

George Eliot's Precarious Afterlives

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At the moment of going to press we hear with extreme regret of the death of the greatest writer of English romance, and one who was at the same time one of the leaders of thought in England. 'George Eliot' — known for long to many friends as Mrs Lewes, but who, by a recent marriage, contracted about a year and a-half after the death of George Henry Lewes, had become Mrs Cross — died, at Chelsea, late on Wednesday evening.¹

When does George Eliot's afterlife begin? The answer is not straightforward. Do we mean the afterlife of the woman born Mary Anne Evans? Or the evolution of the many personae she cultivated as an editor, journalist, translator, fiction writer, and poet? Or is an afterlife best measured in the remediation of the published work in various iterations across text, stage, and screen cultures? Or in the minds of readers?² Marian Evans's many biographers have parsed these relationships between the woman and her writings, each with different sets of emphasis but all collectively contributing to her ongoingness in literary culture. Each biographical intervention constitutes a shaping of her presence in the broader historical record in terms that are inflected by the biographer's own position in critical, cultural, and social traditions as much as by 'George Eliot'. Thus George

¹ 'Obituary: George Eliot', *Academy*, 24 December 1880, p. 460.

² For considerations of the afterlife of George Eliot's works, including remediations of the fiction on stage and screen (film, television), see Margaret Harris, 'George Eliot on Stage and Screen', *Arts: The Journal of the Sydney University Arts Association*, 24 (2002), 27–49 <<https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/ART/article/view/5617/6284>> [accessed 25 January 2020]; Tim Dolin, *George Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 229–49; for an online vlog reinterpretation of *Middlemarch*, see Rebecca Shoptaw, *Middlemarch, the series*, online video recording, YouTube, 2017, <<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC44bITsagDtFrhejSvAe-nzg>> [accessed 25 January 2020]; for a wide-ranging survey of George Eliot's afterlife, including a fascinating summary of centenary celebrations of her birth and death in 1919 and 1980, respectively, see also, Margaret Harris, 'Afterlife', in *George Eliot in Context*, ed. by Margaret Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 52–62.

Eliot's legacy continues to evolve.³ This article takes a different set of relations as its focus: three types of interconnected afterlives that have their roots in the writer's well-known insistence that the diffusion of the work is what mattered, not the identity or personality of the writer who produced that work. I will further argue, however, that Marian Evans's efforts to shape the terms in which she would be remembered were riven with a sense of the precariousness of the potential outcomes for legacy building on the basis of written work or good deeds.

Her complicated relationship with the idea of an afterlife is a core preoccupation of her final collection of poetry, *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems, Old and New*.⁴ Ironically, it is among the most neglected of her works.⁵ In this volume George Eliot offers sustained consideration of the concept of afterlife as diffuse affect. The poems are predominantly focused on singular people or named individuals, including Jubal, Agatha, Armgart, Lisa, Stradivarius, Moses, and Arion. Throughout, however, the poet suggests that afterlives depend on the decoupling of these individuals' works or deeds from their individualized being. A person has no afterlife but their works have after affects, and different cultures shape the afterlives they need for their particular historical moment. The volume has rarely been studied as a *collection*, though it was purposefully assembled by the writer, and, in a note to her publisher John Blackwood accompanying a letter about the first edition, *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems* (1874), she states her intentions: 'every one of those [poems] I now send you represents an idea which I care about strongly and wish to propagate as far as I can.'⁶ This was a pitch for remembrance in particular terms. The volume maintains a telling emphasis on the processes and consequences of myth-making. The poems, some of which were originally published in magazines, are not typically read consecutively. Collectively, however, they

³ Useful overviews of the biographical tradition include Nancy Henry, *The Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 1–22; and Margaret Harris, 'The Biographical Tradition', in *George Eliot in Context*, ed. by Harris, pp. 41–51. Both emphasize the role of women biographers, in particular, in offering original and compelling complications of the writer's life and works in terms that highlight her continued relevance.

⁴ George Eliot, *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems, Old and New*, Cabinet edn (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1878).

⁵ Charles LaPorte, Herbert Tucker, and Wendy Williams are among the few critics who have made significant contributions to our understanding of the poems and George Eliot's poetic aesthetic in this collection. See, for instance, Wendy S. Williams, *George Eliot, Poetess* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); Herbert F. Tucker, 'Poetry: The Unappreciated Eliot', in *A Companion to George Eliot*, ed. by Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), pp. 178–91; Charles LaPorte, 'George Eliot, the Poetess as Prophet', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31 (2003), 159–79.

⁶ *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–78), vi: 1874–1877 (1956), 25–26.

can be seen to reinforce her understanding that legacy building by abjuring ego is a paradoxical and possibly pointless activity.

The extended 1878 edition, prepared by Evans just two years before her own death for Blackwood's canon-building Cabinet edition of her works, saw the addition of other poems to increase the volume's size and reinforce that central idea. It is a dominant keynote of George Eliot's oeuvre, reiterated throughout the collection with such blatant insistence that it compels attention. Through diverse forms, including verse dramas, dialogues, lyrical ballads, and sonnet sequences, we hear again and again that the individual maintains some hold on an afterlife by the sacrifice of subjecthood. This concept will be familiar to readers of George Eliot's novels. But the volume makes clear that this renunciation is not a generous act of will. Rather, the poems suggest that personal erasure is an uncontrollable outcome of the depredations of memory and the unpredictability of the circulation of the work. We are everywhere reminded of the precarious and limited nature of even this afterlife-through-art aspiration.

The evidence of two other types of afterlife confirms anxieties about remembrance and helps us to understand some of the consequences of Marian Evans's decision to guard so carefully all knowledge about her private self to protect her present and to focus the attention of the future on the work, not the woman. Obituaries and memorial essays that followed in the days and weeks after her death and twenty-first century biofictional representations of the writer, despite their generic distinctiveness as 'afterlife' modes, and despite a century and more separating their publication, both present a very partial picture of the woman behind the work. The recent biofictions could have drawn on the longer biographical tradition that has been filling in the record of the life of Marian Evans for over one hundred and forty years, but instead these works remember the writer in terms underpinned by many of the biases of the early memorial culture of the late nineteenth century. As is now more widely recognized, the early commemorative pieces struggled to reconcile popular appreciation of George Eliot's rich, humane, wise novels with what little was known of the controversial and intensely private woman. The George Eliot we meet in recent fiction by Diana Souhami (2014), Patricia Duncker (2015), and Dinitia Smith (2016), is a George Eliot produced by this deeply conflicted and restricted idea of public authorship.⁷ There is the sexual scandal of the radical life and the sibylline profile; the guarding of the private self and that intense need for the genius of the work to be recognized. In a reversal of the post-death emphasis on her considerable intellect, the dominant and shared stress of these more recent portraits of the artist is on a George Eliot who is sexually

⁷ Patricia Duncker, *Sophie and the Sibyl* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Diana Souhami, *Gwendolen* (London: Quercus, 2015); Dinitia Smith, *The Honeymoon* (New York: Other Press, 2016).

obsessed with men of all ages. This George Eliot is an unfortunate pastiche of the first efforts at memorialization following her death cut through with aspects of twentieth-century feminist revisionist studies of the writer and her writings. Such scholarly studies accentuated the importance of gender and sexuality in her work as a necessary corrective to the post-death confinement and erasure of the writer's disruptive and radical influence. The political importance of this work is undermined, I suggest, by the way George Eliot is remembered in these twenty-first century neo-historical biofictions.

