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THE TWENTIETH GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE - 1991
delivered by Jenny Uglow

George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell

The title suggested for this talk was 'two literary ladies' - they were certainly literary, but at various times their contemporaries would have denied that either of them were ladies. George Eliot was 'the strong minded woman' in Carlyle's words, who ran off with G.H. Lewes. Mrs. Gaskell was the author of *Ruth*, burned by two members of her husband's Unitarian congregation at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester because its heroine was a fallen woman. And if George Eliot was strong minded, so was Mrs. G. Her stubbornness drove Dickens, for example, to distraction: 'Oh, Mrs. Gaskell, fearful, fearful! If I were Mr. G., oh how I would beat her!' It was their independence of mind, combined with passion - the way they were prepared to accept the world's criticism - whether of their private lives or their fiction that made them great writers.

They were very different in temperament: George Eliot was undoubtedly an intellectual, while Elizabeth Gaskell, though extremely clever, shied away from abstract argument: she dramatised, rather than theorised. Eliot was austere, though witty and tender to those close to her: Gaskell was excitable, loving company and gossip. Eliot, living with Lewes, was very much out of the world: Gaskell was very much in it, teaching in Sunday Schools, working herself almost to death, for example, in the 'Cotton Famine' caused by the American Civil War in 1862-3. The most fundamental difference, of course, was that Gaskell kept her religious faith, whereas George Eliot painfully rejected hers. But in their writing they come close together in their approach to the novel, and in their concern with character and consequence, truth and morality.

They lived quite differently: Eliot in the 'mental greenhouse' of her fruitful relationship with Lewes, Gaskell in a perpetual scramble of domestic, social and parish life. The journals they wrote for in the early 1850s - Eliot in John Chapman's avante-garde, intellectual *Westminster*, Gaskell in Dickens' family-orientated *Household Words* - also suggest the difference between them. Gaskell, who was a modest woman, admired Eliot's greater power. She was always curious about unknown authors and she found the greatest talent of all in the pages of *Blackwoods* in 1857, in *Scenes of Clerical Life*. By 1859 she had become embroiled in the morass of the Joseph Liggins claims, which became an almost obsessive refrain in her letters. Her open delight in the writing, her distress at finding that the pseudonym masked the notorious Marian Evans, her ultimate willingness to set aside judgement for the sake of the books - all these, which look like gossip and prudishness, tell us much about the unstated principles of her art.

She thought that *Adam Bede* was 'a noble grand book, whoever wrote it - but Miss Evans' life taken at the best construction, does so jar against the beautiful book that one cannot help

hoping against hope.’ Soon she wrote, straightforwardly and simply, to George Eliot herself, saying that since she had heard she was the author she had read the books again, and wanted to tell her once more ‘how earnestly, fully and humbly I admire them. I never read anything so complete, and beautiful in fiction, in my whole life before.’ She apologised for her support of Liggins and - a mark of her tactless honesty rather than her priggishness - added ‘I should not be quite true in my ending if I did not say before I concluded that I wish you *were* Mrs. Lewes. However that can’t be helped, as far as I can see, and one must not judge others.’

George Eliot admired Gaskell’s work, though preferring the quiet realism and comedy to the emotional over-writing she found in *Ruth*. In 1856 she had ranked her with Harriet Martineau and Currer Bell, as one whose work stood out in contrast to the ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, and who suffered from male critics as a result. When she received this letter she replied the same day. Her response was moving and dignified. She had always hoped, she said, that if her books did turn out to be worth something, Gaskell would read them, because she was conscious that her feeling towards Life and Art had some affinity with the feeling which had inspired *Cranford* and the earlier chapters of *Mary Barton*. She had read *Cranford* while writing the *Scenes*, and had turned back to *Mary Barton* on a dim, misty day on the Rhine while working on *Adam Bede*. She was telling Mrs. Gaskell all this, she said, to show what value her letter had, ‘And I cannot believe such details are indifferent to you ... I fancy, as long as we live, we all need to know as much as we can of the good our life has been to others’. Then she signed herself firmly, ‘Ever, my dear Madam, Yours with high regard, Marian Evans Lewes’.

