Rossetti breaking away early in order to work in a style of his own. At first this style was consciously historical, and less concerned with accuracy, precision and detail than that which Hunt and Millais continued to pursue, at least for a time. Rossetti never exhibited at the Royal Academy, preferring to sell privately, thus reducing the chances of George Eliot seeing his work.

George Eliot’s personal reactions to the work of the Pre-Raphaelites follow the development of the movement. She began by writing of them as part of an exciting new trend, and gave most attention to the work of Hunt, arguably the member who most closely obeyed the rules of the Brotherhood. As a young journalist Eliot regretted that the Westminster Review had nobody on the staff able to write well about the group. Very soon, however, she was thinking of the painters separately, and judging Pre-Raphaelite art on an individual basis. By the later 1870s, she was more involved with the work of a later Pre-Raphaelite follower, Burne-Jones, an artist concerned, not with realism, but with symbolism and the mythic.

Visiting the Royal Academy in the 1850s, George Eliot was particularly struck by certain works of Hunt and Millais. In 1852, Hunt exhibited The Hireling Shepherd (Manchester Art Galleries), a painting of a shepherd and shepherdess neglecting their flock. Hunt had a very specific message, a commentary on the behaviour of certain churchmen. The parallel between the shepherd and the pastor, priest or vicar is a familiar one, echoing the 23rd psalm. Hunt’s shepherd is too preoccupied with the shepherdess to notice that the sheep are escaping into the cornfield, while she lets the lamb on her lap eat a green apple. Those who look at the painting today tend to see these lapses of concentration in sexual terms (if they see them at all). But
Hunt had an additional layer of meaning. In the shepherd's hand is a death's head moth, which he is showing to his companion. Hunt was criticising contemporary churchmen, so caught up in the minutiae of religious argument that they neglected their mission to save souls. George Eliot, like many others, saw only the rural scene, and commented on it in her essay on Wilhelm Riehl's *Natural History of German Life*, published in the *Westminster* in July 1856, four years after the painting was exhibited. English painters like Hunt, she says, always give idealised representations of the working classes, unlike the Flemish artist Teniers, or the Spanish Murillo:

> Even one of the greatest painters of the pre-eminently realistic school, while, in his picture of 'The Hireling Shepherd', he gave us a landscape of marvellous truthfulness, placed a pair of peasants in the foreground who were not much more real than the idyllic swains and damsels.4

When she wrote this Eliot was very much under the influence of John Ruskin, whose views on truth and morality in art she shared. She had reviewed Volume III of his *Modern Painters* only three months before. Had she been more aware of the artist's intentions, her approach to Hunt's *Hireling Shepherd* might have been different.5

John Millais' *A Huguenot on St Bartholomew's Day, Refusing to shield himself from danger by wearing the Roman Catholic badge* (Private Collection), one of the most popular paintings of the Victorian period, was on show in the same Royal Academy exhibition of 1852. Because of Millais' broad treatment of the paint, the *Huguenot* has often been regarded as marking the culmination of his departure from the Pre-Raphaelite style. The subject is the massacre of Protestants, Huguenots, which took place in Paris on St Bartholemew's Day, 24 August 1572. The Catholic girl is trying, without success, to save her Huguenot lover.

George Eliot, characteristically, saw the painting in human terms. Writing to Cara Bray she asks: 'Has Mr Bray described to you Millais' picture of “the Huguenot Knight”? The face of the woman is never to be forgotten' (*Letters*, IV, 29-30). The painting remained a great favourite, and a point of comparison, with George Eliot. Among her friends was the Irish artist, Frederic Burton, whom she and George Henry Lewes met in Germany in 1858 and with whom they travelled to Italy in 1864. Burton later drew what is perhaps the best portrait of the novelist. In the year of their Italian journey, Eliot saw Burton's *Helenilil and Hildebrand* (National Gallery of Ireland) at the Old Water Colour Society Exhibition. She called it 'a divine picture' in a letter to Sara Hennell and thought that it was 'better than Millais' Huguenots':

> the picture tells its story. A knight in mailed armour and surcoat has met the fair tall woman he secretly loves on a turret stair. By an uncontrollable movement he has seized her arm and is kissing it. She, amazed, has dropped the flowers she held in her other hand. The subject might have been made the most vulgar thing in the world – the artist has raised it to the highest pitch of refined emotion. (*Letters*, IV, 147)

This is the novelist speaking, responding to the intense emotion and to the human relationship, as she had in her response to the (not dissimilar) *Huguenot*. 