In *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* (1989), 170 years after the birth of Mary Anne Evans, Dorothea Barrett convincingly champions the need to surface the passionate undercurrents in George Eliot's work that have been 'whitewashed' since her death in ways that have suppressed the 'dialectical, turbulent, polyphonic and open-ended' dimensions of her fiction in particular.⁸ There is in this work an undoubted echo of William Hale White's frustrated reaction to John Walter Cross's 1885 'Autobiography' of his wife:

I do hope that in some future edition, or in some future work, the salt and spice will be restored to the records of George Eliot's entirely unconventional life. As the matter now stands she has not had full justice done to her and she has been removed from the class [...] of the Insurgents, to one more genteel, but certainly not so interesting.⁹

Barrett has traced the ways the intellectual as 'heavy-footed sibyl' came to dominate representations of the writer as a means of containing and neutralizing the radical challenge of all types of desire and sexuality in her works, starting with accounts by men who knew her, such as Charles Bray, that gained currency in the aftermath of her death.¹⁰ Barrett's focus is the critical and biographical tradition. Memory pieces of the writer that circulated in the periodical press after her death, I argue, also contributed significantly to the popular reinforcing of the critical bias Barrett outlines. The reactionary fictional representations of George Eliot that we see in the

⁸ Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 1.

⁹ John Walter Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1885); Hale White's reaction is cited in *George Eliot: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. by K. K. Collins (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), p. 36.

¹⁰ Barrett, p. 3. Arguably, Gillian Wearing's visually stunning and original experimental biographical film, *Everything is Connected: George Eliot's Life*, commissioned by the BBC to celebrate the writer's bicentenary and aired in November 2019, builds on decades of feminist scholarship to restore George Eliot to her class of insurgents in the dominant medium of this century. The film appeared too late to be considered as part of this article.

work of Souhami, Duncker, and Smith tend to labour both the psychosexual dimensions of George Eliot's personality and the tedious, heavy-footed sibylline image. It is a reductive afterlife for the woman that suggests, despite nuanced and rich biographical readings over the past fifty years in particular, it is difficult to dislodge some of the repeated tropes of the early memory field. And ironically, these versions of George Eliot exemplify the opposite of the afterlife of the artist evacuated of individual, personalized traits that she strived to represent in her late poetry.

Precarious afterlife: Marian Evans Lewes versus George Eliot

A key moment in the afterlife of any individual is the period directly after death. Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* has made us alert to the determining politics of the form that announces the 'grievability' of a life, the obituary: 'we have to ask, again and again', she writes,

how the obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed. It is the means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition, the means by which a life becomes noteworthy.¹¹

When Mary Ann Cross died on 22 December 1880, there was swift and widespread acknowledgement of the death of the author in the daily press. Throughout 1881, lengthier obituaries and memorial essays considering her legacy followed in the monthly and quarterly periodicals.¹² If we are to go by the registering of the significance of her passing across these news platforms, George Eliot's life and death mattered at a regional, national, and international level: it was made both noteworthy and public, to use Butler's terms. Obituaries asserted that no other woman novelist matched her in terms of reputation at death, many observing that she was the last great novelist of the period, *tout court*. Thackeray and Dickens, with whom she was most often bracketed in terms of status, had died in 1863 and 1870, respectively. Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell, her near contemporaries and the two women novelists with whom she was most regularly compared, were both dead before most of George Eliot's works

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 34.

¹² On theories of the overlapping genres of obituary, memorial essay, and 'biographical sketch' of the recently deceased, see Jock Macleod, 'Noticing the Dead: The Biographical Sketch in Victorian Periodicals', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 50 (2017), 534–59; and April Patrick, 'How Victorian Periodicals Mourn: Obituaries and Memorial Essays', *Victorian Review*, 43 (2017), 196–99.

were published. Brontë died in 1855, three years before the name ‘George Eliot’ first appeared in print in the volume edition of *Scenes of Clerical Life*; Gaskell ten years later, when George Eliot’s great novels of the 1870s were yet to come. Leslie Stephen opens his obituary piece in the *Cornhill* with an emphatic assertion of her exceptional standing:

Had we been asked, a few weeks ago, to name the greatest living writer of English fiction, the answer would have been unanimous. No one — whatever might be his special personal predilections — would have refused that title to George Eliot [...]. In losing George Eliot we have probably lost the greatest woman who ever won literary fame, and one of the very few writers of our day to whom the name ‘great’ could be conceded with any plausibility.¹³

But the legacy building was not as straightforward as this declaration would suggest. The *Academy*’s clause-ridden opening lines cited at the beginning of this article is just one example of the particular difficulty of recording George Eliot’s passing. Memorializing the writer was a complicated business. The convoluted torsions involved in even announcing the death of the author in the *Academy* notice are symptomatic of the problematic afterlife of the woman. Obituaries of Dickens and Thackeray, despite the complicated relationships with their wives that required careful handling at death, did not produce equivocations about how to name the novelist whose death was being noticed.

What we begin to see is that overviews of the body of work that George Eliot produced were straightforward — there were novels that were preferred, characters who were celebrated, points of style that were criticized according to the ‘special personal predilections’ of the critic, to use Stephen’s careful phrase. But how to register the woman? There was an explicit articulation in the initial pieces, in particular, that essayists would focus on her works; that the more personal aspects of the life were not to be the subject of commentary. Thus *Blackwood’s* memorial essay in February 1881 justifies its scant attention to the biographical background:

It was as George Eliot that she appeared before the public, and it is as George Eliot that we wish to regard her in this notice, believing that such a mode of commemorating her is the one that would have been most congenial to her own feelings.¹⁴

That approach, however, was not entirely the result of deference towards Blackwood’s prize author Marian Evans/Lewes/Cross. An additional factor

¹³ Leslie Stephen, ‘George Eliot’, *Cornhill*, February 1881, pp. 152–68 (p. 152).

¹⁴ ‘George Eliot’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, February 1881, pp. 255–68 (p. 255).

that shaped the terms in which the writer's life and death were first recorded was that this most celebrated of novelists was not at all well known. K. K. Collins, the great archivist of George Eliot's afterlife in the religious periodical press, has shown that though there was general awareness of some personal details about the writer, such as her domestic partnership with Lewes, and of her professional association with the *Westminster Review*, so little accurate information about her life was in circulation in the public record that ten days after her death one columnist rounding up the week's news in the *Literary World* wryly observed that, in George Eliot's case, the record seemed to be 'unusually incorrect'.¹⁵ This was a problem indeed for her obituary writers creating that record.

