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Beryl Gray
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In Gore Vidal’s Two Sisters: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel, the obnoxious Hiram Backhouse boasts to his unreceptive peers of the admiration that his PhD thesis – How The Spaniel Figures in the Novels of George Eliot – had attracted. It was he, he claims, ‘who made the discovery that in each book’

not only is there a spaniel but the angel dog – they are all glorified such was her vision – invariably turns the plot at a crucial moment, as in Silas Marner when the dog is not petted by the young squire at the start of the novel, demonstrating to both dog and us that the young man’s nature is unloving. In Felix Holt the Radical, however, it is a different story . . . oh, dear, I’m boring you, I can tell. You don’t like dogs, do you? or literature. I should’ve known . . .”

Unsurprisingly, Hiram is thrown bodily out of the room. Despite his charmlessness, however, he does have something of a case: dogs – though by no means all of them spaniels – had notable roles in the life George Eliot shared with George Henry Lewes, and correspondingly in the writings of both authors.

Dogs also feature prominently in the lives and writings of many other Victorians with whom the Leweses were socially or culturally connected. Included among the latter is the Edinburgh physician and essayist, Dr John Brown (1810-82). Brown was the author of the immensely popular story, ‘Rab and his Friends’, which Lewes summarized as ‘a charming bit of sympathetic painting, the hero of which is an old mastiff, and the heroine an old Scotch woman with a cancer’. He was also one of the seven persons George Eliot stipulated should receive presentation copies of her first novel, Adam Bede (1859), listing him with Jane Carlyle, Dickens, J. A. Froude, Charles Kingsley, Richard Owen, and Thackeray. As George Eliot asked her publisher, John Blackwood, to tell Brown, she had wanted to read the physician’s story ‘at full length’ after seeing an account of it in a newspaper, and had thought that ‘the writer of “Rab” would perhaps like “Adam Bede”’ (Letters, III, 13). It happened that the ‘[f]irst agreeable token’ that her novel was going to make ‘just the impression Blackwood had anticipated’ came in the form of the packet from Brown that contained an inscribed copy of his own story. Opening the packet gave her ‘peculiar pleasure’, she told Blackwood (in the knowledge that he would tell Brown).

I have read the story twice – once aloud, and once to myself, very slowly, that I might dwell on the pictures of Rab and Ailie, and carry them about with me more distinctly. I will not say any commonplace words of admiration about what has touched me so deeply: there is no adjective of that sort left undefiled
by the newspapers. The writer of ‘Rab’ knows that I must love the grim old mastiff with the short tail and the long dewlaps – that I must have felt present at the scenes of Ailie’s last trial. (Letters, III, 13-14)

Rab belongs to a carrier who, once a week, drives his cart between a village some nine miles from Edinburgh, and Edinburgh itself. The brindled mastiff is huge, old, and grey like Aberdeen granite; his hair short, hard, and close, like a lion’s; his body thick set, like a little bull – a sort of compressed Hercules of a dog. He must have been ninety pounds’ weight, at the least; he had a large blunt head; his muzzle black as night; his mouth blacker that any night, a tooth or two – being all he had – gleaming out of his jaws of darkness. His head was scarred with the records of old wounds, a sort of series of fields of battle all over it; one eye out, one ear cropped [close] … the remaining eye had the power of two; and above it, and in constant communication with it, was a tattered rag of an ear, which was for ever unfurling itself, like an old flag; and then that bud of a tail, about one inch long… – the mobility, the instantaneousness of that bud was very funny and surprising, and its expressive twinklings and winkings, the intercommunications between the eye, the ear, and it, were of the sub­lest and swiftest. Rab had the dignity and simplicity of great size; and having fought his way all along the road to absolute supremacy, he was as mighty in his own line as Julius Caesar or the Duke of Wellington; and he had the grav­ity of all great fighters.9

While George Eliot emphasizes her love for this canine hero, her reference to ‘Ailie’s last trial’ indicates that the story is also very much one of human suffering and endurance; of human devotion, and human kindness. As Lewes noted, Ailie is indeed ‘an old Scotch woman with a cancer’, whose anaestheticless operation to remove her breast tumour Brown had watched in 1830, when he was a medical student at the Minto House Hospital. With a kind of loving awe, he evokes her particular beauty, and the dignity, patience, and sweetness with which she endured her suffering, recording that her grace and courtesy as she ‘begs … pardon if she has behaved ill’ had made all the observers weep (42).

