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Ruth Harris**George Eliot – BBC2 *Night School*, 10th March 1994**

It is said that Napoleon interviewed his prisoners at three o'clock in the morning when their powers of resistance were at their lowest ebb. My video recorder saved me from testing his theory between the unearthly hours of 2.00 and 4.00 a.m. on Thursday 10th March when BBC2's *Night School* presented its resource material on the life, work and times of George Eliot. If I had had to stay awake, however, then I think that Professor Rosemary Ashton and her able colleagues would have overcome my powers of resistance with Napoleonic skill. The material was attractively varied, and concentration was helped by its division into ten sections, the first four mainly biographical and the last six mainly critical.

Interestingly, Gabriel Woolf began the story of George Eliot's life with her death and burial in unconsecrated ground. Her questioning of orthodox doctrine, her tolerance and deep moral concerns made the setting for the first part of the programme peculiarly appropriate, filmed as it was in the cool serenity of a place she knew - Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Church. Against glimpses of stained glass, Gabriel Woolf reminded us of George Eliot's transformations from evangelical country girl to radical blue-stocking to successful novelist. His introduction prepared us for an exploration of her life and background by Rosemary Ashton whose rapid but always lucid narrative was skilfully interspersed with the voices of Gabriel Woolf and Margaret Wolfit. Different voices made for variety: so did different settings and the use of paintings, photographs, and brief clips from an early and occasionally over-coloured film on the life of George Eliot. Three aspects of her life were explored by the three speakers: the 'Industrial Context' of the London that Marian Evans first encountered; 'George Eliot the Woman' which presented the various relationships she made; and a section entitled 'Gossip' which concentrated on her unconventionality, on the 'salt and spice' in her nature refreshingly recalled by William Hale White. Her experiences with Chapman, Herbert Spencer and Lewes must have intensified her penetrating insight into complex relationships between men and women. In an all-too-brief appearance, Professor Gillian Beer discussed why Marian Lewes called herself 'George Eliot', one reason for the 'veil' being of course her liaison with George Henry Lewes. The adjustments of society to her unconventional life, her own adjustment to convention in her marriage to John Cross, and her reinstatement in 1980 when she was given her rightful place in Westminster Abbey brought the story of her life to a close. I have only minor quibbles: why the suddenly displaced picture of the Memorial stone? surely an incorrect portrait of John Cross was shown, and surely 142 Strand was demolished recently and not at the end of the nineteenth century?

On the theme of 'Journalism' Rosemary Ashton returned to the *Westminster Review* and considered the wide and varied knowledge required by reviewers in her day, the political bias shown by periodicals, the severity of their criticism and the freedom accorded by anonymity. On the theme of 'Religion' George Eliot's non-fictional writing was again discussed by Dr. Valentine Cunningham who saw her as a 'European-style intellectual' familiar with Continental theology and philosophy. He compared Marian Evans's serious

evangelical phase with Dorothea Brooke's earnest Puritanism (attractively illustrated by the 'jewels episode' in the film of *Middlemarch*). As evidence of her realistic approach, he considered her careful analysis of the religious lives of ordinary people and the varieties of religious experience. Her unique creation of Bulstrode (illustrated on film) showed the acuteness of her perception as well as the dangers of a faith divorced from humanity. An admirer and translator of Feuerbach, she valued the transition from supernatural to earthly affections and portrayed that transition in Silas Marner's expulsion from the chapel in Lantern Yard and his emergence into full humanity with a child to love. (A clip from the excellent *Silas Marner* film showed his first encounter with Eppie.)

A phrenological cast stood on a table beside Professor William Bynum as he introduced the next theme, 'Science and Medicine'. He described the social status of doctors, the distinction between physicians, surgeons and apothecaries, and the value of Lydgate's education in Paris where medical training was based on hospitals and where the need for anatomical research and accurate diagnosis was emphasized. Lydgate's modern techniques were contrasted with older methods and his technical mastery with his misjudgements, especially of Rosamond whose opposition to his work was given rather too heated expression on the clip from the film. The examination of Medicine was interesting and informative but the discussion of Science proved to be more imaginative - and more frustrating. Valuable comments were made on George Eliot's use of scientific metaphors to describe feelings but I felt that Dr. Sally Shuttleworth, whose work on *George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Science* is so well known, was not given enough time to develop some interesting ideas. Asked whether Darwinism led to optimism or pessimism in her novels, she said that it contributed to the sense of development but also to the presence of fierce competition in which one character preyed on another. She agreed that George Eliot's creative method might be compared with Lydgate's 'expectant method' and referred to her phrase, 'experiments of Time', to remind us that she gave to themes and characters the observant patience of an experimental scientist. I was left longing for more.