Collins notes that in the immediate aftermath of her death, journalists were drawing from the same small well of often inaccurate information in the absence of other sources that one might expect of so famous an author:

Steadily accumulating details of home and professional life; regular pronouncements on social and political issues; civic appearances; duly illustrated, with recorded words and gestures; printed conversations and confidences; photographs for sale at Mayall's; pats on the head for children in the park — in George Eliot's case it was all missing, all the cultural scuttlebutt that stood for a living, developing, particular history upon which journalists could depend when the dark time came. (*Identifying the Remains*, p. 8)

In the absence of that typical (and very masculine) 'cultural scuttlebutt', journalists mined the published work for evidence of the lived experience of the writer. As a result, they precipitously overidentified scenes from the fiction and the nostalgic, conservative perspective of the narrator of the favoured early work with the life and beliefs of the author. Additionally, obituary notices and memorial pieces by acquaintances that began to follow her death in the popular press gained particular purchase because the personal insights they offered were so rare. These typically reinforced a version of the novelist that Barrett, among others, has demonstrated is underscored by a contemporary need to contain the radical and heterodox in both the fiction and the woman, despite recognition of that dark and radical edge in her work by reviewers throughout her working life. 'A hierarchy of grief', Butler reminds us, 'could no doubt be enumerated. We have seen it already in the genre of the obituary, where lives are quickly tidied up and summarized,

¹⁵ 'Literary Table Talk', *Literary World*, 31 December 1880, pp. 457–58 (p. 458), cited in K. K. Collins, *Identifying the Remains: George Eliot's Death in the London Religious Press*, English Literary Studies Monograph Series, 94 (Victoria, BC: ELS Editions, 2006), p. 7.

humanized, usually married, or on the way to be, heterosexual, happy, monogamous' (p. 32). Some work had to be done to turn George Eliot into an acceptably grievable body. And Marian Evans played her part in this editorializing. 'As far as she could', as Nancy Henry puts it, 'she wanted to prepare the conditions of how she would be remembered after her death' (p. 1).

As Barrett, Henry, and others have argued, her role in how she has been remembered is rooted in her efforts to insist on that division between her life and her work. In part the impulse derived from her clear-sighted understanding of the biased social framing of women that she knew would affect the reception of her writing. Her concerns on this point were even more acute because she was living with another woman's husband. Thus her decision to publish her fiction under a pseudonym. The apparent conflict between the moral fiction and the controversial life nonetheless required some careful navigation. Journalists reporting her death and constructing the terms in which she was to be remembered struggled to reconcile the sagacious, admired body of work and the problematic and largely unknown woman who produced that work. They wrestled with the disjuncture between what *was* known of the life (the scandalous relationship with Lewes; the heterodox beliefs and radical philosophical tendencies evident in the early journalism and later novels) and what was presented as the loved and celebrated features of the early novels in particular (the humane, self-sacrificing, generous, reaffirmation of social bonds and spiritual connection represented through that wise and moral narrative voice). The widely reported stirring words of Rev. Dr Sadler at her funeral oration, where the immortal legacy of George Eliot's novels was asserted and the mortal woman behind them tentatively acknowledged, give some sense of the problem. His was an uneasy registering of claims to everlasting afterlife for the work and the pseudonym, if not for the woman who created both:

She is [...] one of the few immortal names that were not born to die. The pen has fallen from the hand of her who has made the name of George Eliot memorable, and nothing remains for us to do but to gather up, with heartfelt thankfulness to the Supreme Giver, the treasures she has left for us and all who come after us.¹⁶

We might presume that these words would have pleased both the scrupulously private Marian Evans and the ambitious novelist.

'Churlish celebrity' and 'transient monumentality', or how to 'join the choir invisible'?

'The best history of a writer is contained in his writings', Evans wrote in 1879 with mortality and legacy on her mind the year after George Henry

¹⁶ 'The Funeral of "George Eliot"', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 30 December 1880, p. 7.

Lewes's death: 'these are his chief actions.'¹⁷ And thus she limited her public image to keep a focus on the works, as has been well attested. She refused biographical interviews and the circulation of her image or photographs. She maintained secrecy about personal details of her own life to the extent that she twice paid for a notice to be inserted in the New York *Tribune* reminding those writing to solicit autographs or a fuller sense of the person behind the fiction that she declined all such requests.¹⁸ Readers of George Eliot's writings may share her view that her monumental works provide for her future; that the 'best history' of the writer is indeed embedded within every word and page of her published novels in particular; that those works secure the afterlife of the person as well as embodying for long-term preservation her 'chief actions'.¹⁹

Marian Evans's own efforts to control, limit, and define how George Eliot would be remembered, however, also grew out of her acute anxiety about the perishability and superficiality of reputation as defined by an increasingly consumer-oriented culture with its ephemeral obsessions. Of course she benefited from the financial rewards and gratifications of that same culture. She made her fortune out of it in a knowing play on the price of her name while working against compromising her market value by overexposure. Leah Price, for instance, has convincingly demonstrated this point in her analysis of George Eliot's ambivalent relationship with Alexander Main, compiler of the commercially opportunistic George Eliot's *Wise, Witty and Tender Sayings*.²⁰ Sarah Wah captures her ambivalence by reminding us of Marian Evans's description of herself: 'We know from her letters', Wah observes,

that she did not always object to being a celebrity, but used the label in such a way as to suggest tacit resistance to its negative associations. Thus she is not, so to speak, not a celebrity, but instead [in her own words] 'the most churlish of celebrities'.²¹

¹⁷ *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, VII: 1878–1880 (1956), 230.

¹⁸ George Griffith, 'The Face as Legible Text: Gazing at the Portraits of George Eliot', *Victorian Review*, 27.2 (2001), 20–41 (p. 25).

¹⁹ For often diametrically opposing accounts of how the life is registered (and thereby extended) in the work, see for instance, Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Henry, *The Life of George Eliot*; Philip Davis, *The Transferred Life of George Eliot: The Biography of a Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁰ Leah Price reminds us that even before her death 'excerpts from Eliot appear in an anthology, on a calendar, in four schoolbooks, on an army officers' examination, in a sermon, in one reader's copy of the New Testament, and as epigraphs to a socialist treatise and an abridgment of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*'. See Leah Price, 'George Eliot and the Production of Consumers', *Novel*, 30 (1997), 145–69 (p. 145).

²¹ Sarah Wah, "'The Most Churlish of Celebrities': George Eliot, John Cross and the Question of High Status', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15 (2010), 370–87 (p. 383).

We might imagine we can hear her resisting the shallow stardom newly produced in her newspaper-influenced age and prescribing her alternative legacy for us in ‘O may I join the choir invisible’, first published in 1867. The poem can be read as an effort to move beyond the short-term favour of fame at the hands of an unknown and therefore unreliable public to reach for fuller, longer presence and influence post-mortem through what she characterizes here as the ongoing, timeless song of her art.²² With its forward-pushing enjambments, each stanza reaches out beyond the limits of the line in ways that reinforce aspirations to immortality. The singular longevity of actual stars that continue sending us light for centuries after their death dwarves the fleeting attentions of celebrity culture circulating in the nineteenth century’s mass media platform, the date-stamped pages of the daily or weekly press. Prolonged ‘life’ is enshrined in the actions or thoughts inspired in others, which, with knowing self-reflexivity, includes the wisdom and music preserved for an extended afterlife through ongoing circulation of poems, like this one:

O may I join the choir invisible
 Of those immortal dead who live again
 In minds made better by their presence: live
 In pulses stirred to generosity,
 In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn
 For miserable aims that end with self,
 In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like
 stars,
 And with their mild persistence urge man’s search
 To vaster issues.²³

Our eyes are inevitably drawn to those ‘stars’, deliberately spotlighted in form and thought on their uniquely single-worded line to draw out that word’s clashing metaphorical and literal power. But how texts are read cannot be controlled, however much the author might attempt to guide interpretation.²⁴ And the playing out of legacies is chronically unpredictable: little could Marian Evans anticipate that arguably (and ironically) her poem’s most popular afterlife has been the reiteration of its first line as an emphatic conclusion to a series of exasperated euphemisms for death in Monty Python’s ‘Dead Parrot’ sketch.²⁵

²² See, for example, LaPorte, ‘George Eliot, the Poetess as Prophet’.