Ailie’s wound begins to heal, and all initially seems to be well. But, despite tender care by James, her thin, shrewd, worldly little husband, who will allow no other nurse near her, after four days she develops a fever, becomes delirious, and dies. Throughout her last trial, Rab is in watchful attendance – even in the operating theatre.8

James soon joins Ailie in the grave, and Rab so fiercely and successfully keeps the new owner of the carrier’s horse and cart at bay that the man is compelled to kill him by braining him with a rack-pin. ‘Fit end for Rab, quick and complete’ says Brown in conclusion. ‘His teeth and his friends gone, why should he keep the peace and be civil?’ (48)

George Eliot’s response to Brown’s narrative is to the art of story telling, as well as to the dog
himself. It is the response of an author for whom a series of dogs had played crucial roles in
the stories of human lives she had herself already related. It was surely her own observations
concerning the relationship between, for example, Jet and the Countess Czerlaski, or Ponto
and Mr Gilfil, in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), or between Gyp, Juno, and Vixen and their
respective human companions in *Adam Bede*, that prompted George Eliot to ask her publisher
to send a copy of the novel to Brown: to a writer who had himself so closely, and to her so
movingly, observed a particular dog in its relation to people. Her justified appreciation was
not of the story as a ‘dog’ story, but of the fact that the dog *in* the story is a fully realized dog.
And Rab is a fully realized dog because Brown—like George Eliot and George Henry Lewes—
not only enjoyed dogs, but also regarded them as fellow members of society. He championed
them all his life, producing after ‘Rab’ a series of brief, vivid canine biographies, and—again
like the Leweses—frequently weaving anecdotes about individuals into his correspondence.
So conscious of the dog is he that its image pervades his way of seeing: viewed from
Minchmoor, even the ‘great round-backed, kindly, solemn hills of Tweed, Yarrow, and Ettrick
lay all about like sleeping mastiffs—too plain to be grand, too ample and beautiful to be com-
monplace’.

In his role of art critic, Brown’s eye was inevitably drawn to any dog that found its way into
a picture (particularly if David Wilkie had painted it). Dubbed by the Blackwoods a ‘wor-
shipper of genius’ (*Letters*, III, 11; VIII, 230), he took the opportunity, when reviewing the first
two volumes of Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* (1846), of glorifying two geniuses at once by quot-
ing with ecstatic approval (and some added emphasis) Ruskin’s famously anthropomorphic
eulogy on Landseer’s *The Old Shepherd’s Chief Mourner*—

one of the most perfect poems or pictures (I use the words as synonymous) which modern times have seen. . . . Here the exquisite execution of the glossy
and crisp hair of the dog, the bright sharp touching of the green bough beside
it, the clear painting of the wood of the coffin and the folds of the blanket, are
language—language clear and expressive in the highest degree. But the close
pressure of the dog’s breast against the wood, the convulsive clinging of the
paws, which has dragged the blanket off the trestle, the total powerlessness
of the head laid, close and motionless, upon its folds, the fixed and tearful fall of
the eye in its utter hopelessness, the rigidity of repose which marks that there
has been no motion nor change in the trance of agony since the last blow was
struck on the coffin-lid, the quietness and gloom of the chamber . . . these are
. . . thoughts by which the picture is separated at once from hundreds of equal
merit, as far as mere painting goes, by which it ranks as a work of high art, and
stamps its author, not as the neat imitator of the texture of a skin, or the fold
of a drapery, but as the Man of Mind.

