1995

Charles Christian Hennell and George Eliot: Human and Narrative Affinities

Graham Handley

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, Literature in English, British Isles Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/256

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
CHARLES CHRISTIAN HENNELL AND GEORGE ELIOT: Human and Narrative Affinities

On 13 November 1841 the twenty-two year old Marian Evans wrote to her then mentor Maria Lewis 'My whole soul has been engrossed in the most interesting of all inquiries for the last few days, and to what results my thoughts may lead, I know not - possibly to one that will startle you'. On 16 September 1847, just over a year after the publication of her translation of Strauss's Life of Jesus Marian wrote to her close friend Sarah Hennell, whose brother's An Inquiry concerning the Origin of Christianity (2nd edition, 1841) she had just re-read 'with delight and high admiration. My present impression from it far surpasses the one I had retained from my two readings about five years ago ....there is nothing in its whole tone from beginning to end that jars on my moral sense .... I am sure that no one, fit to read it at all, could read it without being intellectually and morally stronger - the reasoning is so close, the induction so clever, the style so clear, vigorous, and pointed, and the animus so candid and even generous....I think the “Inquiry” furnishes the utmost that can be done towards obtaining a real view of the life and character of Jesus'.

The story of Charles Christian Hennell (1809-50), how he came to undertake his investigation of the Bible, the results published in his Inquiry (1838), his marriage to Rufa Brabant (1 November 1843), Rufa’s making over of her hardly begun translation of Strauss’s Das Leben Jesu to Marian, the publication of that translation in 1846, need not be told again here. What I am concerned to demonstrate are the literary, moral and sympathetic connections between the Inquiry and the writings of George Eliot. Lip-service has always been paid to Hennell’s influence on Marian Evans’s loss of faith: my contention is that in the profoundest possible way Hennell gave her a stronger faith and a wider tolerance, a receptivity and a perspective which she was to absorb and use in her criticism and her fiction. His concerns connect with hers on a number of levels, and it is no accident that the quality of his mind - and of his narrative powers - are similar to her own, and indeed helped in their development.

In his preface to the first edition Hennell says that he is intent upon ‘searching out the truth’ (v), asserting that his investigations ‘will widen the scope of Christianity’ and that as a result there will be ‘a purer moral spirit’ (viii). The evidence gathered will be based on ‘the thoughts and feelings of the human mind itself’ (ix). These phrases, I suggest, prophetically define George Eliot’s concerns in her fiction. In a recent study, Rosemarie Bodenheimer has demonstrated the relationship between clusters of Marian Evans’s letters to George Eliot’s fiction: in brief compass here I hope to show that the re-readings of Hennell helped to provide Marian Evans and George Eliot with the critical and narrative techniques she was to use so well. Even as early as the first chapter of the Inquiry we encounter a phrase which must have nestled in her mind over the span of her writing career: Hennell refers to Cyrus permitting a remnant of pure Jews to reoccupy their own land, adding ‘they were in the way to take rank again amongst the nations’ (ch. 1). This is...
in fact the burden of Mordecai’s moving rhetoric in chapter 42, the Hand and Banner sequence, in Daniel Deronda. But this is a mere speck in the comparable densities of their writing. Just as Marian can either reveal, expose, spotlight Dr Cumming, the poet Young, Riehl, or review with penetrating insight the greatness contained in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s ‘failure’ Dred, so Hennell is the direct, searching, uncompromising critic of the texts of the apostles, subjecting them to close scrutiny and comparison with other writers, placing them tellingly in their historical and political contexts. He probes motives and motivation within that context, and his concern is largely with character, like George Eliot throughout her novels with their progressive deepening. Hennell’s structure is a narrative structure, his stories of hitherto received fact integrated and fused into a whole which constitutes an answer to an inquiry, just as a novel is an artefact which answers to fictional lives. The story of Jesus is boldly and unswervingly sustained: he kept to the high morality of the Essenes, rejected their austerity, adopted the religious liberalism of Judas the Galilean, but abnegated the ‘useless proceeding of declared insurrection’ (ch. 1). Jesus obviously came to believe ‘the delusion that he was the Messiah’ (ibid). We note the independent force of the phrase. Here the narrative focuses on the strength of delusion, something present in George Eliot’s fiction, with varying emphases of a compassionate or sublime nature from Amos Barton to Mordecai. And in her, as in Hennell here, the term is not a term of denigration but rather of humane tolerance and enlightened comprehension. Just as Hennell hoped that his investigation would enhance Christianity by widening its scope, so George Eliot’s investigation of the human condition through her fictional characters enhanced the practice and status of the novel by widening its artistic and moral scope. This was of course complemented by a widening humanitarian concern.

