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THE 1984 GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE:
LOVE, KNOWLEDGE AND NARRATION:
GEORGE ELIOT ON OTHER MINDS

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I

'It was by loving them... that he knew them; it was not by knowing them that he loved'¹ – such was Henry James's legendary conclusion about Balzac and his characters. James's point was simple but important: Balzac was, in his view, able to invest his characters with a special freedom and opaqueness because he loved them as one might love another person! They didn't spring complete and transparent from a fictional blueprint.²

James makes a similar point about Trollope, a writer in whom he elsewhere finds fault. If Trollope 'was a knowing psychologist, he was so by grace; he was just and true without apparatus' and without effort'.³ Creation 'without apparatus' again suggests an understanding that is intuitive rather than calculating; an almost inadvertent, instinctive feeling for the veiled inner worlds of persons, both in fiction and in life. This is high praise indeed from a writer who counted himself among the select group of 'loving' creators of fictional character.⁴

James was, of course, also one of the early and great critics of George Eliot. He met her, reviewed almost everything she wrote, and learnt a great deal about 'the art of fiction' from her work. Yet some

of his best-known judgements about her art are ambivalent or even openly critical. He suggests, for instance, that she tended to work unspontaneously from 'the abstract to the concrete', and that the instinct for the 'irresponsible plastic'⁵ creation of character was less prominent in her than in Balzac, Trollope, Turgenev and others. She depended too little on love; too much on her formidable powers of abstraction and moral analysis.

Over recent decades George Eliot criticism has taken the terms of James's strictures and turned them to George Eliot's advantage. Some of the best work – passages in Leavis, the extended studies by Barbara Hardy, W.J. Harvey and Gillian Beer⁶ have demonstrated not only that analysis in an Eliot novel is often profoundly creative, but that her creation of character is a much less homogeneous and ponderous thing than James supposed.

I don't intend or need to press this particular point here. Rather, I wish to recall the related point that was the subject of my 1984 George Eliot Memorial Lecture, "George Eliot on Love and Knowledge". There I argued that an explicit and often urgent concern with the proprieties of love and knowledge marks a great deal of George Eliot's writings; indeed, that it extends beyond her novels to her short fiction, essays, reviews and letters. This concern is in some instances 'literary' and is reminiscent of James's remark about Balzac; but it is also often more than literary and reflects certain fears on George Eliot's part about human relationships. Is it right to seek to know another person completely? Is it feasible so to know someone? Where does one draw the line between loving intimacy and a kind of manipulative expertise in the inner lives of others? In a remarkable short

story published in 1859 George Eliot was to liken such intrusions to the lifting of a veil. But, as her early letters indicate, the theme was long in preparation.

II

A letter written home by the young Marian Evans during a stay with friends in Geneva draws an important distinction. She writes of her hosts that

I feel they are my friends – without entering into or even knowing the greater part of my views, they understand my character, and have a real interest in me. (G.E.L., I/328)

'Real interest' – a genuine and solicitous concern for other people – is implicitly contrasted with what in another letter she calls 'hard curiosity': 'I hate hard curiosity' (G.E.L., III/376) she insists in objection to an unloving and intrusive attitude to the knowledge of others. Significantly, the theme surfaces again in a statement of authorial intent. She wishes to write

something that would contribute to heighten men's reverence before the secrets of each other's souls, that there might be less assumption of entire knowingness, as a datum from which inferences are to be drawn. (G.E.L., III/164)

'Entire knowingness' is a parallel term for 'hard curiosity': 'inferences', she argues, must to a great extent be instinctive if they are to honour the dignity of another person. (I shall discuss some of the

philosophical implications of this claim presently.)

The novels make the same point on many occasions. Adam Bede insists that 'the human soul is a very complex thing' (I:XVI:259) and that we need to strike a balance between the moral necessities of at least partial understanding and the individual's right to a margin of privacy. The Mill on the Floss picks up on what the letter cited above calls 'knowingness'. The narrator observes that

there is nothing more widely misleading than sagacity if it happens to get on a wrong scent; and sagacity, persuaded that men usually act and speak from distinct motives, with a consciously proposed end in view, is certain to waste its energies on imaginary game. (p.22).