Despite this predilection of Brown’s, and despite George Eliot’s appreciation of ‘Rab’, there
seems to be no evidence to suggest that the physician had anything reciprocal to say concern-
ing her depicted dogs. Instead, after initially raving about *Adam Bede* (*Letters*, III, 11), he
infused his criticisms of her productions with distaste, apparently determined to do what he
could to undermine her reputation. From finding her acclaim ‘somewhat disgusting’ in 1866, he is moved in 1871 to declare his dislike of her ‘style of mind and feeling’, detecting in Middlemarch ‘that taint of sensuality, or rather of sexuality, which was so offensive in The Mill on the Floss.’ Repeatedly insisting that she had been ‘greatly overrated’, the following year he goes so far as to accuse her of ‘unexpected gratuitous nastiness’ and of wanting ‘always to drag her readers down to her dead level’. The reputedly gentle doctor’s vehement – even vindictive – disapproval appears to have blinded him to her use of the very kind of closely observed figure that, in his evaluations of art, he celebrates over and over again. Although her fictive dogs arguably make as great a claim on the reader’s attention as many of Landseer’s (and possibly all of Wilkie’s) make on the viewer’s, and are treated with as much fellow feeling as Brown’s own, not one is noticed by him. But the failure of perception was his, not hers: the sympathy that both abidingly extend to dogs, and their habitual promotion of them, indicate a potential affinity.

George Eliot’s view that dogs are entitled fellow travellers is affirmed in her Christmas, 1864 message to her friends Maria and Richard Congreve. Sending ‘double loves and best wishes’ for all the family, she expressly includes Rough (the Congreves’ dog) ‘as I trust you include Ben [the Leweses’ bull-terrier]. Are they not idlers with us? Also a title to regard as well as being collaborateurs.’ (Letters, IV, 172) As I have already suggested, that ‘title to regard’ is a claim that George Eliot fully acknowledges in her fiction from the outset. Jane Carlyle – one of those to whom presentation copies of Adam Bede were sent – certainly appreciated the dogs in that novel, as her ecstatic letter to George Eliot about it makes clear:

In truth, it is a beautiful most human Book! Every Dog in it, not to say every man woman and child in it, is brought home to one’s ‘business and bosom’, an individual fellow-creature! I found myself in charity with the whole human race when I laid it down – the canine race I had always appreciated – ‘not wisely but too well!’ – the human, however, – Ach! – that has troubled me . . . .

(Letters, III, 18)

Jane Carlyle is of course thinking of the dogs that have already been mentioned: Adam’s ‘rough grey shepherd-dog’ Gyp, who makes his first appearance in the second paragraph of the novel; Mr Irwine’s glossy setter, Juno; and Bartle Massey’s wonderfully-observed ‘turn-spit’, Vixen. These are not merely dog ‘characters’, but responsive communicators with, and interpreters of, their human companions. But her letter’s gesture to ‘Every Dog’ embraces also Mr Irwine’s Pug, who dozes ‘with his black muzzle aloft, like a sleepy president’; Juno’s pups; Vixen’s ‘babbies’; and the small lost spaniel that is briefly poor, pregnant Hetty Sorrel’s travelling companion on her pathetic ‘Journey in Hope’ (Chapter 36) of finding her seducer.

Hetty is desperately tired from her hours of walking. It has begun to rain, and she has just rallied after a fit of hysterical weeping, when a covered waggon comes rumbling along, the driver slouching by the side of the horses.

As the waggon approached her, the driver had fallen behind, but there was
something in the front of the big vehicle which encouraged her. At any previous moment in her life she would not have noticed it; but now, the new susceptibility that suffering had awakened in her caused this object to impress her strongly. It was only a small white-and-liver coloured spaniel which sat on the front ledge of the waggon, with large timid eyes, and an incessant trembling in the body, such as you may have seen in some of these small creatures. Hetty cared little for animals, as you know, but at this moment she felt as if the helpless timid creature had some fellowship with her, and without being quite aware of the reason, she was less doubtful about speaking to the driver....

The psychological register of this is very precise. Hetty’s identification with the spaniel, and half-formed perception that its presence indicates the waggoner’s trustworthiness, of course underscores her own helplessness and vulnerability. But the analysis undercuts the possibility that her situation has widened her sympathies: the emphasis is on the dog’s fellowship with her as a lost creature, not on hers with the dog. But, above all, George Eliot’s double perspective allows the animal its own claim on the reader’s sympathy without dimming the focus on Hetty’s plight.

