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THE 1985 GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE

delivered by DR. MICHAEL BELL, Chairman of
the Department of English at the University of
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GEORGE ELIOT AND G. H. LEWES: THEIR
CONCEPTION OF LITERATURE AS SEEN FROM
THE NINETEEN-EIGHTIES

At the heart of George Eliot's fiction is an abiding concern for truth of feeling. The altruism of a Dorothea, as much as the egoism of a Rosamund, can lead to a disastrous failure in self-knowledge and in understanding of the world. Eliot, of course, was concerned with the outer worlds of nature, of society and of history, yet her approach is always through the emotional perceptions of specific individuals.

Several of the great mid-Victorian novelists shared this belief that large social questions were to be approached through the issue of right feeling. Most notably Dickens sought to educate and arouse public conscience through feeling and he expressed considerable distrust of parliamentary legislation and social science although these might be thought to be complementary to, rather than in opposition to, his emotional appeals. And it is Dickens again who most readily attracted the charges of sentimentality commonly brought against those Victorian novelists who emphasised feeling in this way. I have no space here for a proper defence of Dickens or other Victorian novelists in this respect, but it is important to recognise the strength and sophistication of the Victorian novel in its treatment of feeling.

A full account would encompass the Victorian novelists' transformation of the 18th century cult of sentiment. The cult of sentiment was an attempt, in an increasingly secularised culture, to base the moral life on human feeling rather than on divine sanction. It constituted a massive and permanent change in the literary, moral and social culture of Europe; so extensive in fact that we now take its effects for granted as normal. But the process of assimilating the cult of sentiment was a gradual one and some of the early manifestations of sentiment seemed increasingly absurd to later generations. The 18th century 'man of feeling', with his exaggerated effusions of benevolent emotion, then came to seem conventional, self regarding and even insincere. Indeed, the word 'sentimental', which at first referred approvingly to this self-conscious arousal of feeling, gradually acquired its modern sense of a mawkish, exaggerated or self-indulgent quality of feeling. But this gradual decline of the word 'sentimental' from an approving to a disapproving term does not indicate a decline in the value we attribute to feeling. On the contrary, the modern negative use of the word 'sentimental' implies a criterion of true feeling with which it is being contrasted. Hence the gradual assimilation of the cult of sentiment involved an increasing capacity to

discriminate between true feeling and sentimental effusion.

In this whole development the novel form itself has played a crucial part. For narrative fiction is not only the form in which shades of feeling can be closely and inwardly analysed, it is also the form in which readers are most drawn into an emotional identification with the experience of the characters; and much of the 18th century literature of sentiment actively encouraged its readers to respond to the fiction as if to real life persons and events. Novelists would pretend that the novel was, for example, a real journal or collection of letters. The Victorian novelists, by contrast, seem to have recognised that a self-awareness about the fictional form itself, an awareness that it is only a fiction, could be used to educate readers into a recognition of the unreal, or fictional, elements potentially present in all human feeling. The intrusive authors of the mid-Victorian novel indicate the carefully dual effect of their fictions. On the one hand they represent our common humanity with the characters and therefore encourage feelings of moral identification yet at the same time they draw attention to the fictitious nature of the whole experience. And that fictional awareness is crucial. It prevents the reader from responding to occasions of compassion, as happened with much of the 18th century literature of sentiment, as if they were events in real life. The Victorian reader was encouraged not just to respond to the event, but to consider the appropriateness or otherwise of that response. Dickens' Mr. Micawber, for example, with his rhetorical effusions and his emotional instability, is a descendant of the 18th century man of feeling. But by making him into a comic device, Dickens throws a critical light on the Micawberish elements in David Copperfield himself. The man of feeling here is not just a way of arousing feeling in the reader, but a way of analysing it critically. A further example is the abrupt intrusion of George Eliot in the 29th chapter of Middlemarch when she asks 'But why always Dorothea?' was her point of view the only possible one with regard to

this marriage?.... Mr. Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him and was spiritually ahungred like the rest of us.' After this intrusion we continue to feel for Dorothea yet are suddenly made to consider that sympathy is a newly self-conscious and judicious way; and most readers are obliged to recognise, at least on their first reading of the novel, that their sympathies have indeed been unthinkingly distributed. In short, these Victorian novelists were at once sentimentalists yet critics of sentiment; they devised ways of using fiction that would at once arouse and critically educate the reader's feelings. This self-conscious use of the fiction is a large and fascinating topic which we cannot engage properly here, but it may suffice to indicate something of the sophisticated command of their fictional medium which the classic Victorian novelists, such as Eliot and Dickens, brought to bear on the education of feeling.¹

This Victorian critique of sentimentalism as a way of discriminating an emotional maturity gives a clue to the critical expectations of George Eliot and G. H. Lewes. As readers they sought the same moral maturity and emotional authenticity as they wished to express in their own fiction. G. H. Lewes wrote a series of articles for the Fortnightly Review in 1865 which were later published as a volume entitled The Principles of Success in Literature. He suggests three cardinal principles 'perception', 'sincerity', 'beauty'; of which sincerity, or emotional authenticity, is perhaps the most fundamental in that it is the precondition of true perception and true beauty. In this respect, Lewes is striking a characteristic note of Victorian literary criticism. The personal sincerity of the author is often appealed to as the crucial criterion of literary quality.

