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DEBASING THE BIOGRAPHICAL CURRENCY

by Graham Handley

Early in 1988 I was asked by a publisher in Bristol to write a book called George Eliot: The State of the Art. It was to be largely a survey of criticism, scholarship and biography ranging from contemporary responses to the novels as they appeared right through to the middle of last year (1989), the 170th anniversary of George Eliot's birth. The joy was, however, that it took me back to the works themselves as I checked what had been said; and it took me back to the Letters in Haight's edition. But some of the secondary literature - the 'criticism' which passes for evaluation, the 'fiction' which passes for biography surprised me: I came to realise that George Eliot, elevated into the great tradition from which she is unlikely to be displaced, was the victim of a continuing industry of sensational production. We are told that D.H. Lawrence, having great difficulty in finding a publisher for Women in Love, even tried to place it with Mills and Boon: no such difficulty has attended the stream of 'biographers' who have given Marian Evans the romantic treatment of which the romantic publishers would certainly approve.

It is true that the outward facts of Marian's life read like a novel, since she lived unmarried with the man she loved for twenty-four years, he supported her in her ambitions and creativity to become a great writer, she attained eminence, was a literary lawgiver, her moral prescriptions accepted by society and, after her partner's death, she married a friend twenty years younger than herself, only to die six months later. It is the stuff of romance, particularly when one bears in mind the fact that George Eliot was living within the confines and strictures of the Victorian period, which took its moral stance from 'our little humbug of a Queen', as Marian Evans described her in 1848. And after George Eliot's death in 1880 biographers as well as critics were quick to discover that capital could be made out of George Eliot's 'marriage'; to use the current cliché, there is still plenty of mileage in her. Before the end of this century I have little doubt that there will be at least another 50 books on her, from the esoterically critical to the indulgently biographical. In the latter, the purveyors will claim to know her; but, to reverse Lewes's phrase, to know her is to lose her. Marian Evans is to be found in her letters, and not in family or local gossip at the remove of three or four generations: George Eliot is to be found in her books. Marian Evans, writing anonymously for the Westminster Review in January 1852 on

Carlyle's Life of Sterling, defined her own attitude to biography, arguing for 'a real "Life"', setting forth briefly and vividly the man's inward and outward struggles, aims and achievements, so as to make clear the meaning which his experience has for his fellows But the conditions required for the perfection of life writing, - personal intimacy, a loving and poetic nature which sees the beauty and depth of familiar things, and the artistic power which seizes characteristic points and renders them with life-like effect, - are seldom found in combination.' It is asking a lot, and most biographers fall well short of this ideal either in approach or practice. Publishers ask or are asked, and when we read some of what is printed we are reminded of another of George Eliot's untender sayings (this time in a letter to Edward Burne-Jones in March 1873), 'A nasty mind makes nasty art, whether for art or any other sake. And a meagre mind will bring forth what is meagre.' She could not know how she would be diminished by meagre minds. There are of course exceptions. Mathilde Blind's appraisal (1883) pre-dates Cross and takes up astringent feminist position on some issues raised by George Eliot's work. The neglected Mary Deakin wrote an excellent study of George Eliot's early life (1913), while in 1936 Blanche Colton Williams produced a sensitive and responsible biography based on source material. But running parallel to these are the execrable The Inner Life of George Eliot (1911) the first 'psychobiography', by Charles Gardner: in 1932 Emilie and Georges Romieu produced The Life of George Eliot (translated by Brian Downs) and in 1939 Simon Dewes published Marian: The Life of George Eliot. This runs through to Ina Taylor's George Eliot: Woman of Contradictions (1989).

Here is an extract from the opening of the Romieus' book:

"The farm, shrouded in mist and night, dozes amid the unbrotten quiet of the fields. One eye only blinks out upon its tilth. It is the peaceful hour when Robert Evans makes up his agent's accounts - a long and heavy job, for he is more skilful at drawing the furrow than the sum of a column of figures, and on a low chair near the fire Mrs. Evans sits busily mending the household linen, a huge task which she tackles with courage and good humour.

"But this evening Mr. Evans is alone in the large, bare very clean room whose finest ornament is the tall cupboard of heart of oak which, in days gone by, he made with his own hands

"Robert Evans has put his spectacles across his nose, has passed his pen back and forth across his grizzling hair; then he turns over the pages of the Family Bible. He does not stop to read the text. He opens it at the unprinted pages where for generations past his ancestors and then himself have set down the memorable events of their humble lives.

"All concentrated on his task, like a child, with head bent down he slowly writes:

'Nov 22, 1819, Mary Ann Evans was born at Arbury Farm at 5 o'clock this morning.'

"A girl ... Obviously, he would have preferred a boy; for the soil needs arms, not petticoats; but we must accept what the Lord gives." (pp.13-14)

It is a Hollywood opening, though a few years too early for Walter Pidgeon and Greer Garson to play Robert and Christiana Evans. It is soap, its authenticity spurious, its arms and petticoats a wishy-washy appraisal of what constitutes basic economics. How would Marian have classified it if she had written an article called 'Silly Biographies by Silly Biographers'? Perhaps it would have been The Farm and Family species, or have its own Ambridge or Emmerdale nineteenth century identification.