Significantly, in common with all the dogs in Scenes and Adam Bede, the little spaniel had been drawn before George Eliot acquired a dog of her own – testimony, I think, to her instinctive and rooted interest in the animal. Her Pug – a successor to Mr Irwine’s and the first canine member of the Lewes household – arrived as a present (or reward) from a publisher delighted with the reception of his author’s first novel. Pugs were fashionable and valuable, and not easy to come by, but – knowing that it was a pug that George Eliot desired – Blackwood commissioned his dog-fancier cousin Colonel Charles Steuart to find one.

The dog was bought in London (where he had been kept in a cellar) for 30 guineas. Blackwood reported that ‘the responsibility for seeing to its safety has nearly crushed the Colonel’ (Letters, III, 122), and that he was taking the precaution of ordering a photograph to be sent to him. Pug was brought to Putney station by Joseph Langford, Blackwood’s London manager, where he was received by an initially ‘grievously disappointed’ (Letters, III, 124 n. 1) Lewes – though George Eliot recorded his arrival in her Diary with the exclamation ‘Pug Came!’, her only entry for 29 July 1859. Both new owners were quickly won over, however, with Lewes reporting to Blackwood that the creature was

transcendent in ugliness ... in tyranny over G. E. ... Stupid as a beauty; but very gentle, and affectionate. The laughter is Homeric and inextinguishable, excited by his odd looks and ways ... G. E. pets him above petting. (Letters, III, 127)

George Eliot fed Blackwood a series of reports describing Pug’s poses and expressions, and extolling his charms. She was enchanted by his display of

much astonishment at the sight of cows and other rural objects on a large scale,
which he marches up to and surveys with the gravity of an ‘own correspon-
dent’ whose business it is to observe. He has absolutely no bark – but en
revanche, he sneezes powerfully and has speaking eyes, so the media of com-
munication are abundant. He sneezes at the world in general, and he looks
affectionately at me. (Letters, III, 133)

Pug was such a success that Lewes took him to Kensington to show him to Agnes (the wife he
was unable to divorce) and her children by Thornton Hunt. It was Lewes who made arrange-
ments with ‘Nursie’, who helped look after Agnes’s children, to take care of the dog at Holly
Lodge for a period in 1859, while he and George Eliot went first to Wales, and then to
Weymouth, in search of an appropriate location for St Ogg’s on the Floss.

During this first separation from their pet Lewes wrote to Blackwood expressing a wish to hear
the dog’s history from Colonel Steuart’s

own mouth – nay he ought to see Pug – for I venture to say that hitherto he has not
seen that noble beast – but only a larval form! . . . Since his introduction
into literary society he has developed an aristocratic audacity and refinement,
not to mention originality of genius, of which before he had no gleams. He
was un Pug incompris, in Bethnal Green. Seriously, he is 100 per cent more
lively and handsome than he was when we had him. I don’t think he could
have fallen into more admiring hands: he makes us shout with laughter con-
tinually; and we miss him terribly – for we dared not bring him away with us.
(Letters, III, 145)

These are the observations of someone who not only likes dogs, but whose imagination read-
ily and fully engages with them – as subjects, and as companions.18 But that reference to Pug’s
ability to make the couple ‘shout with [Homeric] laughter continually’ tells us as much about
the nature of the Leweses’ intimacy – about their mutual capacity for spontaneity and fun – as
anything else that can be found in their letters and journals.

For the duration of her ownership of him, George Eliot frequently alluded to Pug in her let-
ters. She reports on his progress, his antics, his explorations, and the discovery that he could
bark after all. Like Lewes, she acknowledges that she misses him when they are both away,
and she hopes that ‘no tragedy’ has befallen their ‘very slow child’ (Letters, III, 304). ‘I dare
say he won’t know us again’, she laments from Berne in June 1860. ‘Argus was certainly a
more sentimental dog – but then he was not so “well-smutted”’ (Letters, III, 308). But towards
the end of that year, at about the time the Leweses moved, or were about to move, to Blandford
Square, a tragedy of some sort evidently did befall him, for on 1 January 1862 George Eliot
recorded that Blackwood had sent her ‘a china Pug as a memorial of my flesh and blood Pug,
lost about a year ago’.19

Lewes’s correspondence of the same period is also peppered with references to Pug. Responding to a friendly letter from Blackwood containing the information that he and his
wife 'have four little dogs here and four more entirely useless animals it would be impossible to find' (Letters, III, 131), Lewes replied:

