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Review of The Power of Knowledge: George Eliot and Education

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**Linda K. Robertson, *The Power of Knowledge: George Eliot and Education*
(Peter Lang, 1997). ISBN 0 8204 3064 1**

This book, volume 61 of the University of Kansas Humanistic Studies series, purports to do one thing but delivers another. According to the blurb on the back cover, Robertson demonstrates that George Eliot had much to say on a number of educational issues that plagued her contemporaries. In fiction, essays, and letters, we are told, she commented on various Victorian educational debates about illiteracy, the desirability of a classical education and higher education for women. In her introduction, Robertson briefly reminds us of some nineteenth-century writers on education: Newman, Mill, Huxley, Ruskin, Arnold, Spencer and Whewell, the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. They all commented on and advocated educational needs and directions, and, Robertson says, they and 'numerous others had a meaningful influence' on Eliot. The result: Victorian educational issues loom large in Eliot's fiction (2-5). But not long afterwards she pours cold water on this argument, pointing out that 'Except for *Daniel Deronda* ... all of Eliot's English novels take place ... at the end of the eighteenth century and in the early years of the nineteenth' (22) – in other words, more or less before the Victorian age began.

People often learn from the past, of course, and perhaps Victorians saw Eliot's novels serving warnings or urging educational reform. But in that case what exactly did Eliot advocate as opposed to describe or reflect when it came to education? In her Introduction, Robertson tries to have it both ways:

In dealing with the education of men, Eliot's novels reflect both the common shortcomings of available schooling and the increasing diversity of educational opportunity. Whether describing a night school for laborers, a relatively exclusive public school, or a university, Eliot advocates schooling which is appropriate for the individual and his station in society. Although she shows that education can be a means by which an intelligent, hard-working person can get ahead in life, she stops short of advocating the concept of equal educational advantages for all without regard for social status, and she certainly shows that individual talents and abilities should be taken into consideration.
(5)

Describing something, however, does not necessarily mean advocating it, and the fact remains, apart from urging people to think carefully and conduct themselves morally, stopping short of advocating is what Eliot usually did. Which is not surprising: she never saw herself as a reformer but an artist in duty bound to reflect the motives and influences already acting on people. Robertson does make this point; that is precisely what her book argues: Eliot believed in the need for education in its broadest sense and usually shied away from particularities. However, here, and elsewhere, Robertson's language blurs the distinction between Eliot the supposed reformer and Eliot the artist.

A similar blurring is seen in discussions on *Adam Bede's* Bartle Massey, *The Mill on the Floss's* Mr Stelling, and *Daniel Deronda's* Klesmer. (On a few occasions, the same incident involving these characters is irritatingly recalled in different chapters.) The strengths and

weaknesses of these three teachers or tutors Robertson sees as indicating Eliot's general views on educational needs and standards. But she eventually concedes that these men 'stand out as individuals more than the majority of the teachers Eliot presents' – which means that they cannot reasonably be used to arrive at conclusions about Eliot's position on educational issues. Weakening her argument still further, Robertson adds, 'Many of the others are described and identified by a limited number of characteristics' (70-1). But who are these many other teachers about whom we can say even less? Mr Crewe from 'Janet's Repentance' is identified as once being an indifferent schoolmaster before becoming a curator and poor Latin tutor to a handful of grammar-school boys. 'The other teachers [who remain unidentified]', Robertson says, '... vary as widely in personality, ability, and background as do Massey, Stelling, and Klesmer; but a significant proportion of them can be accurately described as being of minimal assistance to their students' (71). The conclusion, then, is whittled down to an observation that Eliot disapproved of poor teaching. Jazzing it up by saying '... Eliot shows no mercy in her treatment of incompetent teachers or of a curriculum which is unrelated to the real needs of the student' (5) does not really help.

As the book continues, the purported argument all but disappears, especially when Robertson spends a great deal of time simply recalling that a number of Eliot's characters devote themselves to various forms of unsuccessful or meaningless study and research. Among these she lists Mr Transome in *Felix Holt*. He is judged 'a more pitiable figure than either [*Daniel Deronda*']s Charisi or Mordecai because he is not sustained by his faith nor by a hope that others will carry on works to which he has devoted his life'. Robertson challenges this curious comparison herself, rightly observing that poor old Mr Transome is not really all there (78-9). Elsewhere, too, Robertson either undermines herself or muddies the waters. For instance, the narrator's comment on fellow clerics not being surprised at Amos Barton's intellectual shortcomings is recalled to posit the idea that turn-of-the-century university graduates and clerics did not have to reach very high educational standards (86). But almost immediately Robertson writes 'we have only a limited understanding of the impact their university experience and theological training, such as it was, have on these men in regard to their roles as preachers and as teachers of scripture and doctrine' (89). The equality of higher education, then, is not a significant issue after all, at least when it comes to evaluating Eliot's clerics.

This book does provide useful background information on some educational debates and issues in the nineteenth century, and it is attractively packaged.

A. G. van den Broek