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Review of George Eliot: A Life

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Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life* (Hamish Hamilton, 1996), pp. xiv + 465

Fifty years after John Cross's hagiographic *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals* (1885), Gordon Haight planned a more forthright biography but first found that it would be necessary to re-edit those letters and journals expurgated by Cross and search out material unavailable or unmentioned by Cross. The results was first the seven volumes of *The George Eliot Letters* in 1954-55 and, in 1968, *George Eliot: A Biography*, the then definitive life. More material has been coming to light since, notably (but not only) the two supplemental volumes of the *Letters* Haight added in 1978, and there have been a number of new biographies, the most recent, Rosemary Ashton's *George Eliot: A Life*. Ashton modestly disclaims any ambition to supersede Gordon Haight's biography 'as a piece of scholarship', though she does have access to a few new letters to John Chapman and to letters of and other material on Lewes, whose biography she published in 1991. She also has much tangential but relevant material that Haight did not (or did not use): letters of Robert and Isaac Evans (George Eliot's father and brother); Henry Crabb Robinson's diary; letters of Bessie Rayner Parkes and Eliza Lynn Linton; letters, the Commonplace Book and engagement diaries of Cara Bray. She has also made use of many GE and GHL Journal entries Haight did not publish, and she has brought to bear significant amounts of relevant published materials: autobiographies, letters, biographies, historical, medical, philosophical studies, and periodicals. Though *George Eliot: A Life* may not supersede Haight's biography 'as a piece of scholarship' it has admirably and worthily supplemented it.

Just as Haight did not merely supplement Cross, so Ashton does not merely supplement Haight. 'As a piece of biographical *interpretation*' (my emphasis) it is in its earlier chapters, convincingly and refreshingly new. If Cross's treatment is purificatory, Haight's is 'gentlemanly'. If Haight saw, as Ashton sees, that 'a tension between the urge to criticize, and if necessary to rebel against, established ideas and practices, and the counter-urge to belong securely in the family and social group is at the heart of George Eliot's life in all its stages' (6), he emphasized the 'counter-urge' – her conservatism and 'feminine dependency' – and Ashton, conditioned by a generation of feminist thinking, emphasizes how often Marian Evans's 'stubborn independence of spirit did battle with her fear or loneliness and insecurity, and won' (70). The 'up-dated' image is particularly noticeable in her years in Coventry and at Chapman's menage at 142 Strand in London, the years of her transition from 'Mary Ann Evans' to 'Marian Evans'. The outlines of the story are well-known: her movement away from dissent, from the church, from all churches; her association with the intellectual, religiously and socially unorthodox society of the Hennells and Brays; her defiance of convention by staying for more than seven months in Switzerland, an unmarried woman on her own; her subsequent sexual and professional association with John Chapman; her humiliatingly ardent love for the cool but friendly Herbert Spencer. What Ashton fleshes out, so to speak, is how commonplace – accepted though not flaunted – sexual 'liberation' was in her social, political, and intellectual environment, not only among the radicals in the Strand but among the seemingly more sedate and conventional Brays' society at Rosehill. Marian's behaviour, then – known within the circle but discreet – was not shocking or unusual, whatever the official or public morality of the

time purported to be. Though Ashton acknowledges the conservative 'counter-urge', she also gives a convincing sense of the radicalism of the *Westminster Review* circle and of the radical young Marian Evans: excited by the new ways of living: discovering that her intellect was as good as that of the important men she associated with; brilliant, witty, daring, a bit arrogant and foolish at times, and, though unorthodox and unconventional, still deeply moral in the best sense of the word, still 'country' and down to earth – an admirable young woman, fallible, unique, and alive. Such a young woman, more than the 'dependent' Marian Evans of more placid portraits, we can believe might in her mid-thirties elope with a brilliant, multi-talented, ardent, ribald, married man, who was no gentleman, and, without the sanction of church or state, take his name, and live with him until his death a quarter century later. Such a young woman, too, might write moral but unorthodox, witty but highly serious, novels that capture 'sympathetically the discontinuities, contradictions, and bewilderment of the Victorian age and its immediate predecessor' and give 'imaginative expression to the excitement and the pain of being caught up in a society in flux' (Ashton 9).