George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell would never meet, but these letters endure as a recognition that despite their differences, they shared closely related aims. One clue can be found in the writers they both admired: Ruskin, Scott, Wordsworth. To Eliot, then beginning her career as a novelist, Ruskin, like Scott, taught the truth of ‘*realism* - the doctrine that all art and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial, reality’. Art of this kind could work change in the world:

The thorough acceptance of this doctrine would remould our life; and he who teaches its application to any one department of life with such power as Mr. Ruskin’s, is a prophet for his generation. It is not enough simply to teach truth; that may be done, as we all know, to empty walls, and within the covers of unsaleable books; we want it to be so taught as to compel men’s attention and sympathy.

That final ‘we’ would include Elizabeth Gaskell. Eliot’s belief in self-education through feeling, through entering another’s experience, was one of the reasons why Mrs. Gaskell so liked ‘Janet’s Repentance’ and *Adam Bede*. She also admired the egalitarian stance behind these works and shared the belief that effective political change must be gradual, rooted in

the consciousness rather than imposed by legislation or forced by revolution. Both writers saw history as organic, growing from seeds sown in the past. Eliot would paint this 'natural' social growth and accretion in her picture of St. Ogg's in *The Mill on the Floss* in much the same way as Gaskell evokes the informing pressure of the past at the start of *Ruth*, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and *Sylvia's Lovers*.

Accompanying this analysis of history went a shared belief in inexorable laws of cause and effect. But here the writers differ, at least in their explanations, if not in the way they dramatise the operations of such laws in individual lives - in Maggie or Ruth, John Barton or Bulstrode. Eliot's explanation was primarily secular and specifically Positivist. Gaskell's was primarily theological and specifically Unitarian, deriving from Priestleyan determinism, the notion of a divine plan incorporating evil as well as good, in which error and sin produced punishment, virtue reward. The workings of this plan could be traced in the histories of nations and individuals, for example in John Barton's fatally mistaken reaction to Manchester's misery, which leads him, eventually, to murder:

I fancied I saw how all this might lead to a course of action which might appear right for a time to the bewildered mind of such a one, but that this course of action, violating the eternal laws of God, would bring with it its own punishment of an avenging conscience far more difficult to bear than any worldly privation.

After the 1840s, as she explored deeper into the 'causes of suffering' probed in *Mary Barton* one can feel Gaskell sometimes rebelling, not against the notion of the self-damning conscience of the guilty, but against the 'justice' of the inevitable punishment meted out by the laws of a severe God. Her unease is evident in *Ruth*, and in several stories which return to the text 'the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children'. She prefers the mercy of Christ to the judgement of the Father, and the message of 'Christ' is also retained, as a mystical idea made flesh, in the fiction of Eliot, the unbeliever, as much as it is in Gaskell's. Their stories literally incarnate fundamental truths about the power - and intense difficulty - of personal, self-denying love, often in opposition to a sterner, arbitrary authority. This, in turn, is related to their common belief in feeling, their insistence that priority be given to 'feminine' sympathy as opposed to 'masculine' judgement.

Some of Gaskell's indefinable discomfort that Eliot's books were written by a woman, not a man, may be explained by the sheer power of the mind she detected, the quality which made her say how 'humbly' she admired her books. Nothing shows this difference so clearly as their 1854 essays prompted by Victor Cousin's book, *Madam de Sablé*: George Eliot's incisive, sweeping 'Woman in France' and Gaskell's personal, anecdotal 'Company Manners'. But these articles also reveal a vital common ground, a longing for women to have the freedom of expression and influence they had in France without losing what both Eliot and Gaskell valued as special to their sex: a lightness, a lack of pomposity, an easy imaginative sympathy, above all a *language* of their own. In their memoirs, Eliot suggests, Frenchwomen of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, freed from any thought of a

