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Review of The Complete Shorter Poetry of George Eliot

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***The Complete Shorter Poetry of George Eliot*, ed. Antonie Gerard van den Broek. Consulting Editor William Baker. 2 vols (Pickering and Chatto, 2005). ISBN 1 85196 796 6**

This is the first fully edited and annotated edition of George Eliot's poems to appear in print. 'Shorter' means all the poems except *The Spanish Gypsy*, which is to appear in a companion volume by the same editors in 2008. Whatever arguments there may be about the 'continuing reevaluation of George Eliot's *oeuvre*' in William Baker's phrase, readers need precise evidence about their genesis, publication and textual revisions and (in some cases) meanings, and Antonie van den Broek's edition provides a wealth of such information. It includes 'all variants in MSS and printed versions'; 'original spelling and punctuation have been retained, even where non-standard' except in a very few cases where there might be confusion (I, lvii). Each poem has a bibliographical and biographical head-note; and 'editorial [i.e. explanatory] notes' and textual variants are collected at the end of each volume. The head-notes are excellent: informative but concise. Where doubt exists, about the date of composition, for example, van den Broek gives a detailed and fully referenced account of the evidence. Similarly with source material, discussion of which is often based on Eliot's notebooks and again takes into account recent scholarship. The edition also includes six appendices, most of them useful: the epigraphs to *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*; Fragments from the Yale Poetry Notebook; the two essays on verse ('Notes on form in art' and 'Versification'), plus 'leaves from a notebook'; facsimile title-pages; sample pages from the Jubal MS in the BL; contemporary reviews (from *The Living Age*, *Westminster Review*, *North American Review*, and Rose Elizabeth Cleveland's 'George Eliot's Poetry' (1885), a strident attack by an American, in a volume dedicated 'To my Countrywomen': 'I cannot allow her verse to be poetry. She is the *raconteur*, not the *vates*; the scientist, not the seer.')

So this is a very different kind of edition from Lucien Jenkins's *Collected Poems* (London: Skoob, 1989) which reprints the poems from the Cabinet edition of the *Works* (1878-85), supplemented by poems from the letters and notebooks in the Beinecke library, but with no annotation or textual variants. Scholarship comes at a price, however, as often with Pickering: these volumes plus *The Spanish Gypsy* will cost £260 or \$440, and are evidently aimed at the library market. Whether, sitting on library shelves, they will effectively counter the 'neglect' of Eliot's poetry that Baker writes about in his Preface, remains to be seen, but at all events this is an indispensable edition for the scholar and serious reader.

Though van den Broek wisely does not offer aesthetic judgement of the poems, his edition will inevitably raise the issue in readers' minds, and a reviewer can hardly avoid it. Rose Cleveland's broadside, quoted above, is typical of a strand of criticism that over-valued a spiritual and idealizing poetry as against more solidly moralizing or narrative kinds and denigrated Eliot's verse accordingly: it's good, but it's not poetry. (Cleveland's comment may be a coded attack on Eliot's rejection of revealed religion.) From other perspectives this looks a little odd, because the poetry is now generally felt to be full of spiritual striving – in a problematic way: it lacks the variety of focus and the pinpointing of emotion that we have now come to admire in the poetry of Augusta Webster, to take one example. It is arguable that Eliot herself suffered from the Victorian notion that poetry had, in her words, a 'superiority over all

other arts' ('Notes on Form in Art') and that that 'superiority' equated to seriousness. Matthew Arnold's Victorian reading of Aristotle's distinction between history and poetry comes to mind: the greatest poetry has 'high seriousness'. On this criterion he excluded Chaucer from the pantheon, a bold and self-defining judgement.

Seriousness was a problem for other Victorian writers than Eliot and Arnold. Hardy several times complained that readers of his poetry didn't notice when he was being flippant, nonchalant or fantastical but solemnly assumed he was always serious. His candour in some of these complaints is debateable, but the question is crucial. British poetry was becoming more multivocal from the 1860s onwards, more alert to the expressive modes of drama, and this challenged the sanctification of bardic or visionary poetry (Cleveland's *vates* or seer). Eliot seems not to have seen poetry as a place for experiment but as a realm to be received into, and this can only appear as a backward-looking stance.