Your picture of your daily life is suggestive of pleasant hours; but I see you don't turn the dogs into account. Four dogs! My dear fellow, how can four dogs be without attraction? I would rather hear Mrs Blackwood's opinion on that point, not believing in your ability to edit a dog. Perhaps the dull dogs have wearied you with too many contributions to make you appreciate justly the genus dog. When you have seen Pug your mind will be more expanded, your sensibilities heightened. Till then believe me

Ever your canine

G. H. Lewes (Letters, VIII, 240)

Lewes's jocosity notwithstanding, dogs truly were his 'passion' (Letters, V, 377), as he told Elma Stuart as late as February 1873, when he and George Eliot no longer had a pet of their own. The statement was accompanied by a request for Elma to send a photograph of her own 'dear beast', Watch. Watch's portrait – together with that of another favourite dog – duly followed Elma's first visit to the Leweses, which took place in the autumn. However, the dog who is most essentially associated with him is not Pug, but Ben, the bull terrier (or bulldog, as Lewes often described him). He arrived early in 1864, quickly becoming the household tyrant for whom 'the most momentous subject' (Letters, IV, 159) had to be deferred when he wanted a stick thrown for him.

Immortalized though he is in the Leweses' correspondence, since the publication in 1968 of Gordon Haight's biography of George Eliot it has been Ben's ignominious fate to be persistently identified as Pug. The tradition seems to have begun with the entry for that animal in Haight's index. This refers the reader to a plate showing a photographic portrait of Lewes, whose hand rests affectionately on the back of a dog lying on a chair beside him (see front cover). The portrait is captioned 'George Henry Lewes 1859', Pug's year – but the dog is Ben.

The confusion perhaps arose from connecting the portraits (there are two, clearly taken on the same occasion) with Lewes's letter of 28 June 1861 in which he asks Blackwood to remember 'to get a copy of Pug's photograph taken that the disconsolate family may recal [sic] him' (Letters, III, 430) – though of course Lewes would not have needed a copy of the photograph if he already had two of his own. (This reminder occurs in the letter in which he also outlines his proposal for the article 'Mad Dogs', which appeared in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine in August 1861. The purpose of this article was 'to clear up some of the current errors on the subject [of rabies] and show what can be done as preventive', so dogs were very much on his mind.) My guess is that Blackwood could not find the photograph (presumably the one he had ordered soon after Pug was purchased), instead providing the present of the china pug six months later. Three years after that request to Blackwood, in August 1864, Lewes's son Thornie wrote from Durban: 'What an amiable beast Ben must be. If you have his portrait taken mind and send me a copy' (Letters, VIII, 321-2). The double portraits of man and beast – by the Queen's photographer, J. C. Watkins of Parliament Street – discussed here were
almost certainly those taken nine months later, when Lewes sat to that photographer on 12 May 1865 (Letters, IV, 192). They therefore present him at the age of forty-eight, rather than forty-two, his age in 1859.

The frequency with which Ben is mentioned in the correspondence of both Leweses testifies to his status in the household. While the limitations of his intelligence are often mentioned, his capacity for missing those to whom he is attached is sympathetically acknowledged, and he is himself missed, as Pug had been, when his owners are away. From Venice in May 1864, Lewes confessed to his son Charles, who was staying at the Leweses’ home, the Priory: ‘I often wish Ben were here – such sniffing! – and it would enlarge his mind. . . . Give my love in the most endearing terms to Ben and a saucer of milk in his mother’s name’ (Letters, IV, 150-1). Two and a half weeks later, from Milan, he writes – again to Charlie, and obviously in reply to news of the dog: ‘Ben seems to be enlarging the circle of his acquaintance: query? Will contact with dogs of an artistic society elevate and refine him?’ (Letters, IV, 152)

Characteristically whimsical though Lewes’s many references to Ben are, they are always to a definite persona. Describing him to Robert Lytton in February 1866 as ‘a synthesis of love and ugliness, and gentleness, and spoiled-childishness!’, Lewes adds: ‘with him (to my sorrow) we never travel’ (Letters, VIII, 366). It is from a letter to Robert Lytton five years later that we learn of Ben’s death. ‘Your remembrance of Ben was touching; but alas! misplaced’, Lewes wrote. ‘He has gone where the good bulldogs go. I wonder whether life in the future regions will be “diversified with cats” – as in this world?’ (Letters, IX, 15) But the most extraordinary testimony to Lewes’s preoccupation with Ben is to be found in the undated, recently discovered, and previously unpublished letter to Jane Senior reproduced below. (An attempt has been made to follow Lewes’s system of indentation.)

