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Graham Handley

*The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans:
George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction*

Rosemarie Bodenheimer (Cornell University Press, 1994),
pp. viii + 295.

This is an important biographical and critical study which takes for its starting point George Eliot's view in 1879 that 'The best history of a writer is contained in his writings – these are his chief actions' (*The George Eliot Letters*, VII, 230). Rosemarie Bodenheimer – who courageously ignores the current equalization stance of referring to Eliot and Evans – begins with an exemplary chapter, 'On Reading Letters'. She observes 'Letters and novels are both acts of self-representation in writing and, as such, may both be taken, to begin with, as fictions.' This is a neat and persuasive way in, though there are a few sporting hiccups: W.J. Dawson, we are told, 'emerges as a cheerleader for the familiar letter as the most intimate recording of the self' (13), while we also note that 'When letter collecting is powered by the desire to revel in personality, George Eliot's productions do not make the cut' (ibid). But of course each of her correspondents is an audience, and her letters indicate her ways of 'directing and constructing her readership' (22). Contrasts with Charlotte Brontë are drawn in 'Constructing the Reader', and while Marian Evans's early letters are 'manifestly adolescent' they are also quite distinctly 'the stuff of which George Eliot's novels were to be made' (38). Sexual frustrations and religious struggles are evident and interactive too. There is a particularly stimulating exploration (which includes re-dating) on 'Letters from a Town Mouse to a Country Mouse' which speculatively links the mode here to that 'curious chapter' which opens *The Mill on the Floss*. Narrative stances towards the reader are examined in the fiction. Superb phrases like 'the piety of George Eliot's realism' (50) must be set against solecisms like 'the next sentence, dropping a thousand watts of intensity' (54) and 'the many shadowy voices with whom George Eliot boxes in order to write' (55).

The chapter on the 'Holy War' is largely summary, but 'The Labour of Choice' contains some fine letter analysis, tracing themes and concerns which are fictionalized. There is a telling emphasis on the representation of Maggie Tulliver, where 'Reverence for memory is a touchstone of the narrative' (110). 'The Outing of George Eliot' (a poor chapter title, just as *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans* is a poor title for the book) marks the release of 'a mind whose keenest instincts were so often to be suppressed or transformed into more acceptable utterances' (120). Again there is much summary, with John Blackwood, Chapman and Liggins featuring prominently. There is a challenging interpretation of 'The Lifted Veil' involving the reversal of narrative gender because the author saw herself through the eyes of Warwickshire residents 'as a satirical violator of other people's secret lives' (134). According to Professor Bodenheimer, Charles Bray was 'once again in the position of deputy gossip controller for Warwickshire' (141). In fact gossip becomes a theme: it 'bursts into the text of *The Mill on the Floss* like a flood of violence' (146).

'Brother Jacob' reads as a sharp but amused epitaph for a period of life that had passed' (151) while 'gossip in *Middlemarch* functions as a mirror of what the subject represses' (156). *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* is much given to exposure: in it 'George Eliot's fearful desire to be seen and discussed by her audiences was turned into confessional comedy and rehearsal for their benefit' (158). 'Ambition and Womanhood' examines themes of performance (the 'Armgarth' material is relatively obvious), but the 'special importance' of *Daniel Deronda* is incisively probed: 'If her [George Eliot's] own high ambition was fired by a fear of repetition, it acted by finding its newness in a more scourging exploration of long-familiar issues' (188). The chapter on 'George Eliot's Stepsons' again includes much summary, and one feels that the biographies of Lewes's sons bulk too large in this biography. But there are some ingenious (and sometimes strained) instances of George Eliot's 'transformations of her parental experience into fiction' (193). *Silas Marner* contains the imaginative transference of her newly-acquired motherhood with the boys (gender switch again in Silas's caring for Eppie), while the factual Nelly Bray and her adoption is fictionalized in Godfrey Cass's attempt to reclaim Eppie. Charles Lee Lewes's adoration of Marian before and after his father's death is pondered. Thornie's story is retailed, analogues are found in Fred Vincy and Ladislaw, while Bertie Lewes connects with Rex Gascoigne and the barely-mentioned Warham in *Daniel Deronda*.

The final sequence on 'Old and Young', the phrase conveniently appropriated from *Middlemarch*, shows 'Queen George' holding court to a variety of worshippers, such as the gusher Alexander Main, the crafty craftswoman Elma Stuart and, above all, the genderly embarrassing and too often proximate Edith Simcox. George Eliot feared biography and turned her back on autobiography, so much of which, carefully layered and deftly disguised, is to be found in her fiction, as Rosemarie Bodenheimer has abundantly demonstrated. In this last section of her study she elevates Edith Simcox's insight by saying 'No one could have had a more personally acute understanding of Marian Lewes's strategies of generalized evasion' (254). The final words of this compelling book, though applicable to others as well as to George Eliot, are convincing and light – 'her only real opportunity for evoking the many-sided truths of her inward experience lay in the imaginative activity of fiction making' (267).

This somewhat uneven book has many virtues. It is direct, sympathetic, imaginative in its own right, intellectually stringent. The author's eye is always on the subject, and this admirably redresses both the sentimental and the idealized and even the iconoclastic 'studies' of George Eliot's life. It is largely free from critical jargon or political correctness or any of the intellectual posturings and pseudo-theory which pass for literary professionalism in our own time. The derivations are from Redinger rather than Haight, while the tendency to summary and the stylistic 'spots of commonness' have ready equivalents in our own shortcomings (or at least mine) and indeed are revealed, exposed, in the personality she examines so acutely. The integrity of this warm examination is obvious. It is the first important step towards a fuller understanding of the intimate motivations of a great writer.