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Review of The Transferred Life of George Eliot: The Biography of a Novelist

Philip Davis

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BOOK REVIEWS


There have been several good new biographies of George Eliot in recent years but none quite like this. Davis’s subtle and searching analysis focuses almost exclusively on the writing as he traces the complex ways in which the experience of Mary Ann, or later Marian, Evans is ‘transferred’, to use the term of his title, into the creation of George Eliot and her work. The first life of relative failure, unhappiness and unsuccessful relationships is transformed into a second life as George Eliot, successful novelist and woman of letters, and this closely written and argued study explores the relationship between the two and shows how that second life contains within it traces of the first. He makes clear how George Eliot never completely got over being Mary Ann Evans, how her intellectual superiority was sporadically undermined by her sense of physical plainness, and her fleeting sense of success qualified by melancholy and self-doubt (p. 78). This is not a biography in the conventional sense, but a biography of the mind and the writing of George Eliot, revealing through painstaking analysis what she thought and how she saw the world. Davis has a magisterial command of all her writing, not just her fiction, and of her reading, too, in particular her reading of the writers she translated, Strauss, Feuerbach and Spinoza. Translation in an extended sense is a central term here, for Davis shows how she translates the work of those thinkers into herself and herself into the work; and indeed how she translates all her reading and experience into her writing. What Feuerbach helped her to see was what lay beneath the apparently dull and commonplace surface of ordinary life and how she could rewrite this hidden script in an act of creative translation. Davis’s own work of translation is to bring to light the complex processes involved in this creation. In her work, he maintains, ‘something always cuts across simple straight lines’ (p. 137); and the same could be said of his study which is always teasing out the subtle complexity of her fictional writing and its entangled roots in the long preparation of reading and thinking that occupied the first thirty-five years of her life.

His principal method is minutely focused close reading, alert to the finest implications of a word or phrase or syntactical detail. He seizes on half a sentence describing Mr Tryan in ‘Janet’s Repentance’ – ‘he had an acute sensibility to the very hatred or ridicule he did not flinch from provoking’ – and shows how, with its ‘self-locking syntax’, it works as ‘a double palimpsest’ describing ‘not only Tryan’s early disposition but also George Eliot’s own’, which he illuminates by drawing on Edith Simcox’s assertion that only the most obtuse reader can fail to discern the traces in her novels of her own intensely acute sensibility (p. 204). It is hard to imagine a less obtuse reader than Davis. He takes a passage from Dorothea’s night of anguish in chapter 80 of *Middlemarch*, where she ‘had been representing to herself the trials of Lydgate’s lot, and the marriage union which, like her own, seemed to have its hidden as well as evident troubles’, and shows how the insertion in a subordinate clause of just three words, ‘like her own’, acts as a vital pointer to the self-knowledge that is crucial to Dorothea’s imaginative understanding of others at this point, giving an extra dimension to her inner life and the power of decisive action (pp. 344-5). And when a little
later Dorothea famously looks out of her window in the dawn and feels that 'she was a part of
that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter
as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining', Davis notes how the texture
of George Eliot's prose, 'with all the double negatives, the layers and levels and loops and
turnarounds within the syntax', rotates in the mind and signals the complexity of that 'it'
that is involuntary life (p. 346). The space between the 'neither' and the 'nor, he argues, is
'the in-between area in middle earth that George Eliot loves to see created and recreated, in
the continual working-out of life' (ibid). He takes us deep into that process of working-out,
but for all the subtle intricacies of his analysis, he is at pains to insist upon the solidity to
which George Eliot is committed in her realistic representation of the world, a solidity that is
embodied in Middlemarch in the ordinary, decent, down-to-earth Garth family.

