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Graham Handley

George Eliot: A Biography by Frederick Karl (Harper/Collins, 1995)

This is a massive study, what the author calls ‘a topic for a biography’ (x). It occupied four years of his time, during which he obviously saturated himself in his subject, her period, her circle, her letters and all the contiguous material requisite for a full investigation. The result in the mass is curiously unsatisfactory. To adapt Henry James’s celebrated dictum on *Middlemarch*, this is not a treasure house of detail but it is an indifferent whole. Undigested and indigestible, it reminds me of the Empress Messalina’s infamous innuendo (according to Juvenal) that after a night spent in the brothels of Rome she withdrew wearied but not satiated. In a modestly intellectual way I was wearied and satiated but not satisfied when I reached the haven of Appendix A of *George Eliot: A Biography*, and this despite the fact that the narrative generally follows a convincing, reasoned chronological line. Perhaps the inbuilt departures from it are too indulgent, as when Professor Karl draws an analogy between the relationship of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir with that of George Henry Lewes and George Eliot. Lewes, we are told, played ‘Beauvoir to her Sartre’ – ‘Like Beauvoir, he was “on call,” and while there was reciprocity – more than that between the French couple – the balance definitely tipped towards Eliot’ (538).

These departures speckle the text, but the analogies between the works and the life are much more frequent of course, and sometimes even more untenable. Thus Dorothea is rescued by Will ‘from an emotional wasteland’, so that ‘Eliot, here, seems to be playing with her own rescue by Lewes’ (473). It is legitimate to focus on situations in the novels and poems which correspond in some way to situations in the life of the writer, but to read for these as the main entities is, I think, an error of critical judgment. The works are seen as subjective translations rather than intellectual and imaginative creations, but even here Karl (as he might say) hedges his bets, allowing that speculations are not proof (though they are certainly the stuff of this kind of biography). And I have to say that, with all its limitations, this approach is sometimes stimulating and revealing even if at others it is self-indulgent and wrong-headed. Ina Taylor virtually omitted the novels from her representation of George Eliot in 1989, which is equivalent to writing about Lady Thatcher as a housewife and waiving her political iconography. Karl, as I said, has the merit of saturation: he also has the punitive demerit of a command of cliché: Mary Anne ‘knew from her early twenties that she was different’ (xii), Lewes had ‘a very messy marital arrangement’ (xiii), and when the clichés are in abeyance there is another kind of solecism, as for instance this – ‘Chrissey’s husband, Edward Clarke, while prolific in making babies, was less prolific in being able to support them’ (45). There are a number of curious errors. On page xvi John Oliver Hobbs, Lucas Halet, Violet Page and Lucie Aurore should read Hobbes, Malet, Paget and Amantine Lucile Aurore, the latter the Great George Sand, the other three women who adopted male pseudonyms. Typos? Ignorance? And so it goes on. Robert Evans was born at Boston Common, ‘George Eliot was born into Jane Austen’s England and died in Thomas Hardy’s’ (5), and because she lived near Nuneaton and the silk-weaving industry she ‘was very sensitive to any agitation coming over from France

or homegrown' (15). In fact Karl's style bedevils his approach: Mary Anne 'found herself within skewed alignments' (54), Lewes tried 'to raise sufficient income so as to support children who seemed to pour from Hunt and Agnes like water flowing from a faucet' (201), while poor Agnes is later described as 'a haemorrhaging body, into which they poured funds' (282). Rufa Brabant felt that the translation of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* 'could be a collaboration, with her father helping and even Sara pitching in when the going became thorny' (75). There are times in this biography when the going becomes distinctly thorny.

Yet on the page following this we find: 'she (George Eliot) sensed that words carry deep meanings which go well beyond their sense in a particular context. She experienced language as profoundly linked to a whole range of feelings which carry us back into our personal histories' (76). Indeed she did, and Karl does his best to indicate the nature of much of her personal history by a sometimes overwrought attention to detail. (He has not been well-served by his editors. The book could do with being half its present length. Somewhere inside it there is a biography trying to get out.) He is good on the central importance of 'The Lifted Veil' – a kind of quarry for the works which follow – but the stylistic solecisms are running blots on the landscape of our appraisal. Thus Froude's 'fellowship depended on his ascribing to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church. Faithless, he would also be fellowshipless' (99). Some of the section headings are pop aberrations, as in 'One George, One to Go' (171), 'Who Was She?' (65), 'Out of the Valley with Felix' (388) and the incomprehensibly elliptical 'Arrival' (282) and 'There' (304). Despite *Romola*'s 'overheated context and fuzzy presentation' (371) the biographical mine can be facilely dug: 'The triangle here is telling – Romola, Tito, Tessa – is compelling and personally intimate, a shielded version of Eliot, Lewes, and Agnes' (363). *The Spanish Gypsy* has its uses too, despite its 'lacklustre versifying' (436), for although it kept George Eliot fully occupied for three years it 'cleared out the *Romola* mentality and left her open to an English novel' (ibid). There is some good solid work in the sections headed 'Toward *Middlemarch*' and 'Toward *Deronda*' before Karl hits the Laski trail via the trial of Henry Ward Beecher, who had been strongly defended by his sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe: 'The entire question of Beecher's adultery, whether validated or not, opened up the possibility of whether Lewes had been completely faithful. *We are here immersed in intimations and suggestions, not in hard evidence.* As the politicians say, there is no smoking gun' (583).

The italics are Karl's, and it is perhaps fair to leave him there. Although he deduces much from the fiction as reworking or shield for the life, he is not in any way salacious or sensational when dealing with that life. Scholars and critics will undoubtedly use this book, vigilantly checking accuracy and testing the views against their own and, hopefully, against those of other biographers and critics who go unmentioned here. I am thinking of that long line which begins with the perceptive Mathilde Blind, runs through Mary Deakin and Blanche Colton Williams to the late great studies by Gillian Beer and Jenny Uglow. Karl's biography is not a key to George Eliot, or to the various people she was, judging from the identity crises and shifts indicated in this appraisal. There are insights *and* fanci-

ful interpretations. The biographer of a great writer must be mindful of the nature of that greatness, and the quality of expression should be in some integral way an approximation to that of his subject. This means more than saturation, it means dedication, perhaps being spare rather than prolix, discriminating rather than verbally aggressive. Karl spent four years with George Eliot, Haight upwards of fifty: it shows. For all his quirky possessiveness over his subject, Haight's biography and his edition of the *Letters* and the quietly authoritative and dry dissemination of his knowledge of the period, combine to give us the most complete picture we have of possibly the greatest of the nineteenth century novelists.