The Priory,
21 North Bank.
Regents Park.

Tuesday

My dear Mrs Senior

Will you please hand the book which accompanies this to your eldest daughter with the following veracious history:

Once upon a time, a great many years hence, there lived in the Wood of St John, at a dismal Priory, a small Wise Man with a large Wise Bull Dog.

The Bull Dog, who had a black patch on his left eye, & was consequently named Ben, often murdered fleas, but never the Queen’s English.

He was a Prince in disguise. A wicked magician having transformed him into a Dog. That is why he barked at the Moon, & lived with the small Wise Man, who was so wise that nobody knew how much he knew, you know! He knew which side his bread was buttered, & always ate dry toast. He knew what little girls were made of – ‘much that was naughty & little of nice’.

And he knew
that three Sprigs of Lavender flourished at Wandsworth ‘in human form’!
So he one day said to his Bull Dog: O Ben what shall we do to have a sniff of those Sprigs of Lavender?
Ben looked very wise & turned the conversation. But the small Wise Man, because he was bald, and generally acquainted with the stars, was not thus to be put off. So he said: ‘O Ben! suppose I send a fairy gift to Wandsworth, it may bring a pleasant smile onto the face of the Sprig, & when we meet she will embrace me.’ Hence poor Ben, who was deeply enamoured of Sprig the Elder, gave a jealous growl, and ate up a kitten – for he was particular about his food, and liked it ‘tasty’.
However it so happened that the gift was sent. The Sprig’s lovely face was lighted up with pleasure; the light caught the tinder part of Ben’s heart (NB. Ben is an Irish Bull) and this, flaming amid the fireworks of his feelings, there was a general squish, fizz, suck, bang, sssssss! In fact Ben blew up – nothing remained but a cloud of smoke, which cleared off, & revealed the young Prince in a human form, who straightway led Sprig to the halter & hanged her –.
No, this was what the wicked magician wanted, but the small Wise Man stepped in, & Ben-Prince led her to the Altar & married her.
They lived happily together ever after and had many puppies all with patchies on their eyes so that people knew them to be Princes. Why I don’t know.

This, my dear Mrs Senior, is the history recorded in the most ancient Hibernian M.S. in the possession of

Yours faithfully

G. H. Lewes

There can be no doubt that this bizarre and somewhat disturbing document – part freakish fairy story drawing on werewolf mythology, part punning self-caricature – is inspired by, and immortalizes, Ben.

A few months – possibly a year – after Ben’s death, George Eliot told Maria Congreve that ‘A great domestic event for us has been the arrival of a new dog, who has all Ben’s virtues, with more intelligence, and a begging attitude of irresistible charm. He is a dark-brown spaniel.’ (Letters, V, 238) He had arrived on 8 January 1872; on 5 February he was lost. After that there were no more dogs for the Leweses. Nevertheless, dogs had clearly played a far more significant – and vitalizing – part in their shared domestic, social, and imaginative life than has been generally acknowledged. Intrinsic to the cultural milieu to which they belonged, and in which George Eliot produced her fiction and poetry, they are accordingly crucial to the life, and lives, she created on the page. And so, just as the canine race had been awarded due recognition in her earliest, pre-Pug fictions, so is it indispensable to her last novel, Daniel Deronda (1876), begun when she and Lewes had ceased to keep dogs of their own.