We must allow that it has narrative expectation: How will Mary Ann grow up? What was it like to be only a girl? And will Robert ...? Some readers of the thirties were undoubtedly hooked. Seven years later they might have read this:

"... Robert sent his children to bed and sat under the lamp in the parlour and then got up and walked about the room and took the great Bible down from its place on the dresser and put it on the table and turned the leaves until he found the blank sheets at the end where the tale of the births and deaths of his family was written.

"He sat staring at it. He read the names again and again. His two marriages. The death of Harriet. His four children. If he should have to write down a death as well as a birth! And the clock ticked on, while upstairs there were those muted movements that he had come to dread, and perhaps he prayed inarticulate prayers, until, at last, they came down to tell him

"He had a daughter. The mother was well. And suddenly, when he heard that, he became his usual, solid, strong self again and he took his pen and wrote in the Bible under the birth of Isaac:- 'Nov 22nd, 1819, Mary Ann Evans was born at Arbury Farm at five o'clock this morning.'

"Already it was beginning to show a glimmer - a very faint glimmer - of light in the east. There was no time to go to bed now. There was another mouth to feed: a mouth that he and Christiana welcomed.

"Doggedly, having replaced the Bible on the dresser, Robert Evans put on his boots and went out to work."

(Marian, pp46-7)

'And it's dogged as does it!', as one of Trollope's characters remarks at a crucial moment in The Last Chronicle. Perhaps Marian would have been moved to call this the Daft and Dogged species. Biography? No, of course not, but the fictional variant is interesting, isn't it? Here at least the girl-child is welcome.

Fifty years on from this Ina Taylor's book on Marian Evans appeared. I say Marian Evans, because George Eliot the writer is absent from the book, which is concerned to represent Marian Evans (or Marian Lewes) the woman. Barbara Hardy, the best English critic of this century on George Eliot, refused to review Mrs. Taylor's book on the grounds that it was wrong to review a bad book when so many good books never got a mention. I am not concerned here to review it myself, since this was ably done by Beryl Gray last year in The Fellowship Review and in The Spectator article she wrote. Others who know about George Eliot - like A.S. Byatt and Margaret Drabble - have reviewed it unfavourably (A.S. Byatt called it the worst book of the year in The Independent), but there has been some praise. Here is an extract from Mrs. Taylor's book:

"Far from being the aged scholar she had imagined, Joseph Brezzi was a handsome Italian in his early thirties, who came from Piedmont but claimed descent from an aristocratic Italian family. The twenty-year-old Marian Evans, whose limited experience of eligible men had been restricted to clerics and her brother's hunting cronies, was bowled over by the suave European. The highlight of her week was that delicious moment when Brezzi's horse could be seen walking up the drive and she could anticipate

a full hour in the company of her beloved. Not surprisingly with her affections engaged so strongly, Mary Ann's German progressed at an astounding rate. Lessons in Italian were also booked to give her more time in the presence of this attractive male. 'I am beguiled by the fascinations that the study of languages has for my capricious mind, and could e'en give myself to making discoveries in the world of words,' was her explanation to Maria Lewis."

This is obviously the fantasy and footnote genre: 'explanation'? The footnote implies a confession: the text of the letter is straightforward, with Mrs. Taylor failing to detect the self-mocking note in Mary Ann's tone, a note which is found quite often when she knows she is taking herself too seriously. There is, of course, no footnote on love, Brezzi or Mary Ann's reactions. There can't be.

Biography is not pop or soap: it is a serious investigation of the person and his or her achievements. It demands a high level of dedication and integrity from the biographer, the ability to resist the spurious, the sensational, to report the facts, based on evidence and not on hearsay, or family gossip or any of the seductive conveniences which fall handily to the pen. Above all, the biographer must resist the temptation to 'make' a figure of his or her own, created from sympathetic affinity or even dislike. The biographer's own style should reflect, in accuracy and clarity and taste, a literary quality consonant with its subject. Look at the three extracts quoted in this essay, and you will see that each in its own way is guilty of bathos, cliché and sentimental excess.

There are two modern biographies of George Eliot which are worth reading. These are Gordon Haight's George Eliot: A Biography (1968), reprinted in Penguin Books in 1985. The other is a brilliant psychobiographical investigation by Ruby Redinger: George Eliot: The Emergent Self (1975). Haight gives a full picture of the period and the social and intellectual climate in which Marian Evans and George Eliot lived: Dr. Redinger offers an intelligent and documented interpretation of the development of Marian Evans's (and George Eliot's) mind and emotions. Each biography lacks, I think, the wit and wisdom of the great biographies in our time - Richard Ellmann's of Joyce, George Painter's of Proust, Michael Millgate's of Hardy, or even the whimsical individuality of Quentin Bell's of Virginia Woolf. George Eliot (and Marian Evans) has been shabbily treated by many of her biographers: the great critical biography, linking the life more firmly with the works, has yet to be written.