Hennell’s narrative also possesses the excitements and anticipations of fiction (he often refers to it) and embodies a psychological incisiveness which anticipates George Eliot’s. He traces the expansion of Christianity to embrace Jew and Gentile alike through the preaching of Paul: note the balances and ironies of the following, the sweep of the perspective, the wise understanding of personal and public interaction which is so central to George Eliot’s art:

It contained the sublime and agreeable doctrines of the paternal character of God and the resurrection of mankind; its asserted miracles and accomplished prophecies, and the coming judgment of the world, were of a nature to please and excite the imagination, and its fraternal system of society tended to excite emulation and keep up enthusiasm. To follow a crucified Jew might be at first a fearful stumbling-block, but the mournful fates of Osiris, Adonis, and Hercules, followed by a glorious apotheosis, would suggest parallels sufficient to throw lustre on the story of Jesus, and the Messiah, persecuted to death and raised again, probably appealed more strongly to the imagination and the heart than if he had appeared merely as another triumphant hero demanding allegiance. (ch. 2)

This passage, persuasive in its understanding and its rhetoric, shows Hennell’s grasp and
anticipates like emphases in the ‘accomplished’ maturity of George Eliot - witness the Proem to Romola or the Introduction to Felix Holt or even the Prelude to Middlemarch. One recalls too those superb sequences in ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’ and in Daniel Deronda when the narrator deliberately places Caterina and Gwendolen against the sweep of terrestrial and cosmic worlds, against the tide of humanity in the widest spiritual and scientific sense.

Hennell narrates the greatest novel of all about the greatest character of all, admittedly incorporating residual documentary emphases. From the death of Jesus, to the end of the first century, other vivid characters - like Titus, Josephus, Vespasian - come alive as the plot develops, as reformed Judaism becomes Christianity, and Christianity and Platonism flow into one another. Christianity called out the intellect and the affections (like the novels of George Eliot). Historical width is complemented by particularized stringent analysis, and this is where Hennell excels, as Marian Evans excelled in her own right during her Westminster Review period. Hennell displays both logic and integrity: we know little of Matthew, his representations of Christ inevitably gathered fiction, miraculous incidents at the time of the crucifixion are not mentioned by the other apostles, and so on. The birth of Jesus resembles ‘a wild eastern tale’ (ch. 3), there is much of the ‘rude poetry of warm and unrestrained imagination’ (ibid) and a yielding to ‘the fascination of every fiction which might confirm their belief in their own leader Jesus as an invisible protector’ (ibid). The other ‘narrators’ of the gospels receive like intensive scrutiny: Hennell feels that the idea of the resurrection was allowed to develop by the authorities because it did no harm: moreover it was pleasing to the minds of the apostles and was good propaganda for the emergent faith. He demonstrates contradictions in the accounts of both the resurrection and the ascension, observing

The most beautiful fictions are those which bring to view the forms of departed friends, for in these the colours of the imagination are both deepened and softened by the more refined feelings, friendship, esteem, and sorrow...the romantic hopes which he had excited, the sublime views to which he had raised their minds, and the feelings of veneration and attachment to himself which he had awakened, could not at once subside. All these powerful sources of action found a vent in the continuance of his plans, in the institution of memorials to him, in heightening and colouring to other hearers the incidents of his life, and in cultivating the delightful illusions of his resurrection, perpetual presence, and future reappearance. Fictions proceeding from such feelings, and also connected, as they were in the case of the disciples, with the real interests of life, must be of a different character from those thrown out in the mere wantonness of imagination. Hence the appearance of simplicity, earnestness, and reality, which in the midst of palpable inconsistencies, pervade even the evangelic histories, and make even their fiction unique. (ch. 7)