In Chapter 12 of this novel, we see Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt sitting at his breakfast table, his person languorously arranged on two chairs. He is smoking a large cigar (though his
companion, Mr Lush, is still eating) while half-a-dozen almost equally languorous dogs roam about. Fetch, however, ‘the beautiful liver-coloured water-spaniel’, sat with its fore-paws firmly planted and its expressive brown face turned upward, watching Grandcourt with unshaken constancy. He held in his lap a tiny Maltese dog with silver-collar and bell, and when he had a hand unused by cigar or coffee-cup, it rested on this small parcel of animal warmth. I fear that Fetch was jealous, and wounded that her master gave her no word or look; at last it seemed that she could bear this neglect no longer, and she gently put her large silky paw on her master’s leg. Grandcourt looked at her with unchanged face for half a minute, and then took the trouble to lay down his cigar while he lifted the unimpassioned Fluff close to his chin and gave it caressing pats, all the while gravely watching Fetch, who, poor thing, whimpered interruptedly, as if trying to repress that sign of discontent, and at last rested her head beside the appealing paw, looking up with piteous beseeching. So, at least, a lover of dogs must have interpreted Fetch, and Grandcourt kept so many dogs that he was reputed to love them; at any rate, his impulse to act just in this way started from such an interpretation. But when the amusing anguish burst forth in a howling bark, Grandcourt pushed Fetch down without speaking, and, depositing Fluff carelessly on the table (where his black nose predominated over the salt-cellar), began to look to his cigar, and found, with some annoyance against Fetch as the cause, that the brute of a cigar required relighting. Fetch, having begun to wail, found, like others of her sex, that it was not easy to leave off; indeed, the second howl was a louder one, and the third was like unto it.

‘Turn out that brute, will you?’ said Grandcourt to Lush, without raising his voice or looking at him . . . .
And Lush immediately rose, lifted Fetch, though she was rather heavy and he was not fond of stooping, and carried her out.23

George Eliot here presents a full portrayal of Fetch down to the texture of her hair and her expressive changes of posture. Undiminished by her yearning, her inherent splendour is set off by the small, pampered, ornamented Maltese puppy, the petitioner rejected by Dorothea in Chapter 3 of Middlemarch [though apparently later accepted by Celia]),24 while the comic, Landseerian juxtaposition of Fluff’s nose and the salt-cellar is suggestive of that little dog’s appeal and innocence. The primary function of the picture is to expose the dogs’ master through his treatment of them, but the scene is progressive in a way that no painting can be. A Landseer, for example, could ‘fix’ either the pathos of Fetch’s entreaty, or her jealousy, or her anguish. George Eliot, on the other hand, is able both to adjust and monitor the water spaniel’s image (the pronoun ‘it’ yielding in the process to the particularizing ‘she’) as the tension and drama intensify, and to transmit the irrepressible vocal manifestations of the animal’s emotions. The mock-Biblical gravity with which she and the wailing human female stereotype are associated acknowledges the scene’s potential for comedy, but that potential depends for its realization on a humane response to the dog on the part
of her controller. But of course Grandcourt exhibits no redeeming desire to release Fetch from her unnecessary suffering. Instead, his studied provocation of her resolves more positively into the sadism that foreshadows his attitude to, and treatment of, Gwendolen. Gwendolen is no water spaniel, however: thirty-six chapters later we learn that she comes to dislike Grandcourt’s dogs precisely ‘because they fawned on him’.25

Neither Fetch nor Fluff – nor, in fact, any of George Eliot’s dogs (and there are many more than I have space to discuss here) – is glorified (pace Hiram Backhouse). What her writings reflect is the (Victorian) canine’s social ubiquity, its definition and status in her domestic life, its appeal to her sympathies (if not invariably to those of her characters), its claim on her powers of observation – and an expectation of its proper claim on those of her readers.