²³ George Eliot, ‘O may I join the choir invisible’, in *The Legend of Jubal*, pp. 301–03 (p. 301).

²⁴ As Deborah Gettelman has argued, for instance, of George Eliot’s particular use of realism as an effort to ‘discipline’ her readers’ ‘unruly imagination’. See Deborah Gettelman, ‘Reading Ahead in George Eliot’, *Novel*, 39 (2005), 25–47 (p. 26).

²⁵ ‘Dead Parrot’, Monty Python’s Flying Circus Scripts, Series 1, Episode 8 <http://montypython.50webs.com/scripts/Series_1/53.htm> [accessed 25 January 2020]. The sketch was first broadcast on the BBC in 1969 and has attracted millions of viewers through TV, stage, and Internet platforms.

Some of her admiring contemporaries faced up to their beloved author's impermanence with more stoicism than others, offering a more measured view of the possibility of durability than her funeral orator, for instance. A two-stanza memorial poem published anonymously just over six weeks after her death in London's *Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times* expresses incredulity that this most 'wonderful and rare' of writers should be subject to mortality. The poet records how chastening it is to realize that such greats go the way of the rest of us:

Oh, have the wonders that in thee did lie,
The great circumference of thy glowing mind,
Passing, but shown how all on earth must die,
Howe'er it be, whatever be its kind?

And though the turn in the second stanza asserts in terms that echo Rev. Dr Sadler that the writer will live as long as her great characters capture our imagination — Romola, Maggie, and Gwendolen are the intriguing set of examples singled out in this poem — the final two lines acknowledge that the ravages of time will bring even this afterlife to an end.²⁶ Those concluding realizations, I suggest, echo Evans's own understanding of ending. As she observes in the penultimate stanza of 'O may I join the choir invisible', in an admission that is often overlooked in readings that emphasize the more consoling claim for secular immortality that features in the final verse, remembrance of our names and deeds will at best endure in the Anthropocene age. In a post-human world, that legacy too, will die:

That better self shall live till human Time
Shall fold its eyelids, and the human sky
Be gathered like a scroll within the tomb
Unread for ever. (pp. 302–03)

It is a theme to which she returns throughout her work in her layered exploration of time's manifold and annihilating power over us, individually and collectively.

Her novels are undoubtedly time-conscious records and transmitters of cultural memory and history, monumental cultural objects and cultural interventions.²⁷ At the level of plot, however, they are also haunted texts.

²⁶ 'To George Eliot', *Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, 12 February 1881, p. 107.

²⁷ Nicholas Dames argues the point from another angle. He writes that the novel, 'nineteenth-century European culture's most significant formalization of memory and its processes', operates as a form of forgetting in that it 'formaliz[es] [...] memory by canceling and erasing'. See Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 4.

They are populated by characters full of fear expressed in a barely repressed panic that past errors will return to tear apart the apparently smooth sense of present status, of forward momentum, and of security from past ‘sins’ (think of Tito Melema, Mrs Transome, and Nicholas Bulstrode, for example). Everywhere we have individuals living with past trauma, trauma that by its nature is indifferent to time’s onward press, trauma that is always threatening to erupt into, or relentlessly determine, the ‘now’ (Silas Marner; Gwendolen Harleth). Further, Evans had an acute sense of time’s corrosive energies and how our scales of cultural value are constantly being recalibrated to meet publicly constructed and articulated needs and priorities: individual, collective, or more narrowly, national. As Ann Rigney puts it in her study of the afterlives of Walter Scott — a writer who profoundly influenced the young Mary Ann Evans — Scott’s sense of historicity is embedded in his novels and consequently his writing always anticipates its own obsolescence. Like Scott, Marian Evans was alert to ‘transient monumentality’ in its many manifestations.²⁸ Evans shared Scott’s understanding of the irrevocable disruptions of momentous historical turning points in her great novels of transition and reform. And more, her generational long view provides a clear sense of passing time, the fragility of memory, and our ultimate extinction, when the ‘human sky’ is folded up ‘like a scroll’ and sealed in a tomb, ‘unread for ever’. The novels are replete with a sense of the ‘human histories’ told to ‘no human ear’ that, never having been written down, never get passed on and are forever lost to the archive.²⁹ Her original readers and her readers now are always reminded that personal erasure and cultural entropy are inevitable. Nothing stands still. The landscapes of her fiction, those set most closely to her own childhood of the 1830s, as Rebecca Mead notes, were disappearing from view even as she registered them, as the opening to *Felix Holt* famously acknowledges with its layered markers of residual and emergent natural, human, and industrial interactions.³⁰

Throughout her writing life, Marian Evans reminds us of the problem of translatability between forms and across cultures, providing yet another sense of her own built-in obsolescence. An expert scholar of ancient languages and religions, she was a Janus-headed thinker with a knowing sense of the transience of her own monumentality as of all cultural figures. Her letters, her readings of other works, and her own writings continuously register this knowingness: that sense anticipating her own future obscurity

²⁸ I am borrowing this potent phrase from Ann Rigney. See her *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 10.

²⁹ George Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical*, ed. by Lynda Mugglestone (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 10 (Introduction).

³⁰ Rebecca Mead, *The Road to Middlemarch: My Life with George Eliot* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 35.

or, at its most critical, her utter irrelevance and extinction. In this she is truly at once Victorian and modern. We hear it in her early reviews of Tennyson, Browning, and Wagner: the latter two artists unappreciated in the present may be understood by some future audience; Tennyson, will last as long as we have language.³¹ Having read Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, with its explicit, confronting challenge to an anthropocentric world view, she wondered even in terms of the proportionately short time of man's physical and cultural presence on the planet, if there was yet 'something incalculable by us from the data of our present experience? Even within comparatively near times & in kindred communities how many conceptions & fashions of life have existed to which our understanding & sympathy has no clue!'.³²

The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems, Old and New: 'an old stalk to be plucked away'

