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## Review of George Eliot's Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings

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*BOOK REVIEW*  
*by Graham Handley*

**GEORGE ELIOT'S SELECTED ESSAYS, POEMS AND OTHER WRITINGS.**

**Edited by A.S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren. With an Introduction by A.S. Byatt.**

Penguin Classics 1990. £6.99

In 1963 Thomas Pinney published his edition of *The Essays of George Eliot*, a meticulous, scholarly and conservative selection. It was a major contribution to George Eliot studies, coming as it did in the wake of her rediscovery, more properly re-evaluation, through F.R. Leavis, Joan Bennett, Barbara Hardy, W.J. Harvey and others. Gordon Haight had discovered her for himself in the 1930's, and devoted the rest of his life to editing her letters, writing her biography, encouraging scholars and critics and initiating the Clarendon edition of her works. Pinney is in the immediate Haight tradition, clear, concise, admirably relevant: his introduction to the *Essays* is masterly, direct, consummately informed. It is no discredit to him to observe that this Penguin Classics selection does more than he did, for the editors have extended his brief, as will be apparent from the title.

For most readers George Eliot's writings consist of a handful of novels, recalled from school or college or university study: they are occasionally dramatised for radio or television, even more occasionally filmed, as recently with *Silas Marner*. Outside of a scholarly elite, she is hardly known as an essayist, reviewer, writer of verse or translator. Therefore this edition, which reprints much of Pinney (with suitable recognition of his quality) is invaluable, since it includes additional material in the shape of poems (or extracts from poems), more reviews and letters which shed light on her attitudes towards Positivism, as well as her happy, wonderfully relaxed and warm Ilfracombe journal. The range reflects her development, her interests, relates to her fiction, and contains the kind of informative notes (not in Pinney) which the general reader requires if he is to understand her. Marian Evans was learned, almost obtrusively so, before she became George Eliot. Many readers are put off by the chapter mottoes in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, let alone the evidence of esoteric saturation which threatens to submerge the narrative line of *Romola*. And I suspect that some readers are put off by titles like 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming' or 'Woman in France: Madame de Sable' because of their own period

ignorance. This edition, with its exemplary introduction and the good sense of its notes - neither pedantic nor ostentatious - presents the best of George Eliot outside her fiction in the best of forms, readily portable, sympathetically conceived, intellectually stringent. We see what Mary Deakin claimed for her as early as 1913, which is that her writing before she became a novelist is intimately connected with her later practice. George Eliot did not suddenly emerge full-winged from the chrysalis of Marian Evans: she was already an outstanding writer of rational discipline and humanistic concern, as these essays show. She was a relaxed and observant student of nature and human nature, as the Ilfracombe journal shows, with its whimsical range from the commonplace to the scientifically exact. And in this selection the extracted translations from Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1846) and Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1854) show her dedication, her intellectual stamina, her sympathetic affinity, as profoundly developmental. Strauss was gifted to her, and became a labour without the continuing corollary of love: Feuerbach was her gift to herself, sympathetic, humanistic and capable of bearing the transference of her earlier Christian affiliations. His beliefs lasted throughout her life and were to colour her fictional lives. If Nuneaton and Coventry had shaped her, London made her: from the high attics of Geneva to 142 Strand was more than a merely geographical journey. If Chapman, his wife and mistress caused her emotional and sexual problems, the compensations were great: positive contact with radical thinkers and writers, a milieu which stimulated her own writing and enabled her to judge that of others, a climate of debate and evaluation. Undoubtedly the greatest compensation of all was Lewes, and with emotional fulfilment despite the social and moral penalties, came the abiding assurance of being wanted and, in time, of finding herself and her identity as a writer. She had come a long way from the evangelical wing of Anglicanism, from the time when she poured out her narrowness to her old teacher Maria Lewis: and she had come quite a distance from her Coventry friends Charles and Cara Bray and Sara Sophia Hennell, whose enlightenment did not extend initially to her commitment to Lewes. They remained her friends with no full comprehension of her complexity, and when she told them in 1859 that she was the authoress of *Adam Bede*, their astonishment was an index to their ignorance. There are friends and friends, and we grow away from those we valued so much and who we thought understood us so well. In Marian's case her expansion - of sympathies, of intellect, of personal and wide humanitarian concern - carried her beyond those friends who had initiated the first phase of that expansion when she had met them in 1841. Her celebrated remark towards the end of her life on the peremptory primacy of duty was practically applied in their case: she maintained the birthday letters and an interest in Cara's writing, but her strict integrity made her scrupulously critical of Sara's ambitious spiritual polemics.