In the next section on 'Politics', ably led by an increasingly relaxed Rosemary Ashton, five speakers struck sparks off one another. Dr. John Rignall maintained that George Eliot was conservative rather than radical even though the welcome she gave to the fall of Louis Philippe and her dismissal of 'our little humbug of a queen' sounded surprisingly subversive. Nevertheless the slow progress of reform was what she normally wanted to see. While admiring her personal courage, Dr. Elaine Feinstein felt that George Eliot preferred continuity to 'things broken', and Peter Kemp made the point that she was intellectually radical but emotionally conservative. Her ambivalent attitude to women's education and women's suffrage made for lively debate in which many more astute comments were voiced than I have space to recount. Areas of discussion which would excite the clash of opinions in a seminar included - feminine misuse of power; Alchirisi's sacrifice of her family to her career; the author's reluctance to allow women characters her own achievements; and the enigmatic conclusion of *Middlemarch*. Jenny Uglow maintained that the 'unhistoric acts' honoured at the end of the novel were regarded by some thinking feminists as genuinely radical and that George Eliot wanted to revolutionize relationships by her emphasis on the nurturing qualities of women rather than the competitive and patriarchal.

Another fascinating part of the course was devoted to 'Music and Art', again led by Rosemary Ashton. Leonée Ormond referred to *Adam Bede* as George Eliot's most pictorial novel, her portrait of Dinah preaching on the village green painted as though by a Dutch master. The significance of Dutch art was felt to be its realism and its sympathy with ordinary people, a sympathy that rebelled against the sentimentally pastoral and idyllic and refused to see beauty in thatched cottages with holes in their roofs. Dr. Beryl Gray, whose book on *George Eliot and Music* broke new ground, showed that George Eliot not only presented scenes as pictures but quickened them with movement and sound. Musicality in her characters was not a question of technique but an indication of wholeness - or the reverse. For example, Dorothea Brooke wrongly perceived herself as unmusical, but her receptivity, her rich musical voice and her response to the organ at Freiberg suggested the reverse. Rosamond's accomplishment on the piano, however, was merely imitative, and because Lydgate - musically untaught but highly responsive - mistook her musicality he mistook her nature. In both art and music George Eliot stressed the need to look, listen, define, to be open and receptive even if we failed to understand and were still 'tadpoles unprescient of the future frog'.

With this splendid phrase ringing in our ears, the final stage unfolded as George Eliot's critical reputation and her influence on other writers came under review. Three contributors examined those qualities in her writing that influenced her successors: her nostalgia for the past had its effect on Proust; her psychological perception was admired by Henry James and D. H. Lawrence; her awareness of the biological basis of human personality and society stimulated - surprisingly - H. G. Wells. Peter Kemp maintained that she first influenced men and then much later women such as A. S. Byatt and Margaret Attwood. John Rignall felt that in a post-modern era we were less uneasy about the gaps and discontinuities found in her work, and Rosemary Ashton agreed that we were more prepared to accept a looser structure and also a more sceptical writer who included herself in uncertainties. ('Could Gwendolen have saved Grandcourt?' is a question that has no sure answer.) Finally it was felt that if writers affected by George Eliot could range from Virginia Woolf to H.G.Wells and from Simone de Beauvoir to Vickram Seth, then her influence could justly be described as 'incalculably diffusive'.

The same impression of breadth remains when we reflect on the course as a whole. This is a rich and helpful study of George Eliot which should kindle discussion wherever it is shown. It not only embraces many aspects of her life and work but also allows for a variety of voice, pace and approach by its use of a range of contributors. Its varied techniques, from biography to criticism, from exposition to debate, from monologue to many voices, from the earliest critical opinion to the most recently filmed *Middlemarch* - all these measures serve to maintain interest and to emphasize the magnitude of the central figure. The whole programme is of course in the capable hands of Rosemary Ashton who, like George Eliot herself, sees all round her subject, considers every angle and selects the most significant.