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Review of George Eliot

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The physical format of this important overview is unattractive, the print small, with some forty-eight lines to the page giving the impression of overpacking to keep the cost down. This companion to George Eliot studies – it is in fact more than a guide – has a number of blemishes. Jedrzejewski has not been well served by his editor(s): he has been allowed some loosely inappropriate phrasing on occasions, as with Mary Ann’s reaction to her father’s death which ‘made his departure obviously painful for her in emotional terms’ (9). This hardly conveys the anguished outcry or poignant self-searchings of her grief. Clichés are also present – Switzerland becomes a ‘safe haven’ (10) for her, while later we are variously told that ‘things began to calm down on the domestic front’ (23) and, after the death of John Blackwood and her continuing ill-health, she was ‘clearly at a difficult point in her life’ (29). The fictional Mr Tulliver bathetically ‘suffers a major health crisis and dies’ (45).

There are other stylistic scars, notably the over use of ‘quasi’: examples include Dinah having a ‘quasi-angelic spirituality’ (43), *The Mill on the Floss* possesses ‘quasi-autobiographical truth’ (45) as well as having ‘a quasi-allegorical feel’ (47), while *Romola* has ‘a quasi-documentary manner’ (56). *Daniel Deronda* exhibits ‘quasi-scientific detachment rather than personal intimacy’ (83) and *Theophrastus Such* has a ‘quasi-fictional framework’ (90).

I note these solecisms because one feels that critical commentary on a major writer should at least accord its subject the responsibility of a commensurate style. That said, I have no doubts about the comprehensive grasp displayed by Jedrzejewski throughout this book. The biographical summary is adequate and makes important connections with the fiction. There is a telling if brief analysis of Marian Evans’s *Westminster Review* period and its relevance to her subsequent work. There is a tacit and succinct recognition of Lewes’s appeal for her, which Jedrzejewski defines as ‘intellectual openness’ (13), a phrase redolent of the expansion which followed upon their intimacy. The summaries of the novels are excellent, each one containing critical pointers which are not only sound but often stimulating, suggesting lines of investigation which lead to a deepening appreciation. One may disagree with some of the emphases, but they have the positive merit of deriving from a close and intelligent reading. Throughout his commentary Jedrzejewski never loses sight of George Eliot’s major concerns, and he is particularly interesting on the characterization, for example, of Godfrey Cass, and ‘the crucially important symbolic dimensions’ (60) of *Romola*, while he defines, as it seems to me comprehensively, the comprehensive greatness of *Middlemarch*. Each section on a novel is rounded off with a selection from contemporary reviews, my only cavil here being that they all come from David Carroll’s admirable *Critical Heritage* volume (1971) whereas some not extracted there – particularly on *Daniel Deronda* – are important. Jedrzejewski is himself finely definitive on the latter novel, which is ‘clearly the work of an affluent metropolitan intellectual, equally at home in the country houses of the Victorian upper classes, in the bohemian circles of London, and in the fashionable resorts of Continental Europe’ (80).

The sections on Eliot’s literary criticism and on the poetry are equally telling. The first is brief and highly selective, but is certainly relevant in its references to her subsequent themes through an examination of the essays on Dr Cumming, Madame de Sable and ‘Silly Novels by Lady
Novelists’, as well as the much-quoted but vitally important review of Riehl. (92) Coverage of the poetry is adequate: inevitably, I suppose, the ‘Brother and Sister’ sequence is associated with the ‘quasi-autobiographical vision of the author’s childhood recreated in the early chapters of The Mill on the Floss’. (95)

The summaries and evaluation of criticism after George Eliot’s death and up to the present day are invaluable. There are gaps – there is not a complete blank between Stephen (1902) and his daughter Virginia Woolf in 1919 – but these are more than compensated for by brief, neat, independent registers, like the recognition of Freemantle (sic) (1933) and the groundbreaking work of Anna Kitchel in the same year. Thereafter the choice is fairly predictable (and of course influential), though it is good to see Reva Stump’s Movement and Vision in George Eliot’s Novels (1959) accorded deserved recognition. Occasionally there is a touch of condescension as Jedrzejewski relates a past appraisal to ‘the advanced critical climate of the twenty-first century’ (120). Certainly criticism and scholarship have changed markedly over the last sixty years, but one wonders whether this registers an advance or merely a tightening – in some ways frightening – grip of particular, evanescent theoretical obsessions with their publish-or-be-damned measure of academic excellence. Fortunately, Jedrzejewski has no need to bother too much with what is current, though he surveys the statutory selection with admirable objectivity. His chronology on George Eliot is sound, that on historical/literary events thin. The bibliography is generally excellent, though why D. J. Enright’s edition of Theophrastus Such should be given and not Nancy Henry’s is a passing aberration. One can, as I said earlier, take issue with particular pronouncements, but this is a companion to George Eliot studies which will be found useful by students and readers at all levels of involvement with her writing. Jedrzejewski’s dedication and his extensive, impressive and intimate knowledge of his subject are evident throughout.

Graham Handley