She did, however, vary her tones, and the question arises whether we (like Hardy's imagined readers) have simply become unable to read them. Solemnity seems her natural strain, but there are of course lighter tones and moments of humour in the poems as in the novels. 'How Lisa loved the king' interestingly combines a relatively light touch in evoking Lisa's youth and her rural surroundings with a more earnest nobility towards the end of the poem, and yet it doesn't seem to me entirely successful. The freshness of vision aimed at in the detailed rendering of the natural world tends to be consciously naïve, just as Lisa's consciousness of her love doesn't escape coyness. In these passages Eliot is very literary, writing in a tradition of artful evocation of Italian romance that is familiar from Chaucer, Keats and Leigh Hunt (it's as if English poets can't think of Boccaccio without thinking of Chaucer).

Eliot's reading of Shakespeare's sonnets is telling. Van den Broek asks how it is that she was so subtly interested in them but apparently not moved to imitate their art. In fact her comments about them are subtle only when she is surprised by joy, and this applies to a small minority of them. (Her count of 'good' Shakespeare sonnets is about the same as Wordsworth's in 1815.) Many are thought to be mere verbal exercises. Why should a writer of Eliot's stature not value verbal exercises? It comes back to the mystical idea of 'poetry'. Henry James's diagnosis may be truest: the faults in the language of her poetry 'arise from an excess of rhetorical energy, from a desire to attain to perfect fullness and roundness of utterance; they are faults of overstatement.'

Even so, there are great pleasures to be had. I will pick out a moment in 'Armgart'. The poem may not be the feminist text and answer to 'Aurora Leigh' that some recent readers have wanted to find in Eliot, and formally it may be nearer to a series of monologues rather than a drama, but the confrontation between Armgart and Walpurga in the fifth scene has a degree of tension when Walpurga brutally reveals the egotism and snobbery of the artist. Exciting and serious, because Eliot reflected so seriously on art and egotism; here she is both in her element and of her time.

Since this is likely to be the standard edition of the poems for many years, I should note that there are a few copying or proof-reading errors in the texts. I have not made a full check but noticed the following. In 'Brother and Sister, IV' line 3 gives 'my' instead of 'by'; in 'As tu vu la lune se lever' line 8 has 'res' instead of 'tes'; in 'Armgart', line 112 has 'beats' for 'bears'

and line 724 'miller-seed' for 'millet-seed'; in 'Stradivarius' line 28 has 'hung' for 'flung' and line 29 'hurting' for 'hurling'; and in 'A Minor Prophet' line 19 has 'talks' for 'talk'. (This last might be a genuine variant, but is not noted as such.) Here and there in the editorial material there are oddities. In the head-note to 'Armgart' van den Broek quotes from Eliot's essay 'The Antigone and its Moral' her judgement that it would be wrong to dismiss Creon as a 'hypercritical tyrant' (I, 87), giving the source as Pinney's *Essays of George Eliot*; but Pinney and every other editor writes 'hypocritical', which is presumably correct. In the same passage, where Pinney has Eliot writing about 'the polytheistic conception, according to which the requirements of the Gods often clashed with the duties of man to man', van den Broek leaves out the last two words, which destroys the point of the sentence (I, 88). These are minor matters, but they can sow a seed of doubt in the reader's mind. Just one case in point: in Appendix C, discussing Eliot's three essays mentioned above, van den Broek quotes her quoting James Sylvester's *The Laws of Verse* on the analogy between metre and music (II, 168). 'Crotchet' is spelled 'crotchet', 'crochet' and 'crocket' in the same sentence, and van den Broek gives a page reference to Pratt and Neufeldt's edition of the *Middlemarch Notebooks*. They, however, use the single spelling 'crotchet' and don't indicate that they have regularized spellings. The printed text that Eliot copied from (i.e. Sylvester's book) also uses 'crotchet' consistently. So where do the variants come from? As a non-specialist reader I assume they are in Eliot's MS (the spellings are all accepted variants in the *OED*), but in the absence of any explanation I have to wonder, perhaps quite unjustly, whether this is an example of lax proof-reading.

That ungrateful duty is done. This edition is full of information and starting points for further discussion and is warmly to be welcomed.

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