28
George Eliot became friendly with Millais in the 1860s, and she might have noted a parallel between their personal situations. Married to the former Effie Ruskin, Millais endured the refusal of Queen Victoria to entertain his wife at court, as well as a certain amount of social disapproval. He was among the mourners at the novelist’s funeral, and there is a coda to their friendship in Millais’ painting of *The Girlhood of St Theresa* of 1893, which is thought to have been inspired by the opening passage of *Middlemarch*.6

William Holman Hunt and George Eliot were first acquainted in 1864, eight years after she had criticised *The Hireling Shepherd* in her Riehl essay. There are indications that he disapproved of her relationship with Lewes, and had refused to meet her before then.7 George Eliot now visited Hunt’s studio, rather than seeing his work at the Royal Academy. In 1864, for example, she went to view his *Afterglow in Egypt* (Southampton Art Gallery), which shows a Nubian girl carrying wheat. Noting that Hunt had spent years on the painting, George Eliot regretfully described it as:

> a bit of existence, not of action and is painted with immense elaboration, yet with shortcomings in the midst of elaboration that prevent it from being a triumph. That is always rather a sad thing to say when there has been so much study, so much hard work, so much heroism as must always go to the doing of anything difficult. But Inspiration is a rare incalculable thing – it will flash out sometimes in a mere bit of sky and water and weed, and leave you only to wonder at its absence in a picture where all sorts of rare and beautiful things have been brought together and studied with immeasurable pains. (*Letters*, IV, 159)

Eliot’s doubts about this painting were not confined to its quality as a picture of ‘existence’ rather than ‘action’. She is apparently referring to something more difficult to define, a certain lack of inspiration on the artist’s part.

George Eliot first encountered Dante Gabriel Rossetti when he was in his twenties and still close to his Pre-Raphaelite period. He was friendly with a group of young women, who included two artists, Barbara Leigh Smith (later Barbara Bodichon) and Anna Howitt. Both were also close to George Eliot, who was in her middle thirties, and a figure to whom they could look up in admiration. By 1854, Rossetti was sufficiently friendly with her to send his ‘love to Miss Evans if you see her’ through one of Barbara’s and Anna’s friends, Bessie Parkes.8 After this period, however, there is no evidence of meetings between George Eliot and Rossetti until 1870.

One factor may have been her relationship with Lewes, whom Rossetti had known since his boyhood. Gabriele Rossetti, the painter’s father, and Lewes had both been tutors in the family of Swynfen Jervis and Dante Gabriel recalled how, when he was ten, Jervis’s daughter, Agnes, several years older than him, had asked him to dance. Lewes, ‘a horrid fellow’, according to Rossetti, married Agnes in 1840. The two men mixed in the same circles in the early 1850s, and Rossetti recalled that he thought Lewes ‘a monster of physical ugliness and mental showiness in those days’.9 Writing to Jane Morris in 1880, he spoke of the reports of the end of Lewes’s marriage: ‘she took up with the only man to be found who was uglier than Lewes – viz Thornton Hunt, whatever may be the case, my remembrances of her assure me that she
Jan Marsh believes that Rossetti disliked both Lewes and George Eliot, and that their meetings in 1870 resulted only from the painter's wish to secure a commission.¹¹

Some indirect contact between George Eliot and Rossetti had continued through the 1860s. In July 1862, George Smith sent George Eliot a copy of Rossetti's *The Early Italian Poets*: 'which I am very glad to possess' (*Letters*, IV, 48). She was working on her early Italian novel, *Romola*, at the time. Rossetti told Elizabeth Gaskell of his liking for *Adam Bede* in 1859 (not knowing the identity of the author) and, in 1867, he was reading *The Mill on the Floss*. In the late 1860s, his brother, William Michael, consulted George Henry Lewes about his projected edition of the poems of Shelley. William Michael visited The Priory in 1869 and wrote at some length of his discussion on Shelley's poems with George Eliot.¹² At the time of her death, he recalled that: "in animated intellectual talk" her face became "incomparably superior to what it was at other times".¹³

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George Eliot’s diary for 9 January 1870 then records that Edward Burne-Jones brought Dante Gabriel Rossetti to lunch at the Priory, and that they were carrying with them a version of George Frederic Watts’s bust of Clytie, a gift from the artist. Watts, an older painter than the Pre-Raphaelite group, took up sculpture in the 1860s, and exhibited the marble version of Clytie, to considerable acclaim, in 1868. For his part, Watts responded warmly to George Eliot’s ideas, declaring that he wanted to ‘erect a statue to unknown worth – in the words of the author of Felix Holt, “a monument to the faithful who are not famous.”’¹⁴ This eventually materialised in Watts’ creation of Postman’s Park, in the City of London, where plaques record the acts of valour of ordinary people. Clytie shows the nymph who fell hopelessly in love with Apollo, the sun god, and followed him around the sky with her eyes, until she became a sunflower. George Eliot did not know Watts personally, and she was delighted by the unsolicited gift, writing: ‘You have sent me the finest present I ever had in all my life, and I wish you knew better than I can tell you how much good it has done me. [oo.]