Notes

4 Ibid.
5 John Brown, ‘Rab and his Friends’ and Other Papers and Essays (Everyman’s Library, London, 1970), 39-40. Subsequent page references to the story will be to this edition, and will be given in the text. The story first appeared in vol. I of Brown’s Horæ Subsecivae (3 vols, Edinburgh 1858-82), and was first published separately in 1859.
6 I am extremely grateful to Ann Watkins, who drew ‘Rab and his Friends’ to my attention before I had given any thought to the fact that George Eliot had wanted her novel sent to Brown.
7 Brown was apprenticed to the eminent surgeon, James Syme, who in 1829 founded the Minto House Surgical Hospital and Dispensary in Argyle Square, Edinburgh. The events in the story are factual, though Brown changed the characters’ names.
8 Ailie’s operation takes place thirty-five years before Joseph Lister brought the principle of antisepsis to surgery. With the presence of a crowd of students, the staff of assistants, the surgeon himself, Ailie’s husband, and a dog, bacteria would have had a field day.
9 ‘Minchmoor’, op. cit., 128. The essay was first published in 1864, and included in Horæ Subsecivae, III.
10 The significance Brown attributes to the dog in Wilkie’s Distraining for Rent (1815) – the artist’s ‘most perfect picture’ (‘Notes on Art’, Horæ Subsecivae, II [1862 edition],
234) – exemplifies this tendency. The narrative Brown derives from his contemplation of the depicted impoverished, distressed family (whose very bedding is being appropriated) includes the dog, whose head pokes out from under his master’s chair. Acknowledging that the animal is barely discernible, Brown is nevertheless able to indulge in an extended fantasy centering on its faithful diligence and protective ferocity, before going on to praise Wilkie for his treatment of dogs generally. Almost every one of the artist’s pictures includes a dog, he claims; ‘and such dogs! not wee men in hairy skins, pretending to be dogs. His dogs are dogs in expression, as well as in body’ (op. cit., 240).

11 ‘Modern Painters’. By a Graduate of Oxford’, North British Review, vol. 6 (February 1847), 401-30. (Vol. I of Modern Painters was first published in 1843.)

12 John Ruskin, Modern Painters, 5 vols (London, 1843-60), repr. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds), The Works of John Ruskin, 39 vols (London 1903-12), III, 88-9; quoted by Brown, op. cit., 404-5. Strong echoes of Ruskin’s eulogy can be heard in Brown’s own praise of another painting by Landseer: There’s Life in the Old Dog Yet (see Horae Subsecivae, III, 303-8). Ironically, by the time of Brown’s review Ruskin had come to regret his ‘implied overpraise of Landseer’ (Works, III, xlvi n.) in the first volume of Modern Painters, and sought to modify it in subsequent volumes – though he continued to find The Old Shepherd’s Chief Mourner ‘simple and touching’ (Works, V, 338).

13 Letters of Dr John Brown, ed. by his son and D. W. Forrest (London, 1907), 188.

14 Ibid, 208.

15 Ibid, 213-4. Brown’s attitude is attributable, I suspect, to his discovery that the presumed male author of Adam Bede was after all a flagrantly sinful woman.


17 Ibid, III, 11-12.

18 It seems fitting that a young acquaintance of his should have compared Lewes to ‘a rather small, active, very intelligent dog’ (Lucy Clifford, quoted by Ruth Harris in her review of Such Silver Currents, by M. Chisholm [below, 96-97]).


20 See Gordon S. Haight, George Eliot: A Biography (Oxford, 1968), Plate X (facing page 364). In vol. VIII (1978; 321-2, n. 7) of The George Eliot Letters, readers wishing to see a photograph of Ben are indeed referred to Plate X in the Biography. However, neither the original, perpetuated misidentification, nor the related, also perpetuated, misdating of Lewes’s portrait, is acknowledged.

21 The companion portrait is reproduced on page 71 of Marghanita Laski’s George Eliot and her World (London, 1973). Laski’s elaborated caption reads ‘G. H. Lewes with
Pug, 1859. "Pug grows fatter and more fascinating every day", Lewes wrote to his sons on 10 November, "but his intellect does not develope [sic]. He is decidedly no genius."

British Library, Add. 75298. I am extremely grateful to Jonathan Ouvry (copyright holder of all unpublished George Eliot and George Henry Lewes manuscripts) for permission to publish this letter, and to Barbara Hardy for drawing my attention to it. It is part of the set Professor Hardy mentions in her report (this issue, pages 70-71) on the *George Eliot: Life and Letters* conference referred to at the head of this article.


In Chapter 55 of *Middlemarch* (1871-2), the widowed Dorothea is visiting Freshitt when the conversation between Lady Chettam and Mrs Cadwallader turns to the subject of (early) remarriage. Sir James conceals his annoyance by playing with Celia’s Maltese dog.

*Daniel Deronda*, ed. Handley, 546.