As an interpretive biography, then, the early portions of Ashton's *George Eliot: A Life* has a good deal to offer. The vividness of her treatment of Marian Evans, however, fades once Marian Evans becomes George Eliot. Ashton quotes at length familiar passages from the letters and journals that uncomfortably suggest the 'dependent' George Eliot of Haight if not quite yet the sibylline George Eliot of Cross (though she too appears). There is Lewes protecting her from criticism, her doubts about the quality of whatever writing she has in progress, the delays, the headaches and toothaches, reports of her sententious pronouncements. This George Eliot existed no doubt, but was that all there was? Could Marian Evans have changed her nature as well as her name? Ashton cannot, of course, falsify the record, but summary rather than quotation would at least be a first step in interpretation and the initial distancing might free her sensitivity and intelligence to evaluate the written record. After all, much of the correspondence in the first years of her fiction writing was restricted by two great secrets: her liaison with Lewes and her identity as George Eliot, and the first remained a constraint for years. Even the journals were, as almost all private journals are, quasi-public: not intended for other eyes, but, as a written record, potentially open to them. That the letters and journals which were too revealing were destroyed suggests as much; even Cross did not have much trouble expurgating what was left. When her authorship became public and the nature of her private life widely known in certain circles – though only hinted at from time to time to the general public – solemnity and strict decorum seemed to be required, but surely her earlier vivacity, though perhaps tempered by age and circumstances, had not evaporated. Her wit and irony seldom surface in the record but that they persist is still evident in the novels and they could not have been suppressed at home. Her appreciation of Lewes's salty humour and her sensuousness had surely not been eradicated by fame and headaches. George Eliot and Lewes had lively minds, lively wit, and strong sensuality. They lived together, clearly happy, productive, triumphant, and in love, until Lewes died. Where, in *George Eliot: A Life*, in addition to the doubts and complaints, can we find all that juice and all that joy?

Ashton says from the beginning she is proceeding 'on the assumption that the reader is interested in George Eliot the writer as well as George Eliot the woman' (xii), but Ashton's title is

George Eliot: A Life not *The Life and Works of George Eliot*, and she promises to satisfy our interest in the subject as writer not our (critical) interest in the novels that writer wrote. Appropriately, then, there is no attempt to match her exemplary documentary biographical scholarship with comparable 'histories of the (critical) question', and the names of many critics and titles of many important critical works are missing. Her practice – its contribution and limitation – may be exemplified briefly by her handling of the time-honoured life-into-work procedure of searching for the 'originals' of fictional characters and situations. Ashton rounds up the usual suspects – e.g., clergymen from Nuneaton, Robert and Isaac Evans, Aunt Samuel, (but not, I believe, the Pearsons), Anton Rubinstein – while citing more than once George Eliot's insistence that she did not take her characters from 'life'. 'Such originals existed, as they did for Dickens', Ashton admits, 'but they were put into the alembic of memory, imagination, and association with other experiences, becoming in the process some of the most believable fictions in literary history'; in George Eliot's words, they are "wrought up into new combinations" (205). We regret that she does not use her knowledge of the life to show how the writer creates the new combinations. One of the more interesting trackings of her memory, her reading, and 'association with other experiences' involves, as might be expected from the author of *G. H. Lewes: A Life*, the reading and experiences of Lewes as well. Ashton cites a passage in Lewes's *Life of Goethe* (though it is not listed in Ashton's bibliography) in which he defends Goethe's breaking off a youthful engagement rather than entering into an 'unholy marriage'. Ashton comments that 'George Eliot would depict a similar dilemma (though with a different conclusion) in the Maggie-Stephen relationship in *The Mill on the Floss* the novel in which she deposited a transposed version of her and Lewes's own difficult experience' (133). Perhaps we are supposed to be able to precisely define the transposition ourselves, but the guidance of Ashton's knowledge and sensibility would be welcome: Lewes is no Stephen (though for all I know he may have used attar of roses); what is the role of Philip in this transposition? is the 'different conclusion' of the novel an apology or plea to Isaac or the 'man of maxims' passage a defiance or rebuttal?

Like George Eliot herself, Ashton lingers over the early years – 'Amos Barton' is begun on p. 163 of *George Eliot: A Life* and *Daniel Deronda* is published less than one hundred and ninety pages later – and we cannot help but regret that George Eliot's writing life does not have as much freshness of detail and of interpretation as does that of Mary Ann and Marian Evans. To wish a book longer, however, is not faint praise.

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