George Eliot's final collection of poetry cycles through myths of origins and ends with such insistent emphasis on personal annihilation that we are left in little doubt about Evans's sense of her own perishability. The individual subject has a limited history and a limited future we are told from the opening poem, 'The Legend of Jubal', to the last, 'O may I join the choir invisible'. Throughout, we are alerted to her equivocations about the possibility of ongoingness. The only hope for some type of longevity is in the extreme sublimation of the self to a wider communal purpose. That purpose is expressed in the representation of the dilatory or ripple effect of good deeds ('Agatha', 'O may I join the choir invisible', for example); of original art ('Legend of Jubal'); of craftsmanship ('Stradivarius'); exceptional talent ('Armgarth', 'Arion'); or of exceptional vision ('The Death of Moses'). Everything that constitutes the physical self becomes irrelevant, invisible, or, as in the case of Jubal, unrecognizable, sacrificed for the longer life of the disembodied and transferred legacy. This much has been acknowledged in critical readings of the individual poems. But I want to suggest further that even with the thematic unity suggested in the conclusions of many of the poems that reiterate the possibility of transcendence of individual mortality, we are equally left with a sense of what is lost when the individual life ends. And perhaps even more crucially, the perpetuation

³¹ On Tennyson, see 'Tennyson's *Maud*', in *George Eliot: Selected Critical Writings*, ed. by Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 171–79 (first publ. in 'Belles Letters', *Westminster Review*, October 1855, pp. 596–615 (pp. 596–601)); on Wagner, see 'Liszt, Wagner, and Weimar', *Fraser's Magazine*, July 1855, pp. 48–62; on Browning, see 'Belles Lettres', *Westminster Review*, January 1856, pp. 290–312 (pp. 290–96).

³² Quoted in K. K. Collins, 'Questions of Method: Some Unpublished Late Essays', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35 (1980), 385–405 (p. 390).

of such transcendence (in the minds of others; in cultural memory or as cultural practice; or in the historical record) is presented ultimately as fragile and time-limited, dependent as such 'transcendence' is on unreliable memory acts and, more profoundly, on the prolonging of the Anthropocene. The poet's representation of historical cultures' obsolescence is just one of the ways that she casts doubt on that unlikely continued dominance of the human species.

In the pastoral idyll 'Agatha', the eponymous subject is preserved in a dialogue with a local 'angelic' young lady. Parallels are drawn between the countrywoman's strong, simple religious faith and models of female self-sacrifice emblemized by Roman Catholic female saints. The potential for immortality supposedly guaranteed by sainthood, however, is undermined by the fact that Agatha survives not as a saint but as a slim faint shadow, a legend for lovers to recall as part of their own lexicon of courtship. She is 'an old stalk to be plucked away', to linger in memory as half-folksong, half-prayer in local lore, as we are reminded in the ten-stanza 'song' with which the poem concludes.³³ That closing elision of folksong and prayer is a revelatory George Eliot move that reminds us of the cultural conditions that underpin the mythic promise of religious afterlives as well as underscoring the depredations of memory cultures. Agatha and her two shadowy cousins are not only deindividualized as 'three old maids' known only by their first names, they are also instrumentalized in future cultures merely to fill out a playful song, simplified shadowy subjects of 'gentle jesting' (p. 64). Arguably, Agatha is revived again for longer life in this retelling by the poet, but both the bare presence of Agatha in that afterlife and the deliberate datedness of the cultural references (religious, folkloric, regional) anticipate even this revival's ultimate obsolescence.

Like 'Agatha', many of the poems in the volume are intertextual remediations drawn from classical, biblical, and folkloric sources in terms that might imply cultural preservation and retransmission of their selves, works, and deeds long after the death of the individual. But, as with the representation of Agatha, both the highly charged sense of what is lost when the body dies, as well as the persistent representation of the uncertain and precarious terms of legacy, ensure that a countermelody dominates. George Eliot's creative decisions about how to retell the tale of the Dionysian poet Arion, renowned for his musical talents, reinforce this point. It is a poem, as Wendy Williams observes, that 'marks the attitude of an artist coming to terms with physical mortality while finding value in success not for the artist's sake but for the sake of humanity'.³⁴ The original version of the story

³³ 'Agatha', in *Legend of Jubal*, pp. 47–67 (pp. 60, 64–67).

³⁴ Wendy S. Williams, "Arion": George Eliot's Exploration of Art and Influence after *Middlemarch*, *Victorian Poetry*, 54 (2016), 199–220 (p. 203). Williams's compelling reading of this poem suggests how it demonstrates George Eliot's conflicted

is recounted by Herodotus: it tells of Arion's capture by pirates who sought the treasures the poet had won at a recent music competition. The pirates offer him the choice between two types of ending, either a 'watery pall' in the ocean bed or 'wounds and burial' back on land.³⁵ George Eliot remains faithful to the outline of the original myth: namely, the poet sings a captivating song that buys him time, reasserts his otherworldly talent, and, in this version, stuns his captors with its heavenly beauty. Having performed his final song, Arion apparently commits suicide by throwing himself into the sea at his song's end, demonstrating little need for approbation, we are told, and, it is implied, refusing to gamble on the possibility of reprieve through the beauty of his art:

But lo! Arion leaped on high,
Ready, his descant done, to die;
Not asking, 'Is it well?'
Like a pierced eagle fell.³⁶

Eliot tellingly chooses to end the poem at this point. Arion's subsequent fantastical rescue by dolphins, sent by Apollo or gathered in response to his song, is not incorporated into her much curtailed version that keeps its focus firmly on death. Arion chooses his end and there is no sense of the possibility of ongoing life of the individual body, or I would suggest, of the body of work.

Another sacrifice of the self is recounted in George Eliot's retelling of the Midrash on the death of Moses. In Eliot's version, Moses, to lead his people, must evacuate his body and be but 'soul', to live on not in flesh but 'as Law'.³⁷ Unlike Arion, his resistance to this transformation is painful and poignant. The angels refuse to cooperate with God's request to pull him from his vibrant life and Moses's struggle to accept the death of his body is prolonged: 'I love this body with a clinging love' (p. 287), he memorably

attitude to the fame and financial success that followed the publication of *Middlemarch*. Williams explicates how George Eliot's revisions to Herodotus's version of the Arion story reinforce the point that she turned to poetry in the late 1860s and 1870s to lay claim to her disinterested investment in art, 'to elevate her literary standing and refashion her public image' for longer life (p. 201). I am suggesting that when read as part of the wider collection, the fragility of Arion's claims to immortality are heightened.

³⁵ 'Arion', in *Legend of Jubal*, pp. 293–97 (p. 295).

³⁶ 'Arion', p. 297. See Williams for an expert reading of George Eliot's foregrounding of her metrical skill in these final lines, through which, Williams suggests, George Eliot is deliberately showcasing the enduring craft of her own poetic 'song' (p. 209).

