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Review of George Eliot in Context

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I have a few reservations. Most of the essays are remarkably condensed but one or two have more breadth than depth. In ‘Travel and Tourism’ Judith Johnstone touches on many aspects of the novelist’s travels but omits some complex connections, like those between Marian Evans’s life in Geneva and ‘The Lifted Veil’. Nancy Henry writing on ‘Genre’ says flatly that ‘Brother Jacob’ is ‘underappreciated’, but this is George Eliot’s one short story and we want the genre-critic’s reasons. She makes the interesting suggestion that writing poetry may have enhanced the prose in Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda, again without explanation. Joanne Wilkes’s enlightening ‘Historiography’ leaves out George Eliot’s psychologizing of the historical consciousness, for instance in Dorothea and Daniel, characters more alert to their place in history than anyone in the more extrovert historical narratives of Scott and Thackeray, who wrote from, and about, an awareness of history, but did not interiorize it.

Judith Flanders is good on anachronistic objects in Mr Irwine’s study but I can’t agree that interiors in Adam Bede are done ‘with impressionistic lightness’. George Eliot’s scenery and props are adapted to dramatis personae, sometimes accumulated piecemeal as scene requires, so Mrs Poyser’s dairy is presented in ironic free indirect style from Arthur Donnithorne’s viewpoint, and indeed described in an impressionistic blur, as in ‘such soft colouring of red earthenware and creamy surfaces, brown wood and polished tin’, which contrasts with the sharp-focused image of Hetty ‘standing on little pattens and rounding her dimpled arm to lift a pound of butter out of the scale’. Most interiors are solidly specified: the ‘roomy workshop’ at the start, with carpenters’ tools and Seth’s door without panels; the Poyser’s kitchen with deal and oak tables for family and servants, oak clock, a large rush-bottomed chair, a three-cornered chair, and a rocking-chair, great round pewter dishes lit by the sun, brass candlesticks, two broken jugs, shining checked linen cloth, slices of stuffed chine, veal, fresh lettuce, cold potatoes and cold broad beans; Thias Bede’s death-chamber, with a newly mended tear in the checkered bed-curtain and a white sheet over the small window. Flanders observes the emphasis on cleanliness, but there is much more.

Delia da Sousa Correa (on ‘Music’) seems reluctant to accept George Eliot’s preference for the phenomenal over the numinous. When Daniel suspends self and looks at the river, the experience is neither ‘uncanny’ nor ‘transcendental’, but excessively empathetic, showing a tendency linked with self-abnegation, traced back to Daniel’s childhood and motivating his friendship with Hans Meyrick, relations with Mirah and Gwendolen, and convenient susceptibility to Mordecai’s need for a second self. Sir Hugo’s joke about his weakness for rescuing damsels in distress is crudely perceptive.

There is a large omission: language, philosophy, painting, sculpture, music, but not literature – why nothing about George Eliot’s reading and writing of Dante, Shakespeare, Fielding, Austen, George Sand and Dickens? Harris remarks echoes in Virginia Woolf and
Peter Carey; Henry mentions Gertrude Stein, Woolf, Joyce, and T. S. Eliot; Rignall makes links with Balzac, Flaubert, Richard Jefferies, Edward Thomas and T. S. Eliot (the last in relation to ‘In a London Drawingroom’, one of George Eliot’s better poems) but there is no essay on literary contexts, and the categories of language and genre are the only ones obliging the contributor to consider literature. George Eliot would have written differently without learning Latin and Hebrew, more differently without reading Goethe, Balzac, Wordsworth and Gaskell. We expect social history, science, politics, philosophy and religion to be there, and they are, dealt with thoroughly, often with new insight and analysis. Is the missing category due to the current pre-occupation with issues and topics rather than forms, content rather than art? Our own intellectual environment claims to be expansive but can be restrictive: historicisms and abstracted ideologies encourage the critic to contextualise novelists, poets and dramatists and to read widely in history, science, psychology and philosophy, not necessarily in works of literature. Of course an inclusive discussion of George Eliot’s influential predecessors and influenced successors is impossible, but it can be done by samples, as in Rignall’s book George Eliot, European Novelist.

Several informative essays sensibly subordinate text to context, leaving facts to speak for themselves and the reader to apply facts. A good example is Michael Recktenwald in ‘Secularism’ who disagrees with the suggestion that Victorian secularism was largely middle-class and gives an illuminating discussion of ‘religious defection among the working classes’, while summing up with a tribute to George Eliot’s agnosticism from Charles Bray’s autobiography: ‘She held it as a … conviction … that in proportion as the thoughts of men and women … are diverted from their own mutual relations and responsibilities to an invisible world … they are led to neglect their duty to each other’.

Pauline Nestor on ‘The science of the mind’ discusses Adam Bede’s explicit observation of ‘the backstairs influence’ of unconscious mind; and … ‘the question of will’ … ‘at the heart of her fiction’, comparing George Eliot’s idea of moral vigilance to W. B. Carpenter’s ‘ideal’ of ‘naturalizing the will as a ‘developed reflex’. Nestor quotes Mind: James Collier seeing contemporary literature ‘drenched with psychological metaphor’, and Joseph Jacobs saying ‘the science of human nature’ should learn from ‘the stores of acute observation contained in the works of George Eliot and George Meredith’.

Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi makes a valuable defence of George Eliot’s treatment of women, often found unsatisfactory by feminists because insufficiently revolutionary. She emphasizes the realist enterprise, and by implication, George Eliot’s preference for an historical norm rather than a political ideal or model. Josie Billington in ‘Families and kinship’ makes a strong case for implicit, as opposed to explicit or programmatic, argument in The Mill on the Floss, observing its unusual emphasis on a woman’s restrictions ‘within the bosom of a loving family’, and analysing the subtle free indirect style which conveys Maggie’s ‘“habitual” emotional responses’ and ‘her more hidden heart fibres’. She is good on the relationship of sibling-love to other relationships, though her discussion of the Feuerbachian ‘kinship’ of Daniel and Gwendolen ignores the sexual element introduced in the novel’s subtly timed beginning, ‘Was she beautiful?’

Neither of these persuasive discussions of feminist response confronts Daniel Deronda’s diminution of the women artists, Mirah Cohen and the Princess Halm-Eberstein, ‘the Alcharisi’. Like less artistically gifted Dorothea, creative Mirah is ‘assimilated’ into the life of another, conveniently not wanting ‘a path of her own’, and without the narrator’s
deprecation of the assimilation so marked in Middlemarch. The novel’s open ending is qualified by the closure of romantic happy-ever-after. Alcharisi’s enforced retirement is particularly shocking because of her resemblance to the author, in feeling ‘a man’s force of genius in you, and ... the slavery of being a girl’, the distress Mary Ann Evans suffered and Mrs John Cross apparently confided to her husband. Gwendolen has been thought to develop independence, but all we have is a promise to Daniel – and Rex waiting in the wings. Klesmer rules, putting down Gwendolen’s uneducated aspirations to sing and act, having begun their acquaintance by snubbing her in public because ‘woman was dear to him, but music dearer’, and we hear no more about Catherine Arrowpoint’s operetta after she becomes Mrs Klesmer. Mrs Arrowpoint, the writer in the novel, is a figure of fun. The creativity of women is diminished to promote the agency of the hero, whose own early artistic promise was dismissed, as ungentlemanly. Maggie and Dorothea are powerful examples of suppressed power, historically representative, and though Gwendolen may be another, I think Daniel Deronda is the novel most disappointing for feminism.

George Eliot may be found unsatisfactorily in other aspects of social criticism too. It is clear in Adam Bede that the ‘organic’ rural community is tragically divided and divisive, but though Adam admonishes and fights Arthur, man to man, his reproach is personal rather than politically conscious, and as Robert Dingley says, in an interesting discussion of deference, this novel does not articulate radical critique or generalized comment (‘Politics’). Silas Marner is more explicit – perhaps an advance in political critique? – with surnameless Eppie revising Hetty Sorrel’s ignorant dream of fine clothes, a carriage, and the envy of poorer girls in church, though Livesey’s historically informed essay on ‘Class’ argues that this comes not from class-solidarity but a clinging to the habitual life.

Moira Gatens’s essay on ‘Philosophy’ claims that George Eliot’s self-styled ‘experiments in life’ create the genre of ‘philosophical novel’, which does not translate or domesticate the ideas and arguments of philosophers (in this case Spinoza and Feuerbach) but offers its own particularizing way of making ‘the invisible visible’, as George Henry Lewes put it. Gatens argues that George Eliot’s ‘critical method is testament to the potential of art to improve and expand human knowledge’. Gatens’s philosophical and literary argument may take criticism in a new direction, and certainly makes us think hard. I wonder if she would put other novelists, less learned in philosophy, in the new genre? James? Hardy? Joyce? Lawrence? Woolf? And other artists? Bach? Mahler? Michelangelo? Picasso?

Rignall picks out two words, ‘wasted hedgerows’, from the much-discussed Introduction to Felix Holt. Lynn Voskuil takes us into murky corners of that louche theatre-world from which Mirah shrinks – though her essay on ‘Theatre’ doesn’t mention Klesmer’s respect for the trained professionalism of even a hack actor. Kieran Dolin tells those who didn’t know that ‘The Dead Hand’ in Middlemarch is a translation of the medieval ‘mortmain’, ‘property bequeathed to religious and other bodies forever, property controlled from the grave’ (‘Law’), so extending the enjoyment of George Eliot’s muted irony. Juliette Atkinson reminds us that among Henry James’s better-known judgements of George Eliot is praise for her ‘exquisite rhetoric’. Raines is very good on Dolly Winthrop’s ‘rhythmic vacillations’ of thought and style, and the ‘shock’ felt by Lydgate, where ‘emotional and physical experience cannot be separated’ in ‘a link vital to our understanding of George Eliot’s use of scientific language’ (‘Language’). Elizabeth Gargano notices that Maggie and Tom knock over Stelling’s reading-desk and lexicons in their ‘revolutions round the table’ (in ‘Education’). Discussing ‘concrete
and abstract understandings of money’, Dermot Coleman recalls that Tulliver is bankrupted by ‘an abstract paper mortgage over whose transferability he has no control’ (‘Money’). In ‘Industry and technology’ Menke returns to the tragic end of The Mill on the Floss and the ‘wooden machinery’ which kills Tom and Maggie. Most of the material from letters and novels will be familiar to scholars, but the keen eyes and sharp ears of so many contributors offer the pleasure of fresh particulars.

Notes

1 In her piecemeal assembly of kitchen objects George Eliot may have made a small slip: Chapter 6 describes a polished oak table ‘usually turned up like a screen … more for ornament than for use’ (presumably not very big) and ‘a long deal dinner-table’, but in Chapter 20 family and guest sit round ‘the oak table’ and there is a ‘large deal table against the wall’ with ‘bright pewter plates and spoons and cans, ready for Alick and his companions’.

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