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## Versatile Victorian; Selected Critical Writings of George Henry Lewes

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*Versatile Victorian; Selected Critical  
Writings of George Henry Lewes,*  
edited with an Introduction by Rosemary Ashton  
(Bristol Classical Press, Gerald Duckworth, 1992)

This admirable collection, its succinct introduction indicating the range and quality of Lewes's criticism, is a feast. This is the place to taste Lewes selectively. I like to think that it is true that the best part of an author's life lies in his/her own writing, and these occasional pieces and essays reflect Lewes's vibrant and vital personality, with his unashamed expressions of delight in what he likes and the unequivocal evaluations of what he doesn't. Even when he is subjective we are aware of the play of intellect. He can be provocative, as the title of his first piece in this collection ('Was Macready a Great Actor?') shows, and he can be self-mocking with a sure lightness of touch ('Hear it, ye winds — Charles Kean has cut me off the Free List!'). He can evaluate Dickens's early works with the assurance that 'Boz has hit fame, not popularity, or in other words that the admiration with which he is almost universally regarded, is well-founded'. But his scientific hackles rise at the representation of Spontaneous Combustion in *Bleak House* ('it is a fault in Art ... giving currency to a vulgar error'). Equally forthright and independent though controversial, is the article which Lewes wrote nearly 20 years later after Dickens's death. Read it, and you will see why Lewes made enemies and also why he was so respected. Admittedly, one has to grow back into the critical format of the time, the leisurely review, the long quotations (as from *Ruth*) and the moving and sympathetic account of the life and writings of Charles Lamb in 1848. A year later Lewes savages Disraeli, saying 'His talents fail to win respect. His coxcombry is without grace; his seriousness without conviction'. Any criticism of Macaulay, however, is 'an earnest of our sincerity'.

Rosemary Ashton's introduction prepares us for all this and more. She quotes Trollope's assessment of Lewes — 'there was no form of literary expression in which he did not delight and instruct' — and there are many tributes to Lewes's versatility. The latter is a somewhat diminishing word, but Professor Ashton's restoration of so much that is only available in 19th-century journals is a labour not just of love but of justice. The literary and social personality of Lewes stands forth in the pages of her biography, but here Lewes speaks in his own voice or, more accurately, in the many voices he had at his command. Each tone is revelatory of some aspect of the man and his talents. Lewes is no paragon, but he is a committed, entertaining, sometimes biased but always stimulating evaluator of everything that entered his experience.

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