³⁷ 'The Death of Moses', in *Legend of Jubal*, pp. 283–89 (p. 289). For an extended reading of this poem, including its relationship to the work of her contemporaries, see Miyuki Amano, 'Unique Representations of Moses in the Works of Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot', *George Eliot—George Henry Lewes Studies*, 69 (2017), 160–73.

pleads to God with a jagged metrical pulse that echoes the racing, clinging heartbeat of the living being. The repetition of ‘love’ reinforces his plea to stay where he is, as he is and his reluctance to give up the body resonates beyond the elevation to that prolonged afterlife in law. That sense of the compelling claims of the physical, of the sensual life, is reinforced in ‘Sweet evenings come and go, love’ and the sonnet sequence, ‘Brother and Sister’. In each, we witness different but related emphasis on the primacy of sense experience that is dependent on the body and expressed as loving relation and connection between two individuals. ‘Sweet evenings come and go, love’ — a poem about change, partings, and personal annihilation — registers the persistence of Nature beyond the curtailed human life. The final stanza that gestures towards ‘a better time [to] come’ is undercut by the overwhelming song of loss: ‘The daisies will be there, love’, we are told, ‘The stars in heaven will shine’, those cycles of nature, resilient and indifferent to the affective rupture death will bring: ‘I shall not feel thy wish, love, | Nor thou my hand in thine.’³⁸

The title poem, ‘The Legend of Jubal’, a ‘full-blown allegory of the artist’s life’, as Rosemarie Bodenheimer puts it (p. 183), is ultimately an insistent acknowledgement of the artist’s obsolescence and, even more starkly, of art’s ultimate insignificance. The poet recounts the invention of music by Jubal in response to his tribe’s new consciousness of man’s mortality after the accidental death of a child. Having left home to spread his art throughout the world, Jubal eventually returns, following his realization of man’s inconsequentiality in the face of ‘a wider earth’ that will outlive and outlast our song:

But wheresoe’er he rose the heavens rose,
And the far-gazing mountain could disclose
Nought but a wider earth; until one height
Showed him the ocean stretched in liquid light,
And he could hear its multitudinous roar,
Its plunge and hiss upon the pebbled shore:
Then Jubal silent sat, and touched his lyre no more.³⁹

He returns home to die and to find his gift of music embedded and elevated in the culture of his people, but his personhood unwanted and unwelcome: ‘Jubal was but a name in each man’s faith’ (p. 37). He is subject to the depredations of time, a reminder of the fragility of the species, that, as Evans writes, ‘Earth’s destruction can destroy’ (p. 42), just as it will destroy his ongoingness in culture, and his gift of music.

³⁸ ‘Sweet evenings come and go, love’, in *Legend of Jubal*, pp. 279–80 (p. 280).

³⁹ ‘The Legend of Jubal’, in *Legend of Jubal*, pp. 3–43 (p. 29).

Rosemary Ashton has suggested the poem is about time, ‘a displaced expression of her anxiety about her writing past, present, and future’.⁴⁰ I would extend this to suggest this entire final volume carries that anxiety. The scientist and atheist in Marian Evans understood the reality of human transformation post-mortem. She takes an understandable gamble on the longevity of the human species made distinct by its appreciation of art, and in this volume, in particular, of music, as providing for a type of afterlife, while everywhere accepting the evacuation of personhood as an inevitable part of this process. The ‘artists’ and seers, in this volume, including Jubal, Agatha, Armgart, Arion, Moses, Stradivarius, and the ‘I’ voice taken for George Eliot in the final poem, are forgotten as individuals; variously, they fade, disappear from view, die, commit suicide. They leave behind only song or sound, and these traces only while human time prevails. That too will end. Lovers are torn from each other; friends disagree; a brother and sister grow apart. And though critics have emphasized the enshrining of immortality through art that features in so many of these poems, death pervades the collection.⁴¹ Her first reviewers were keenly alert to that darker tone. ‘The Legend of Jubal’, the ‘runaway favourite among those in the volume’, as Ruth Solie observes, was nonetheless received as decidedly ‘grim’.⁴² It is more ‘fitly termed a hymn in praise of death’, according to R. H. Hutton; while Henry James viewed it as emblematic of her ‘pessimistic philosophy’.⁴³ The only imagined afterlife with any distinct substance in this collection is the parodic Anthropocene world of ‘A Minor Prophet’. The sense of endings rather than futures is unsurprising: ‘The Legend of Jubal’ and ‘Armgart’ were among the poems written as Evans’s stepson Thornton Lewes was dying in the home she shared with George Henry Lewes. As she was finishing ‘Armgart’ she wrote to Edith Lytton (who was mourning her own uncle) that

for nearly a year, death seems to me my most intimate daily companion. I mingle the thought of it with every other [...]. I try to delight in the sunshine that will be when I shall never see it anymore. And I think it is possible for this sort of impersonal life to attain greater intensity, — possible for us to gain much more independence, than is usually believed, of the small bundle of facts that make our own personality.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 302.

⁴¹ See, for example, *The Complete Shorter Poetry of George Eliot*, ed. by Antonie Gerard van den Broek, 2 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), 1, p. xliii; and Williams, *George Eliot, Poetess*, pp. 137, 142.

⁴² Ruth A. Solie, “‘Music their larger soul’: George Eliot’s “The Legend of Jubal” and Victorian Musicality”, in *The Figure of Music in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry*, ed. by Phyllis Weliver (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 107–31 (p. 116).

⁴³ The remarks from Hutton and James are cited in Solie, p. 116.

⁴⁴ *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, v: 1869–1873 (1956), 107.

Remediating, remaking, revising 'George Eliot'

Two hundred years after her birth, the woman persists, though the ways both her personality and work are remembered are often underscored by that sense of ending that marked Evans's own view of her individual life. Rebecca Mead's *The Road to Middlemarch* offers a compelling example of the type of memory work that seeks to dynamically register the ongoing significance of the writer and her work while being alert to future forgetting as the undercurrent of that work. In part Mead's precarious and often tender balancing of competing claims of recording and letting go derives from the deeply personal and affective terms in which she preserves her George Eliot. As is the way with cultural memory, this afterlife evolves to meet the needs of its present moment and the different stages of the (auto) biographer-cum-critic's life. *Middlemarch* changes as Mead changes, inspiring her to leave home and driving her ambition, she tells us, in her youth; teaching her 'what home might mean, beyond a place to grow up and grow out of' in her 'middle life' (p. 266). And everywhere in these transitions, in this account of life and death and living, the sense of ending dominates. It is there in the slow erasure of George Eliot's presence in the homes she once inhabited, now either demolished or repurposed for other uses, each palimpsest pushing further and further from sight the contours of the writer's inhabited world. Or in the realization that this love letter to the writer's words and wisdom depends on the attentive reader for the breath of life.

All afterlives require supporting structures to enable their recording, transmission, and remediation beyond the individual investment such as Mead's. As different forms of mediation come to dominate different ages, adaptability to the dominant forms of the day provides for the vibrancy of the legacy. The case has been made that George Eliot's voice has not adapted well to the forms of twentieth-century mass media. Tim Dolin and Margaret Harris have shown, for instance, that unlike some of her near contemporaries, neither the writer nor her work have benefited from significant remediation in small or big screen formats. Cinematic treatments of Dickens's novels number over one hundred and fifty. Not so George Eliot's. There are reasons for these differences that have been explained with reference to the popular appeal of Dickens's work with its more overt use of pathos, vivid caricature, and melodramatic tactics, reasons that speak to what Cora Kaplan has diagnosed as his 'unassailable status' in the twenty-first century, as evidenced by the 'ubiquitous presence of his work in multiple media'.⁴⁵ Along with the Brontës, Shakespeare, and Austen, he continues to generate multiple media afterlives. For the mere twenty or so film versions

⁴⁵ Cora Kaplan, 'Neo-Victorian Dickens', in *Charles Dickens in Context*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 81–88 (p. 81).