The critical biography which has yet to be written about George Eliot, integrating the life and the work, and these works in particular, will avoid, one hopes, too much scholarly saturation on the one hand, or irresponsible fictional indulgence on the other, George Eliot has been over-subjected to both. The lamentable treatment by Ina Taylor in 1989 was, in a curious way, complemented by Valerie Dodd's *George Eliot: An Intellectual Life* in 1990, though the latter is a valuable and responsible study in its own right. But it places George Eliot in the choir inaccessible instead of the choir universal, whereas this Penguin Classics selection brings her to us, in her words, at particular periods in her life, just as her novels do in their fictional extensions of her personality. A.S. Byatt's introduction is superb. She cites William Hale White's conviction that she was 'sceptical' when he knew her in the early 1850's at 142 Strand. She charts her co-editorship of the *Westminster Review* from Chapman's purchase of it in 1851. She edited ten numbers of the periodical and, although she probably wasn't paid, 'it transfigured her life'. The prospectus she issued was reformist in tone: 'It advocated progress towards universal suffrage and reform of the judiciary, and a national system of education'. Space was to be made available for those who disagreed with the views of others. A.S. Byatt's assessment of the essays George Eliot wrote for the *Westminster Review* is that they had 'a new intellectual authority, freedom and sense of excitement', and she states further 'these essays are also at times savagely ironic, often very funny, and have a speed and sharpness that is frequently less remarked on'. She stresses George Eliot's capacity for 'ferocious, witty and energetic rejection', and regards 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' as the definitive rejection preparatory to her own fiction. She observes 'She was a complex woman, at once freely independent and timidly clinging, powerfully intelligent and full of a compelled artistic ambition that sprang both from "feeling" and the mind'. There is sensitive particularity here, A.S. Byatt seeing in the essay on Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft 'mirrors for her sense of herself'. She analyzes further sympathies and rejections, stressing George Eliot's concern for accuracy of language, her realism, her conception of art ('Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot'.) A.S. Byatt brilliantly defines George Eliot's spiritual/intellectual position: 'The young George Eliot was an evangelical Anglican; the growing George Eliot, compelled by Charles Hennell's *Inquiry into the Origins of Christianity*, by Strauss and by Feuerbach, was resolutely anti-Christian; the mature George Eliot saw Christian belief and morality as forms of human experience that must be studied and valued as part of our natural history'.

The subtlety of A.S. Byatt's introduction is seen particularly in the section on *Incarnation*: here she says that the debate about the 'divine and the human, the

infinite and the finite, is inextricably connected, consciously and unconsciously, to the development of the form of the novel'. Secular narrative replaced Biblical narrative, interest in individuals replaced interest in divinity. The influence of Feuerbach in its essentials is evaluated: there is an excitement in reading him, and George Eliot's translation reads 'easily and urgently'. A.S. Byatt indissolubly connects the early writer with the great novelist: 'The voice of the narrator of *Middlemarch* is more mannered than that of the brilliant essayist; it speaks with a universalizing 'we' for the organic community, whereas the essayist (vide 'Madame de Sable' or 'Heinrich Heine') often poses as a witty male. But the continuity is strong, and the essays and translations tell us vital things about the tone of the art'. And, we might add, about the woman, her expanding life, the natural impetus of her emergence.