The Bust looks grander and grander in my eyes now that I can turn to it from time to time.’¹⁵ Eliot, like Clytie, was following the desired object with her gaze.

Watts asked Burne-Jones to tell George Eliot that he hoped that she and Lewes would come to his studio at Little Holland House in Kensington. After Watts had visited the Priory, the Leweses duly went to his studio. There they found what George Eliot described as ‘wonderful things’ (Letters, V, 77). Gordon Haight notes that George Henry Lewes’s journal records that there were ‘a few other visits to the studio accompanied by George Eliot and occasional meetings at previews and exhibitions, but no more calls at the Priory’.¹⁶

Watts was always to regret that he had not painted George Eliot for the series of portraits of Great English men and women which he gave to the National Portrait Gallery. His widow gives an explanation for this failure in her biography of her husband: ‘he was afraid to attempt’ [it] ‘perceiving the difficulty that it would have presented’;¹⁷ ‘he knew that the features belonged to a type he would have found most difficult; and afraid of not doing the great mind justice, he did not venture to make the attempt’.¹⁸

Like Watts, Rossetti, having visited the Priory, invited the Leweses to see his paintings, an invitation accepted on 13 January 1870 when Barbara Bodichon was a fellow guest. Rossetti showed them a number of drawings including a Beatrice, Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge), Cassandra (British Museum) and Pandora. Afterwards, Rossetti sent George Eliot copies of two recent sonnets for drawings, ‘Mary Magdalene’ and ‘Pandora’, together with some photographs, two from the drawings which had inspired the sonnets, and Hamlet and Ophelia (British Museum) and Rosa Tripex. Two others were from drawings of his late wife. To George Eliot, Rossetti simply described these as ‘from the same model as the Beatrice which interested you’.¹⁹ To Barbara Bodichon he was more forthcoming, telling her that the drawing of a head, dated June 1861, was made ‘shortly before her death’ and that a ‘little figure’ was ‘done when we were all together at Hastings’.²⁰ William Michael Rossetti believed this head and shoulders drawing, now known only from a photograph, to be ‘The most accurate and portrait-like drawing made during his [Rossetti’s] married life’.²¹
Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Head of Elizabeth Siddal (from a photograph of a lost drawing). 1861
Like this portrait, several of the drawings shown to George Eliot and Lewes were not recent works. *Mary Magdalene* dates from 1858 and shows Mary leaving her lover in order to follow Christ. Rossetti had originally drawn the saint from a favourite model, the actress Ruth Herbert, but in 1870, when he sent the photograph to George Eliot, he was planning a (never completed) oil version. George Eliot told him that the ‘subject of the Magdalene rises in interest for me, the more I look at it. I hope you will keep in the picture an equally passionate type for her. Perhaps you will indulge me with a little talk about the modifications you intend to introduce’ (*Letters*, V, 79). Rossetti was planning to paint his favourite later model, Jane Morris, in this oil version. *Cassandra* is another drawing of a dramatic and crowded scene, this time from the Trojan legend. Originally drawn in 1861, it had been reworked in 1867.

*Pandora* is a study of a single female model, of the kind which dominated Rossetti’s later career, while *Rosa Triplex*, a subject which he continued to rework between 1867 and 1874, shows three half length female figures. There are various drawings of projected designs for both subjects, and Rossetti must have sent George Eliot photographs of two of these.

One photograph which interested George Eliot greatly was that from *Hamlet and Ophelia*, drawn, like *Mary Magdalene*, more than a decade before, in 1858. Rossetti had illustrated the passage in Act III, scene one, as Ophelia returns Hamlet’s letters and gifts. Rossetti sent a letter of explanation to George Eliot with the photograph. He told Barbara Bodichon that this was a ‘rather crochety construction of the Hamlet’ through which he had ‘more than half convinced myself that it seems pretentious when put into writing. So I won’t do it again’.

![Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Hamlet and Ophelia*. 1858.](image)
In the Hamlet I have wished to symbolize the character & situation, as well as to represent the incident. Perhaps after all a simpler treatment might have been better. [...] As regards the dramatic action, I have meant to make Hamlet ramping about and talking wildly, kneeling on one of the little stalls and pulling to pieces the roses planted in a box in the angle – hardly knowing all he says and does, as he throws his arms wildly this way and that along the ledge of the carved screen. Ophelia is tired of talking and listens to him still holding out the letters & presents she wishes to return.

In response, George Eliot told Rossetti that the drawing seemed to her 'perfectly intelligible, and altogether admirable in conception, except in the type of the man's head. I feel sure that "Hamlet" had a square anterior lobe. Mr Lewes says, this conception of yours makes him long to be an actor who has "Hamlet" for one of his parts, that he might carry out this scene according to your idea'. She then went on to talk of her own possible 'prejudices' about heads and faces (Letters, V, 79).

It is well-known that George Eliot had a particular interest in phrenology. She seems to have reacted favourably to the drama of Rossetti's scene, but to have felt that this Hamlet was not a man of thought as well as of feeling. Nevertheless, the nature of this correspondence and the detailed responses which George Eliot was prepared to offer, do suggest that some warmth of feeling had sprung up between the artist and the novelist. Rosalie Glynn Grylls states that Rossetti showed 'sketches of Lizzie' to George Eliot, that he 'continued to seek' her 'appreciation' and that she 'remained a loyal friend'. The portrait head of June 1851 and the full-length drawing from Hastings were two such 'sketches' of Elizabeth Siddal, and the Beatrice drawing which the Leweses had seen in the studio must have been a study of her for Beata Beatrix (Tate Britain), which became Rossetti's memorial portrait of his wife, and which was finished in 1870. George Eliot recognised that the gift of the photograph from Lizzie's head was a tribute of friendship and received it with deep gratitude: 'I am especially grateful to you for giving me the head marked June 1861: it is exquisite' (Letters, V, 78-9).

In the light of this, it is strange to find William Michael Rossetti, two decades after his brother's death in 1882, noting that 'My Brother's acquaintance with the self-styled "George Eliot" was not at any time very close', before going on to say that 'it was (as we see) at this date sufficient to warrant him in sending her, or to warrant her in asking for and accepting, some photographs from his works of art.' William Michael was, however, cool about George Eliot in his later writings, commenting that he did not much care for her novels.

For a short time, George Eliot saw Dante Gabriel Rossetti fairly frequently, sometimes at dinner parties, like the one given by Richard Monckton Milnes, Lord Houghton, in May 1870 or when he lunched at The Priory. In 1870 she was reading his recently published Poems, a gift from the author. The friendship between the Leweses and Rossetti culminated at the time of Robert Buchanan's attack on Rossetti in his article, 'The Fleshly School of Poetry', of 1871. Buchanan held a grudge against the Rossetti brothers following a hostile review from William Michael and is thought to have been unstable. Unfortunately, the effect of his attack on Dante Gabriel was devastating. From then until his death the artist was often in a nervous and debilitated state. Lewes and George Eliot were particularly distressed by what had happened,
Lewes explains in his diary for 3 February 1872, ‘Letter from Buchanan. Wrote to explain my altered opinion of him’ (Letters, VII, 89). Ten days later, Lewes noted that Rossetti had left for Scotland. Clearly Buchanan did not want to grasp the cause of Lewes’s anger. At the time of Lewes’s death in 1878, Buchanan sent a copy of an obituary to George Eliot, saying that he did not know why they had become estranged. Rossetti’s name dropped out of Lewes’s and George Eliot’s diaries and letters after the ‘Fleshly School’ affair, as the artist cut himself off from many social contacts.

The younger painter, Edward Burne-Jones, seems to have been responsible for bringing Rossetti and George Eliot together once more in January 1870, although Barbara Bodichon was also trying to arrange a meeting between Rossetti and the Leweses. Burne-Jones and his wife, Georgiana, had first lunched at the Priory on 9 March 1868 and were back to dinner a fortnight later. A very warm attachment grew up between George Eliot and Georgie Burne-Jones, whom George Eliot dubbed ‘Mignon’. She gave the younger woman advice and help at the time of Burne-Jones’s passionate affair with the Greek beauty, Mary Zambaco. Georgie Burne-Jones and her children joined George Eliot and Lewes on a holiday at Whitby in July 1870 and George Eliot felt a considerable interest in Margaret and Philip. She and Lewes gave a book to Philip on a visit to his parents’ house at Fulham and George Eliot went to see him soon after he had become a boarder at Marlborough College.