of George Eliot's novels, Dolin notes, fourteen belong to the silent screen era, a period when so many nineteenth-century novelists enjoyed visibility in the new media mode that needed crafted, recognized stories to draw new audiences to the pioneering form that the number is hardly surprising. But there has never been a cinematic version of *Middlemarch*. *Wuthering Heights*, in contrast, has been adapted for the screen so often that there are now book-length critical studies on cinematic adaptations and remediations of that text.⁴⁶ Harris suggests that a 'reflex answer' to the problem of her poor screen afterlife might be the apparent untranslatability of George Eliot's narrative voice into cinematic mode, that voice that is so crucially central to the meaning, substance, and affective power of her novels, yet posing 'too great a challenge' to screen adaptation. Harris points to successful adaptations of Henry James's and Thomas Hardy's work to suggest the reflex answer is unsatisfactory but acknowledges she cannot explain the lack ('George Eliot on Stage and Screen', p. 27). Dolin's overview of the limited success of television adaptations of her work in the 1990s and early twenty-first century concludes with more certainty that screen adaptations 'do not finally do justice to Eliot's fiction' because '[her] fiction demands to be *read*: demands the active, enthusiastic pursuit of something more than you see there in front of you'.⁴⁷ Though the conclusion is hardly fair to the subtlety and suggestive communicative power of good film-making.

Dolin has argued more persuasively that second- and third-level educational institutions have been the key enablers of George Eliot's presence in memory cultures. Her early novels have been embedded in national curricula in English-speaking countries for over a century. The fiction, more broadly, has been enshrined as an exemplar of the realist novel and thus a cornerstone of the discipline of English in universities. The contending frequencies of her work have meant her novels persist as source texts to demonstrate the competing pulls and pushes of critical approaches to reading literature and culture in Anglo-inflected criticism since the 1940s, from formalism to deconstructionist theory to the 'return to history' at the end of the twentieth century, and so on into the preoccupations of the twenty-first century academy. Such state-sponsored preservation in second-level education curricula, in particular, has ensured that George Eliot's name is recognized by a general reading public, but arguably at some cost, as F. W. Kenyon's romance *The Consuming Flame: The Story of George Eliot* (1970) implies. Kenyon's is one of the first biofictions of the writer to draw on the archive-as-afterlife assembled by Gordon Haight in his groundbreaking

⁴⁶ Valérie V. Hazette, *'Wuthering Heights' on Film and Television: A Journey across Time and Cultures* (Bristol: Intellect, 2015) discusses screen adaptations, including British, French, Mexican, and Japanese versions.

⁴⁷ Dolin, pp. 248–49, 249, emphasis in original; Philip Davis's biography, *The Transferred Life*, would suggest as much.

biography and multivolume edition of George Eliot's letters. In the flyleaf to his imagined biography, Kenyon's intention to write back against the prescriptive cultural memory acts of 'canonisation' is explicit: 'Those who suffered in school from the compulsory reading of her works', we are told, 'will certainly not suffer from this account of her private life — the scandal of the strait-laced Victorian world she astounded.'⁴⁸ This work implies that in the context of a post-1960s sexual revolution, the George Eliot that needed to be recovered and remembered is one who speaks to the more liberal sexual temper of those times. This George Eliot replaces Gordon Haight's needy woman with a decidedly desiring and animated body, who declares to her Coventry-based friend Sara Hennell in a discussion about sex outside of marriage, 'I set no very great store on conventional respectability' (Kenyon, p. 88). Her London years that follow soon after detail her emotional and sexual relationship with publisher and owner of the *Westminster Review*, John Chapman, and then with Lewes. Her first sexual encounter with Chapman, we are told, leaves Marian feeling 'that a certain unmentionable part of herself was purring like a recently weaned kitten' (Kenyon, p. 138).

Almost fifty years later, Dinitia Smith's *The Honeymoon* extends Kenyon's overt celebration of this 'scandalous' woman to offer an even more intimate version of the writer that is structured around those dependent sexual relationships with men. Looking back on her life from her torturous honeymoon in Venice with John Cross, Marian's erotic encounters, from her first liaison with Coventry ribbon manufacturer and radical Charles Bray to her platonic marriage to her 'nephew' John Cross, are played out in terms that emphasize the psychosexual as her defining impulse. Smith's biofiction recalls Brenda Maddox's popular biography, *George Eliot: Novelist, Lover, Wife*, which keeps most of its attention on the lover and wife at the expense of the novelist.⁴⁹ Maddox sheds new light on Cross's apparent suicide attempt in Venice on honeymoon with his new wife and relates his depression to family history and repressed sexuality. Once again, new archival material produces new afterlives. Maddox's account provides grounds for an original fictional portrait of George Eliot in a complex, sympathetic, and fluid relationship with Cross, as we might expect in a twenty-first century that has begun to mainstream gender diversity. What does not change, however, is the narrative of her dependence on male approbation, a defining trope along with emphasis on George Eliot's unattractive and awkward body.

These tropes have their origin in what George Griffith has termed the George Eliot visit narrative, narratives predominantly circulated in private

⁴⁸ F. W. Kenyon, *The Consuming Flame: The Story of George Eliot* (London: Hutchinson, 1970), inside cover jacket.

⁴⁹ Brenda Maddox, *George Eliot: Novelist, Lover, Wife* (New York: Harper, 2009).

correspondence, and very occasionally published first in the American press by visitors to her Sunday salons in the 1860s. These accounts were recirculated in the British press thereafter and revived with particular frequency, unsurprisingly to fill the vacuum that followed the initial reporting of her death (Griffith, p. 28). With their focus on her personal appearance, they plugged a particular gap. Circulation of images of the woman were extremely scarce until the publication of *George Eliot's Life* in 1885 by Cross. Paul Rajon's etching of Frederic Burton's head and shoulder portrait from 1865 is reprinted in the inside cover of that volume. Throughout the later 1880s, reproductions of the scant number of sketches, images, and of the two photographs that did exist began to emerge in the periodical press, a medium increasingly dependent on illustration and photographs as it moved to the end of the century. The initial dearth of evidence, however, gave these eyewitness reports of her physical appearance more traction. Margaret Harris has shrewdly observed that, in general, these accounts 'are consistent in their factual descriptions, but not in their subjective responses'.⁵⁰ This is a crucial point: while the two photographs and the handful of other portraits and sketches, including some recently discovered images purporting to represent the writer in the earlier part of her life, give us some sense of the real woman's appearance, the relentless emphasis on negative responses to that appearance tell another story.⁵¹ It is a story that is being repeated well into the second decade of this century as fictional representations of the writer demonstrate.

These original reports of the writer are dominated by negative references to her plainness or ugliness, usually counterbalanced with positive accounts of her luminous eyes and deep, melodious voice. The momentum gathers around binary positioning: her masculine features, her feminine nature; her big head, her tiny body; her love and ease in rural environments and her awkwardness, diffidence, or shyness in social spaces; the utter dependence on men of this most famous woman. Here we have a physical rendering of the dichotomy captured in the *Academy's* obituary cited at the beginning of this article: the writer of English romance; the leader of English thought. It is a limited repertoire because both the visit narrative and obituary or biographical sketch are limited genres. It is also

⁵⁰ Margaret Harris, 'Personal Appearance', in *Oxford Readers Companion to George Eliot*, ed. by John Rignall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 13–15 (p. 15).