Rich in insights into the inner life of the novelist, her writings, and the workings of
her fiction, this biography has less to tell us about the events of her life. It builds here upon
the work of earlier biographers and does not seek to add to what is generally known. Thus
it accepts the conventional view that Lewes was barred from seeking a divorce because he
had condoned his wife's adultery and accepted her illegitimate children as his own, and
does not take account of Nancy Henry's review of the evidence in her recent Life (2012),
where she argues persuasively that there was no legal impediment to Lewes's petitioning
for a divorce and that the strongest reason for his not doing so was to avoid the unfavourable
publicity which he and his family and his partner would be exposed to by a case in court.
There is also the occasional minor error: the Attleborough to which George Eliot's sister
Chrissey and her husband moved was a village in the vicinity of Nuneaton not the better-
known town in Norfolk. On the other hand Davis does pay more than usual attention to
writers and thinkers on the periphery of the Eliot-Lewes circle who were influenced by the
novelist. For instance, he weaves into the discussion of science in relation to Middlemarch
an account of a science-fiction novel Flatland (1884) by one of her younger admirers, the
clergyman E. A. Abbott, who had met the scientist John Tyndall at a dinner at the Priory and
later moved away from trying to write religious fiction. The work of another admiring reader,
F. W. H. Myers, who coined the term 'subliminal' to describe what lay below the level of
conscious thought, is brought together with the critic Edward Dowden's notion of the 'second
self' that lives and speaks through George Eliot's novels, to throw light on how the fiction
intimates the presence of something more widely diffused than is adequately described by
the term 'anonymous narrator', and which Davis memorably defines as 'a language-presence
which came out of her abstracting from the characters all that they could not say or could not
think or could not be' (p. 271). His analysis of Daniel Deronda is informed by the insights of
another little-known reviewer and visitor to the Priory, Joseph Jacobs; and he takes seriously
the claims of R. H. Hutton, one of her finest reviewers, that the novels exhibit a sense of strain
brought about by lack of faith and relates it to the novelist's self-critical awareness of paradox
and contradiction in her own writing. In these and other ways this intellectual biography
makes use of, and illumines, the intellectual milieu in which George Eliot lived and worked.

The central figure of this milieu was, of course, G. H. Lewes, and, with the aid of
contemporary descriptions by those who knew him, like Bessie Parkes and J. S. Mill, Davis
brings to vivid life this 'small, bold, bright, and ugly man with a past' (p. 150). With his
confidence, buoyancy of spirits, and robust indifference to failure that Mill noted, Lewes was
precisely the opposite of the 'heavy-laden and self-doubting' Marian Evans. As she herself
remarked, he was exceptionally happy in his work and had no irritable anxieties about it when it was done. This was illustrated in the summer of 1856 when, after he had finished his *Life of Goethe*, the couple enjoyed what amounted to ‘a belated and extended honeymoon’ on the sands at Ifracombe and Tenby as he threw himself energetically and contentedly into scientific work for his next venture, ‘Sea-Side Studies’. It was Lewes, Davis maintains, ‘who gave Marian Evans an increased sense of life, even through the lens of the microscope’ (p. 160). The nature of their relationship is nicely conveyed by a passage from his *Life of Goethe* where he describes the kind of love that Goethe himself had rarely experienced: ‘he had scarcely ever felt the peculiar tenderness of man for woman, when that tenderness takes the form of vigilant protecting fondness [...]’. He knew little of the *companionship* of two souls’ (p. 157). What was missing from Goethe’s life was central to Lewes’s relationship with George Eliot.

Davis explores in particular the intellectual dimension of the couple’s companionship and demonstrates the reciprocal influence of their writing as he describes the development of a shared way of thinking, memorably defined as ‘a thinking that worked on the verge of knowing’ (p. 168). In his *Principles of Success in Literature* Lewes acknowledges his debt to Marian’s essay on Young but also insists that imagination is in the service of realism in terms that are taken up in her work: ‘Fairies and demons are not created by a more vigorous effort of imagination than milk maids and poachers’ (p. 162). Realism is, indeed, a central concern of this study, and as Davis traces in intricate detail ‘the strangely demanding twists and turns of the apparently common realist novel’ (p. 233), he presents an extended case for the challenging subtlety and complexity of realist fiction as an art-form, and a running rebuttal of the disparagement it has received from ‘the schools of theory for the last forty years’ (ibid). George Eliot’s novels, linked together in multifarious ways which Davis teases out, amount to ‘a mental network of varying combinations and sudden connections, showing a way for thinking about existence’ (p. 391). In explicating that thinking in this deeply serious, demanding and rewarding work, Davis shows himself to be precisely the kind of receptive reader that George Eliot requires, a reader whose role is, in his own words (echoing a passage from *Daniel Deronda*), ‘from beginning to end, to pick up what seem to be prints or traces and try to make them into further tracks of life’ (p. 389).

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[Editor’s Note: In our next issue Margaret Harris will discuss Davis’s book in a general piece on biographies.]