A.S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren have provided the ideal framework for our appreciation. The printing of the Prospectus in 1852, the same year in which *Bleak House* began publication in monthly parts, also asks for 'A thorough revisal of the Ecclesiastical Revenues, with a view to their national and equitable use in promoting the intellectual and spiritual advancement of the people'. Nearly 150 years on, we ponder the radical tenacity, the bold confrontation, the moral and social probity which spoke out beyond the constraints of money, or the degradations of expediency, free from the seductions of advertising and the corruptions of our modern press, more particularly the tabloid sections of it. It is not just the high-mindedness that strikes us, but the inherent quality of truthfulness and integrity which George Eliot brought to everything she wrote and which is emblematic in this selection. And again we see how her new life influenced her writing. Here is an extract from 'Woman in France: Madame de Sable': 'But it is undeniable, that unions formed in the maturity of thought and feeling, and grounded only on inherent fitness and mutual attraction, tended to bring women into more intelligent sympathy with men, and to heighten and complicate their share in the political drama'. This was written some five or six weeks after she began to live with Lewes. By the time it was published (October 1854) one suspects that he was as actively encouraging as was Madame de Sable, by showing 'that sympathy and appreciation which are as genial and encouraging as the morning sunbeams'. And perhaps her own sympathetic recognition of Madame de Sable, and the conscious loss of her own relationships in these years, moved her to write 'she was not a genius, not a heroine, but a woman who men could more than love - whom they could make their friend, confidante, and counsellor; the sharer, not of their joys and sorrows only, but of their ideas and aims'. There is, moreover, a striking plea - 'Let the whole field of reality be open to woman as well as man'. What we receive from this essay is George Eliot's ability to combine learning - intellectual

evaluation - with sympathetic affinity - humanitarian concern. These are also the twin peaks of her achievement in fiction.

Space precludes any further detailed treatment of the selection given here. The attack on Dr. Cumming and the particularising of his ignorance is rhetorical and sustained. The evaluation of Heine is beautifully poised, sensitive, warm with association, at the same time acknowledging his vituperation, his bitterness, his lyricism, his 'heightened sensibility', his wit. Occasionally she injects a little of her own; 'The German language easily lends itself to the purposes of poetry; like the ladies of the Middle Ages, it is gracious and compliant to the Troubadours.' Irony runs the length of 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' though George Eliot's toothache at the time may be in part responsible for the occasional venom of the stings. 'The Natural History of German Life' is intimately connected with the natural history of her own fiction. The Ilfracombe Journal is among other things a slice of mental and emotional autobiography, another honeymoon (and I suspect there were many): the reviews show that stringency of mind, that application of disciplined and principled standards, that integrity and sanity which places truth above cosmetics. I was particularly pleased to see printed here her notice of Ashford Owen's *A Lost Love*, one of the minor classics of Victorian fiction, still beyond the reach of publication in our own time: it is a novel as quietly insistent and movingly complete as *The Rector's Daughter*.

Selections from the poems are also included, and although I am inclined to say that the poetry is in the novels and not the verse, no account of George Eliot (and her writings are her account) can afford to omit the end-products of her obsessional belief that she was a poet. We are nothing without our failures and delusions: the verbal blemishes of the great writer often merit more than the occasional intellectual scratch, as so much of today's scholarship exemplifies. And the 'Brother and Sister' sonnets, those reflex nostalgic ironies of a mind that was looking backwards (and forwards and sideways) to the end, have their own particular charm; they seduce us with the transparent ease of their expression. They carry us to July 1869, before the writing of *Middlemarch* and show us that the mind which could weave that particular web and scratch the pier-glass could indulge - so naturally - in sentiment without a self-judgmental or intellectual gloss. If you want to know George Eliot, buy this Byatt and Warren edition: it merits, indeed demands, a hard-back permanency. The stature of classic is rightly given it by the publishers. Taken with her fiction, it gives us the only real George Eliot we can know: she is very different from the fictionalised intellectual and certainly from the biographical fiction we have so often been confronted with.