It is instructive to note that this criterion of authorial sincerity was increasingly rejected by most critics and writers of the early 20th century. Sincerity, it was increasingly felt, could not guarantee quality, and, as with the verse on gravestones, the most sincere expression may be the most banal. The falling fortune of the word 'sincerity' as a critical

term over the late 19th and early 20th centuries is an index of what both authors and critics were seeking from literature. The preoccupation with truth of feeling has been displaced or so transformed as to be no longer recognisable. If, therefore, we wish to appreciate something of the gulf that divides modern criticism and fiction from those of G. H. Lewes and George Eliot, it will be helpful to consider more closely why the literary concern for true feeling, and the corresponding critical criterion of 'sincerity', were displaced.

The mid-Victorian novel was beginning to fall apart by the 1880's and was only gradually superseded by the new forms of Joyce, Lawrence, Conrad and Virginia Woolf. The Victorian novel, in other words, was not suddenly overtaken by the early modern generation, it had already begun to collapse from internal contradictions. Very broadly, we may say that the concern in Dickens and Eliot for individual moral growth and emotional maturity depended on an implicit cultural consensus as to what these things were. Central conceptions such as 'egoism' or 'duty' represented for these writers universally valid moral principles; however varied and problematic their practical applications might be. But by the latter decades of the 19th century even these apparently fundamental and universal moral values were being threatened by emergent social groups for whom such moral imperatives were either irrelevant or actually oppressive. Most notably the industrial working class and increasingly emancipated women could not express their experience or their view of the world within the old terms. George Eliot's great effort had been towards cultural unification. By the end of Middlemarch the different social levels and moral types of the book have all been absorbed into the common image of the river of history. More philosophically, she weaves the different intellectual threads of science and religion into the overall web of her fiction so that it combines the objective veracity of the one with the moral and visionary force of the other. But this remarkable effort to understand life in its most universal spirit could not survive the

expressive demands of those social elements which were, or felt, disadvantaged within her totalising conception. Indeed, with each generation in a culture, it may be precisely those principles that seem at the time most securely universal which strike later generations as most historically limited. And so it is precisely the attempt in Eliot and Dickens to speak for a whole society which seemed so dangerous or unreal to some of their successors. Hence the totalising, comprehensive ambition of the classic mid-Victorian novel gradually became impossible as the social reality had to be perceived in an increasingly relativistic way. And this partly explains why the emotional education of individual characters could less readily be invested with a universally representative meaning. Furthermore, there were fundamental changes occurring in several areas of thought which reinforced this displacement of the individual self. And these intellectual developments very directly affected modern conceptions of literature. I am thinking here of the modes of analysis associated with Karl Marx, with Sigmund Freud and with the modern study of language. To speak once again in very summary terms, the common element in each of these different areas is their threat to the importance traditionally accorded to individual personality.

In practical terms we could perhaps characterise the consequence of these changes by modifying a famous phrase of Eliot's contemporary, Matthew Arnold. Arnold formulated the universalist conception of literature by saying that great literature gives us access to the 'best that has been thought and said'. A modern critic, by contrast, is likely to look on earlier literature as simply the record of what has been thought and said. And the record may be most interesting for its symptomatic value; its unwitting revelation of what the author did not mean to say. As the assumed power of the individual personality has been undermined, as the moral self becomes assimilated to larger social, psychological and even linguistic processes, so critics tend to discount the author's conscious expressive purpose and analyse the latent or unconscious significance of the work.

It seems, then, that some of the most distinctive and influential aspects of modern critical thinking are strongly opposed to a concern such as George Eliot's for individual authenticity and maturity of feeling. George Eliot and G. H. Lewes inherited the enlightenment attempt to preserve a traditional ethical identity within a secular philosophical outlook and it may be that this whole phase of culture based on the emotionally responsive individual may finally be coming to a close.² However, it is by no means self-evident that this must be so and faced with this pluralistic inheritance there are two opposite dangers for modern readers. The first is to adopt dogmatically the new style of philosophical analysis according to which the moral preoccupation and representational realism of George Eliot are to be seen as naive. In fact the supposed naivety of 19th century realist novelists seems more of an article of faith than of critical demonstration for some contemporary commentators. The other extreme possibility is to reject all these recent modes of analysis as merely perverse; the product perhaps of an institutionalised intellectualism in which the career structure places a mistaken value on a quasi-scientific conception of original research.