The tone and the admirable logic of the sequence would have delighted Marian Evans and
remained in store for George Eliot. Sometimes I hear Hennell’s voice, his intellectual pro-
bity and his humanity, in hers, but I also find his pertinent analogies relevant to her own
development both as individual and, later, artist. The four evangelists blended fact with
fiction, seeking ‘to increase the interest and efficacy of their narrative’ (ch. 8), while in
evaluating John, Hennell refers to ‘the novelist’s prelude to a bright denouement’ (ibid).
His general questioning of the miracles of Jesus includes the assertion that we find ‘the
omniscience of the novelist instead of the one-sided local knowledge which must belong
to an eye-witness’ (ch. 9). Sometimes brief scientific analogies are included in his narra-
tion: ‘Follow the vein of the supernatural throughout, and it either shuns or breaks itself
upon the historical strata’ (ibid). The epistles, mostly written before the gospels, are more
romance than history, though he allows ‘Many of the finer thoughts and feelings of
mankind find a vent in fiction’. (ch.11)

The most fascinating section in the Inquiry deals with the character of Christ. He is enthu-
siast, prophet, and political activist to his contemporaries. He is a moral teacher but con-
cerned too with national deliverance. He has a comprehensive benevolence: our know-
ledge of him is limited, but what we do know is redolent of human virtue. Although
Hennell refers to ‘truths’ which are ‘palpable fiction’ and ‘human fictions’ (ch. 18) his
own defence of Christianity is an impassioned one. It embodies ‘a system of moral excel-
lence’ embracing ‘the principles of humanity’ and involving ‘an active part in the affairs
of life’ (ibid). The ‘some spot of a native land’ (Daniel Deronda, ch. 3) so dear to George
Eliot constitutes the heaven that ‘is already close at hand’ (ch. 18) for Hennell. He urges
people not to throw away cherished associations because of the denial of miracles. He pro-
motes the practical Christianity which Christ displayed, and he believes that ‘both reason
and piety bid us ... to repose implicitly upon the higher wisdom in whose disposal we
stand’ (ibid). But, rational to the end, he refers to ‘the enigma of our own and the world’s
existence’: his transcendent faith, however, tells him a time will come when these will be
solved.

Marian Evans was temporarily ‘Strauss-sick’ but she never became Hennell-sick. His
clear narrative wears learning lightly, his intellect reflects humility and integrity, his ded-
ication is exemplary, his humanity never in question. His work, and the literary and human
personality which informs it, entered deeply into the consciousness of Marian Evans, so
much so that her emergence as a writer was facilitated in the directions I have indicated
above. His cogent and crisp analyses of historical fact and supernatural fiction helped to
provide her with the frame for her own cultural analyses and evaluations. His emphasis on
the abiding value of truth as distinct from the unquestioning acceptance of dogma became
one of her lifelong, cherished beliefs. His seeing Christianity in its practical forms as the
moral way of life we should follow continued to be a dominant influence in the fiction of
George Eliot. His historical sense, his understanding of movements, political pressures
and changes, was a model which she could appreciate and which she would later adapt in
defining English insularity. His structure, both in the part and in the whole, is as careful
and cumulative as that of The Mill on The Floss and Middlemarch. But there is another
less easily defined resemblance between Hennell and George Eliot. Reading them both

44
one is aware of a presence, a personality, working and writing for good, for the enlighten­ment of mankind through the revealed truths of practical idealism and human interaction. Hennell died before George Eliot came into being, but he lives on in her work, one of the most humane and liberal influences who helped to shape her artistic destiny.

Notes