literary career, could describe without inhibition 'the tragedy or comedy which was going on before their eyes'. This is very similar to Gaskell's aim as a novelist, and in 'Woman in France' Eliot went further however, stating something which had always been fundamental to Gaskell's fiction. After her now famous dictum that 'Science has no sex', that the reasoning faculties, properly used, 'must go through the same process and arrive at the same result', she adds that 'in art and literature which imply the action of the entire being', the woman writer has something special to contribute: 'Under every imaginable social condition, she will necessarily have a class of sensation and emotions - the maternal ones - which must remain unknown to man.' This, plus physical weakness, 'inevitably gives rise to distinctive forms and combinations.' The only point on which Gaskell would differ - and one which George Eliot herself would modify in *Silas Marner* - is that she believed the 'maternal emotions' *can* be and are shared by man. And that if all men would recognise and admit them, the world might be a very different place.

The fiction of Eliot and Gaskell overlaps in many ways: in the depiction of provincial life, their use of dialect, their passionate interest in the inner, unspoken lives of men and women and in their sense of these lives - especially those of women - as constrained by their social environment and by structures of prevailing ideas. Even in novels that seem quite different we sense that they are working on similar lines - in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Sylvia's Lovers* for example, books written at roughly the same time, where the insecurity of the external world - the bankruptcies in the *Mill*, the Napoleonic Wars and the press-gang raids in *Sylvia's Lovers*, are set against the inner threats of passion and desire within the heroine, and against the encircling, flowing uncertainty of life itself - the flood and the sea.

Both writers, in common with the developmental cast of mind of their times, see human society as evolving, adapting yet subject to the ravages of competition, accident and change. And in *Wives and Daughters*, her last and most secular novel, Gaskell concentrated on a subject which had always equally preoccupied her: not the mysteries of life but *how* to live. The novel bears comparison with *Middlemarch* and deals with the same theme, the struggle between egotism and altruism, within society and within the heroine herself. There are two central symbols of morality in *Wives and Daughters*, the mother and the scientist. One is the emblem of love, the other of patient scrutiny and deduction. They fuse to give the quality that both Gaskell and Eliot advocate in human relationships, personal and social: loving attention. The scientist's approach to life resembles their ideal of the novelist. He looks in a pond or a ditch full of dull, ugly-looking specimens and finds something rare and strange; he focuses on the individual or the symptom in order to analyse the general pattern, he detects slow patterns of growth and change invisible to the casual eye. Novelists too note how different people relate to their environment and the protective colouring they adopt to survive. And, like the scientist of the post-Darwinian 1860s, they can shape their observations into plots of development.

Fiction and science can resemble each other too, Gaskell suggests, in their underlying moral stance, their care for detail, their attention to growth, their awareness of other species, other

types of 'selves'. And the scientist's lens can peer inward as well as outward. Ironically, in *Middlemarch* as in *Wives and Daughters* the actual men concerned turn out to lack any true insight into their own emotions. It is the heroines - Dorothea and Molly - who make that inner voyage of discovery.

Eliot, as concerned as Gaskell with the hidden processes of inner development, expands the analogy between the 'realist' novelist and the scientist in the marvellous passage where she compares Lydgate's disdain for the weak imagination which produces 'indifferent drawing or cheap narration' to:

the imagination that reveals subtle actions inaccessible by any sort of lens, but tracked in that outer darkness through long pathways of necessary sequence by the inward light which is the last refinement of Energy.... he wanted to pierce the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy, those invisible thoroughfares which are the first lurking-places of anguish, mania and crime, that delicate poise and transition which determine the growth of happy or unhappy consciousness.

It is a thought of great sadness that Mrs. Gaskell, who died in 1865 at the age of 55, should not have lived to read *Middlemarch*.