The passage is important not only in the obvious sense that it implies a certain impropriety in intrusive enquiry, but because it gives George Eliot's customary view on what the philosophers (Anglo-American rather than Continental) call 'intention'. Her writing rests on the assumption that other people's 'motives' are obscure and beyond total reconstruction, but that they are not thereby wholly indeterminate or entirely resistant to humane understanding. As we shall see, George Eliot was not 'doing' what is now called among critics 'deconstruction'. However, she was insisting that understanding be humane, and that this entails a preparedness not to know certain things in relationships of love. Thus Philip Wakem in The Mill : "I think there are stores laid up in our human nature that our understandings can make no complete inventory of" (p. 268). Romola takes a similar - if

at times inconsistent – line on what it calls 'the complexities in human things' (II:LII:236). Of the tragically complex Savonarola the narrator observes:

The mysteries of human character
have seldom been presented in a
way more fitted to check the judgements
of facile knowingness than in Girolamo
Savonarola; but we can give him a
reverence that needs no shutting of the
eyes to fact, if we regard his life as a
drama in which there were great inward
modifications accompanying the outward
changes. (I:XXV:359)

Once again, the point is that one must steer a course between shallow and insulting 'knowingness' on the one hand, and the negligence of not asking certain tough questions that are necessary to ethical social life, on the other. The first of these alternatives explains the centrality of the word 'reverence' in George Eliot's moral vocabulary, for reverence (she hoped) allays the temptations of 'facile knowingness'. Felix Holt is typical in contrasting reverence and its synonyms with the language of unfeeling intrusiveness. Thus Rufus Lyon joins the narrator in finding 'curiosity' anathema. Lyon shrinks 'even from an inward enquiry that was too curious' (p.359) and will not defer to 'the insufferable motive of curiosity' (p. 399) in others. Not surprisingly, the most searching and momentous treatments of love and knowledge come in the masterworks, Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda. Middlemarch seems (as Dr. Johnson put it) to find an echo in almost every bosom, not least that of the poststructuralist critics who seek evidence in literature for their seemingly limitless linguistic scepticism. Middlemarch obliges with a characteristic Eliotean stress on the

'difficulty' and 'complexity' of human affairs and on the dynamic and fluid propensities of the self. 'Character', it asserts, 'is a process and an unfolding' (I:II:226). But poststructuralists like J. Hillis-Miller perhaps understate the extent to which Middlemarch assumes, and indeed illustrates, that other selves are available to a certain – albeit a provisional and incomplete – kind of knowing.⁷ George Eliot's general position is classically given in Book II. Dorothea, having like all people been 'born in moral stupidity', has to acknowledge that Casaubon is not the man of her imaginings; not simply the embodied image of her adolescent fantasy life. She has to 'conceive' that her inadequate husband has 'an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference' (I:XXI:323). This passage has been variously interpreted but I take it to mean that the otherness of other people is a relatively stable feature of moral relationships and that it can be mitigated by the kind of provisional, respectful and cumulative intimacy that characterise relationships of love. 'Difference', in this view, is not what it so often becomes in structuralist and poststructuralist discussion – the touchstone of the anti-humanist denial of the substantial self – but rather the condition of creative human relationships. George Eliot was not so naïve as to think such relationships wholly unmediated by social convention. On the contrary, her novels, essays and letters suggest that various codes (linguistic, ethical, religious, aesthetic) provide relatively stable contexts within which people can make partial sense of one another. But – and this is central to her work – such codes do not as it were exhaust the individual. Something 'spiritual' goes on within and between people in relationships of love, and neither they nor we can entirely explain this. That such an assumption

strikes some contemporary readers as philosophically unsophisticated need not automatically invalidate it. Experience – philosophical and other – suggests that it is hard to picture rational, ethical societies without in the first instance taking something like this image of self for granted.

George Eliot's last novel, Daniel Deronda, further submits the 'equivalent centre of self' to a searching spiritual, philosophical and moral investigation. Daniel, for example, is another character of tact and reverence. He possesses a 'reverential tenderness' (III:L1:135) towards other people and, in a phrase reminiscent of Rufus Lyon, wonders whether he should 'obtrude his interest' (I:XVII:280) upon Mirah Cohen. Deronda indeed is the unimpeachable – if at times somewhat implausible – summation of George Eliot's doctrine of unintrusive love. He has the kind of knowledge of other people that James imputes to Balzac as a creator of character.

III

This doctrine, of course, has deep roots in George Eliot's life and personality. Those familiar with the biographies will know the suffering and internal conflict that gave rise to one of the great declamatory phrases of Middlemarch's narrative commentary: 'the terrible stringency of human need' (II:XLVIII:313) was a thing this immensely complex and intense woman knew at first hand. For her human relationships were invariably the central feature of both life and fiction; and her novels reflect her personal struggle to reconcile 'need' – the temptation to claim and know another person completely – and the contrasting call to solicitude, reverence, unintrusive acceptance. Indeed, the creative tension that so distinguishes her work perhaps resides in her having known, with equal

intensity, the horror of solitude and the temptation of a total knowingness. And here her extraordinary – and in some ways aberrant – short story "The Lifted Veil" assumes great importance.

