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Ian Sutton

GEORGE ELIOT.

Edited and Introduced by K. M. Newton

Longman Critical Readers, 1991

This is the first of a series which will 'take full account of contemporary literary theory, providing collections of key modern readings of major authors.... Among the critical positions represented are British poststructuralism, deconstruction, feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism and new historicism'.

Do not despair, however. Things are not quite as bad as they sound. Most of the essays here can be understood with a bit of effort and most of those are worth the effort. They have been carefully chosen not only to include the main schools of criticism but also to cover the whole range of George Eliot's work, and even to convey a real whiff of controversy by juxtaposing critics who radically disagree with each other (McCabe v. Lodge, Chase v. Newton).

What is chiefly worrying the academic world at the moment seems to be the problem of realism. Put crudely, the idea is that most Victorian novelists thought they could and should represent objective reality, whereas according to modern critical thinking they couldn't and shouldn't. It is not difficult to show that few of them held that belief naively and that they were just as well aware of the nature of fiction, the conventions of narrative and status of the authorial voice as any of their critics. J. Hillis Miller and Colin McCabe both devote keen attention to this point, suggesting that George Eliot was in some way making unjustified claims for what she was doing. Their views are answered by Jonathan Arac and,

to my mind finally. by David Lodge in a splendid analysis of certain passages of *Middlemarch* leading to this conclusion: the authorial commentary, so far from telling the reader what to think or pulling him in a position of dominance in relation to the discourse of the characters, constantly forces him to think for himself and constantly implicates him in the moral judgements being formulated.'

'Moral judgements' is a phrase that needs to be said more often. It tends to get overlooked by critics led astray by their own ingenuity. such as Cynthia Chase in her very clever deconstructionist reading of *Daniel Deronda*. Of the other critical approaches promised by the blurb, both feminism and psychoanalysis make disappointing showings. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in a short extract on *Scenes of Clerical Life*. can hardly do more than mention the fact that almost all George Eliot's heroines are women whose men are unworthy of them, who are in various ways misjudged, who sacrifice themselves or are sacrificed. Mary Jacobus's examination of the language of *The Mill on the Floss* shows clearly how Maggie's (female) experience of the world is not expressible in the (male) language that surrounds her. But Jacobus feels betrayed by the end of the novel, where 'patriarchal' values are affirmed instead of being contradicted. With her emphasis on reconciliation rather than defiance, was George Eliot a feminist at all?

Psychoanalysis brings in an even smaller harvest. Two turgid essays try to apply Freud's theory of woman's fantasy seduction by the father to *Silas Marner* and *Romola*. For how much longer will this sort of thing be thought intellectually respectable? Finally Marxism surfaces to little purpose in Catherine Gallagher's piece on *Felix Holt*.

Terry Eagleton has never confined himself to a single critical approach or even to mutually consistent approaches, and his essay on *The Lifted Veil* is a typically spectacular fireworks display which would have astonished George Eliot as much as it does us. He builds up an elaborate equation which makes Latimer's clairvoyance a symbol of scientific prediction, whose real role (it turns out) is to serve capitalism's need to see into the future for the sake of profit. And just as Latimer's gift brings him only misery, so (by a paradox that not everyone will be able to follow), bourgeois science's success in predicting the future will bring nothing but its own destruction, since the proletariat will not survive to be exploited. At another level, Eagleton plays with the idea that sexual knowledge kills sexual desire, and at yet another explores the equation of prevision with poetic imagination, and suggests how it is a model for the dilemma of the realist novelist, who knows but pretends not to know. 'Fiction is a form of paranoia.' All of this is heady stuff. We must all feel that in *The Lifted Veil* George Eliot is writing something deeper, more universal, more philosophical than mere fantasy, so one is glad to have all these avenues opened up. But on the other hand, surely, the whole impact of the tale lies in the context of human predicament and moral choice, not on that of science, economics or the activity of writing. Words like 'generosity', 'human piety', 'love', 'tenderness', 'self-renunciation', which occur in it, are hard to place anywhere in Eagleton's reading.

To readers in doubt whether this book is for them I would say: Don't begin with the Introduction. Go first to David Lodge's essay, which offers real insight into George Eliot's mind and art and will leave you with a new sense of her greatness. Then go to the last two (by Cynthia Chase and K. M. Newton) which turn on the question whether Daniel Deronda was circumcised or not, whether George Eliot knew or cared, and what difference it makes to the problem of realism if she did (this at least is something everyone can understand). Then perhaps plunge into Eagleton. You should by now have enough confidence to tackle the rest.

A great deal of close reading, high intelligence and serious concern has gone into these essays. What is depressing about them is to see how far the language of literary criticism has diverged from ordinary speech. Is it really necessary? Do we really need 'metalinguage', 'catachresis', 'hyperbolic patterns', 'mimetism', 'diegesis', 'diachrony', 'synchrony', 'metonymic signs'? May there not be a temptation for scholars to write like this not in order to be understood but to be understood only by their peers?