These circumstances might have overshadowed the relationship between George Eliot and Edward Burne-Jones, but they remained good friends through the 1870s. Penelope Fitzgerald speculates that they had a good deal in common. Both were lovers of beauty who were acutely aware of their own unprepossessing appearance. Both came from comparatively simple backgrounds in the Midlands and had a ‘childhood longing for beauty’.

As with Rossetti, George Eliot took an intelligent and thoughtful interest in the artist’s work. Like Rossetti, Burne-Jones was not a Royal Academy man, although Leighton persuaded him to join for a time. In 1870 Burne-Jones resigned from the Water Colour Society over the Society’s decision to remove his Phyllis and Demophoon (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery), which shows a naked man, from the walls of its exhibition. In 1873 he showed his work at the Dudley Gallery, where two paintings particularly struck George Eliot. One was Love among the Ruins (private collection) and the other The Hesperides (Kunsthalle, Hamburg). She wrote to the artist, in a long letter of March 1878 that:

I want in gratitude to tell you that your work makes life larger and more beautiful to us – I mean that historical life of all the world in which our little personal share of her seems a mere standing room from which we can look all round, and chiefly backward. Perhaps the work has a strain of special sadness in it – perhaps a deeper sense of the tremendous outer forces which urge us than of the inner impulse towards heroic struggle and achievement – but the sadness is so inwrought with pure elevating sensibility to all that is sweet and beautiful in the story of man and in the face of the earth, that it can no more be found fault with than the sadness of midday when Pan is touchy like the rest of us.

(Letters, V, 391)

George Eliot seems to be saying that Burne-Jones’s work, for all its beauty, was not sufficiently
involved in human struggle, but it is apparent that her emotions, the sense of the sadness of the world which she shared with him, overcame this intellectual response. Burne-Jones’s reply was written at once: ‘you have written so sweetly and comfortably to me that you have made me seriously happy, and given me more courage than I have felt for many a day’ (Letters, IX, 85).

George Eliot watched Burne-Jones’s career with considerable interest. Three years later, on 3 March 1876, she told Emily Pattison, ‘Burne Jones goes on transcending himself and is rising from the inconvenient celebrity which is made up of echoes as well as voices. I do hope he will be urged into having a collection of his pictures in a separate little gallery for a time, so that his admirers might point to the reason for the faith that is in them’ (Letters, VI, 229).

This was prescient for, in the following year, Sir Coutts Lindsay opened the Grosvenor Gallery, where Burne-Jones’ work was particularly well represented. As George Eliot foresaw, his paintings became overwhelmingly popular in aesthetic London. Unusually, George Eliot went to the private view at the Grosvenor and she returned later with Georgie Burne-Jones. George Eliot’s doubts about the paintings seem to have been resolved. Writing of some ‘beautiful photographs which I may keep as long as I like’, lent to her by Burne-Jones in December 1879, she describes them as works of ‘self-culture, sweetness and light’ (Letters, VII, 234). On his side, Burne-Jones spoke of George Eliot as a conversationalist: ‘There is no one living better to talk to... for she speaks carefully, so that nothing has to be taken back or qualified in any way. Her knowledge is really deep, and her heart one of the most sympathetic to me I ever knew’.27 He was less confident about her novels. When his studio assistant, Thomas Rooke, said that Middlemarch was dull, Burne-Jones responded: ‘Yes, I suppose there will always be times when her books will be studied. But ladies never give us any fighting – they only give us magnificent sentiments instead. I like a Dumas duel. I can’t fight myself; I suppose that’s why I like to read about it’.28

Visiting George Eliot soon after the death of Lewes, Burne-Jones was struck by her loneliness: ‘I wondered she cares to lie down or get up any more’.29 This response may have contributed to the shock when George Eliot wrote to tell Georgie of her intention to marry John Cross. She visited the Burne-Joneses for the last time in late April 1880, soon after her marriage. It was a sad finale to the most enduring of George Eliot’s artist friendships, and perhaps ironic that it should have foundered (yet again) over her choice of partner.

Notes
3 Leighton’s sister, Alexandra Sutherland Orr, the future biographer of Robert Browning, became a good friend of George Eliot and G. H. Lewes and dined with them on several occasions.


7 I am grateful to Dr Judith Bronkhurst for this information.


10 *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris*, p. 58.


16 Haight, p. 69.

17 M. S. Watts, II, 250.

18 M. S. Watts, I, 276.

19 *Correspondence*, IV, 371.

20 *Correspondence*, IV, 372.


22 *Correspondence*, IV, 372.

23 *Correspondence*, IV, 371.