"The Lifted Veil" is about an intensely needy man who is cursed with a capacity for total and intrusive knowledge. Its 'hero', Latimer, finds that he can both see into the future and into the minds of other people. This nightmare of knowingness compels a 'diseased participation in other people's consciousness' (301), a 'curse of insight' (340) and, in what must surely be one of the most momentous phrases in all of George Eliot's writings, a sense of the 'fatiguing obviousness' of 'other minds' (319). Such 'obviousness' is a gothic inversion of 'reverence', 'love', 'delicacy' and solicitude – the touchstones of George Eliot's fictional humanism. It portends a kind of category collapse in which a great writer is in effect asking what the world would be like if the things she held to be true were in fact an insipid and systematic idealisation of the real state of things. The temptation to call this 'deconstruction' should however be resisted. "The Lifted Veil" is an appalled act of self-criticism and examination, but it is everywhere shaped by an urgent and fundamentally coherent artistic intention.

Perhaps one further detail of the story's rather tortured plot is pertinent here. Thus blighted, Latimer chooses to marry the one person into whose mind he does not have the horrific power of involuntary psychic access. Bertha is at first his salvation, the 'oasis of mystery in the dreary desert of knowledge' (301). Eventually, however, the veil lifts on her mind also. What is revealed is the gothic inversion of love: a malign and trivial calculator who

actually seeks her husband's death.

Why should George Eliot write such a thing? There were no doubt many reasons, some psychological (her complex feelings about relationships); others circumstantial (the story was written at the peak of the embarrassment, humiliation and insecurity surrounding her pseudonym). But a further (and related) one may again connect with the personal and artistic insecurity that threads its way through her letters.

In a particularly striking one of these she writes that 'I fear authors must submit to be something of monsters not quite simple healthy human beings' (G.E.L. III/119). At his most troubled, Henry James sometimes envisaged the novelist as a kind of 'monster' in a moral world. What, after all, is omniscient narration but an intrusion upon other – albeit created – minds? "The Lifted Veil" seems to look guiltily forward to James on Balzac; but it seems also to reflect a troubled region of George Eliot's own life. It is surely significant that she complained to Herbert Spencer of precisely the 'double consciousness' she attributes to Latimer. Like a novelist Latimer is a man conflicted by a special kind of consciousness: he knows all about the people he would in many respects prefer to leave in a loving obscurity. Here George Eliot's legendary psychological realism begins to seem a less secure thing than is often thought. This was, after all, a form of narration which encouraged her to render transparent the mystery she believed to reside in other people. Her great novels are a creative response to the problem of knowledge in life and in narrative art. The letters and "The Lifted Veil" reveal the extent and the urgency of this, one of fictional humanism's perennial concerns.

argument for the liberal humanist position.

John Bayley's The Characters of Love : A Study in the Literature of Personality (London : Chatto & Windus, 1960) gives the Jamesian view cited above in greater detail than James ever attempted.

3. Henry James, Partial Portraits (London and New York : Macmillan, 1888), p. 105.

4. See his Preface to The Portrait of a Lady in which he describes the way characters presented themselves to his imagination. The Preface is reprinted in The Art of the Novel, ed. Richard Blackmur (New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934).

5. Partial Portraits, p. 51.

6. F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (London : Chatto & Windus, 1948); Barbara Hardy, The Novels of George Eliot : A Study in Form (London : Athlone Press, 1963); W.J. Harvey, The Art of George Eliot (London : Chatto & Windus, 1961); Gillian Beer, Darwin's Plots : Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983).

7. See especially two of Hillis-Miller's essays on Middlemarch : "Narrative and History", ELH, Vol. 41 (Fall 1974) pp 455-73, and "Optic and Semiotic in Middlemarch" in The Worlds of Victorian Fiction, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1975). This deconstructive view of the self in fiction might be contrasted with two important works that propose a theory of the self as a narrative unity:

Barbara Hardy, Tellers and Listeners : The Narrative Imagination (London : Athlone Press, 1975), and Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue : A Study in Moral Theory (London : Duckworth, 1981).

8. Herbert Spencer, An Autobiography, 2 Vols. (New York : D. Appleton and Company, 1904), Vol. 1, p.459.

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