⁵¹ For discussion of images of George Eliot and their cultural and biographical significance, see Griffiths, 'Face as Legible Text'; Paul Goldman, 'A New Portrait of George Eliot?', *British Library Journal*, 8 (1982), 174–81 <<https://www.bl.uk/ebj/1982articles/pdf/article11.pdf>> [accessed 25 January 2020] (p. 174); Kathryn Hughes, 'George Eliot: Is this a new portrait of the author as a young woman', *Guardian*, 5 May 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/05/george-eliot-is-this-a-new-portrait-of-the-author-as-a-young-woman>> [accessed 25 January 2020].

a compelling mnemonic system that is linguistic, symbolic, and performative, a collective imaginary framed by knowledge gaps, gendered prejudices, and nostalgia, as manifested by the appreciation of her early fiction of rural life in particular.

In such accounts a memory field is established, whether accurate or not, most often a hotchpotch of both fact and fiction. The circulation and prolonged replaying of such narratives of dubious accuracy but affective power in obituaries and memorial essays in the aftermath of her death enshrined the memory of the writer in such particular terms and so effectively that the trope of the horse-faced women with the big jaw and immense ugliness has persisted as a negative dimension that somehow needs explaining. The pattern is so widespread we can call it a template. Just four days after her death, the *Liverpool Mercury* reported the words of an apparent acquaintance, unnamed, who claims a friendship of twelve years with the writer, ‘which only closed with her death’. The sense of entering onto a ‘higher moral plane’ in her company is recounted; the feeling of wanting to live a better life and be a better person having left her company; the full force of her personality is registered ‘as great as her books’. The wise narrator is folded into the real person in this move. Interwoven with this awed praise are details of her physical appearance that draw out the standard bifurcation of the body/mind: ‘In every line of her face there was power, and about the jaw and mouth a prodigious massiveness, which might have inspired awe had it not been tempered by the most gracious smile.’ The short piece concludes: ‘She seemed to live upon air and the rest of her body was as light and fragile as her countenance and intellect were massive.’⁵² The following February, Grace Greenwood’s piece for the *Independent* repeated some of the same tropes. The focus on the features is relentless and builds its own memorable power through repetition: ‘it is over the massive and craggy features so often belonging to men and women of genius that the sunlight of souls plays most gloriously’, we are told by way of reconciling the massive features with the massive legacy.⁵³

The fact that recent historical fictions by Souhami and Duncker put Gwendolen Harleth rather than Marian Evans centre stage signals from the outset the privileging of the creative fiction over its creator. We imagine the writer who sought to promote her work and not her self might have approved, were it not for the terms in which she too is remediated in these works. The championing of Gwendolen has a long history. Early adaptations of the novel, and in concert with their historical moment, repeated the

⁵² ‘The Late George Eliot’, *Liverpool Mercury*, 28 December 1880, p. 8.

⁵³ Grace Greenwood, ‘Three Great Women’, in *Stories and Sketches* (New York: Tait, 1892), pp. 38–49 (first publ. in *Independent*, 17 February 1881, pp. 1–2), cited in Collins, *Interviews and Recollections*, p. 39.

antisemitism of so many of the novel's critics, as John Picker, for instance has shown. He observes that

the sequel usually represents a means to honor the power of the original and an attempt to recapture and further extend that power. But with Eliot, and especially with *Deronda*, the sequel is a reproach. In aesthetic and ideological ways, the sequels and related 'variations' on *Deronda* offer critical attacks on Eliot's plot, structure, and characters, but especially her treatment of the Jewish Question.⁵⁴

Neither Souhami nor Duncker repeat the racism of these early sequels and they are both careful to expose antisemitic biases. But the air of reproach persists in the generous attention to the fictional heroine and uneasy, often vicious depiction of the writer. In both novels there is an overt critique of George Eliot's unsympathetic representation of the very modern Gwendolen Harleth, while the novelist is presented in caricature. George Eliot is set up as a rival to her daring and beautiful heroine in an edgy and perverse version of some as yet unwritten Greek drama: Sophie/Gwendolen vying with her creator for the love of another character (Daniel Deronda or a substitute for him).

In Duncker's shamelessly playful, postmodern, and clumsily irreverent *Sophie and the Sybil*, George Eliot makes an early appearance. On the very first page our hero, Max, encounters the aged George Eliot in the publishing house of his brother, Wolfgang Duncker, namesake of the author and Evans's actual German publishers:

His first reaction was disappointment. She was old. Her liver-spotted hand and wrinkled skin smelt slightly of cinnamon mixed with an odd whiff of alcohol [...]. A fragile veil was lifted away from her forehead, magnifying the long, thin, countenance, the massive jaw and the vast expressive eyes. The lady is old. The lady is ugly. The lady has wonderful eyes. (pp. 3–4)

We are in the territory repeatedly covered by the early commentators on the woman: the unattractive body and the winning sympathy conveyed through the eyes and rare smile. That smile widens in Duncker's account in tellingly graphic terms: "The row of revealed teeth gleamed like tusks, yellowing gigantic and uneven. Max inclined towards her, amazed by the scale of her remaining fangs. One or two gaps appeared, giving the untoppled columns the tragic aspect of a ruined temple" (p. 4). The aged, crumbling mass of a body is pitched throughout the novel against the youthful beauty of Sophie. The chapter ends with George Eliot bowing 'her massive

⁵⁴ See John M. Picker, 'George Eliot and the Sequel Question', *New Literary History*, 37 (2006), 361–88 (p. 363).

head' and leaving. Sophie's insecurity about what is repeatedly represented as the psychosexual dependence of 'the Sibyl' on male approval builds in waves of increasing intensity. In the final section of the novel, Sophie is in Venice with Max after the birth of their child. In the 'Stygian shades of the Academia', she overhears 'George Eliot' deliver a characteristically detailed and dull lecture on Bellini's *Madonna degli Alberetti*. Duncker repeats her opening images of the writer, through Sophie's eyes rather than Max's this time, but echoing exactly the same tropes and even the same refrain: 'A fragile veil was lifted away from her forehead, magnifying the long, thin countenance, the massive jaw and the vast expressive eyes. The lady is old. The lady is ugly. The lady has wonderful eyes' (p. 258). Casaubon's dull monologues, all 'semi-colons and parenthesis',⁵⁵ are drawn out in this parodic reversal of the dried up man and the ardent, fertile young woman as Sophie fixes on the young male companion receiving the sermon: 'She has hypnotised this young man, like a snake swallowing a toad' (Duncker, p. 259). In the novel's 'Finale', the narrator (the metafictional Duncker) reinforces Max and Sophie's vividly venomous representation of the gross physicality and sexual obsessiveness of the woman by telling us the 'facts': that Cross's biography downplayed the sexual life of his wife entirely, 'and he certainly doesn't point out, as more recent biographers have done, that George Eliot flung herself at more or less every man who took the slightest interest in her' and, for good measure, we are reminded, 'she lured the women too' (p. 279). It is a mock-knowing but gauche reading of Evans, of her biographers, and of the many women, such as Edith Simcox and Elma Stuart, who were personally devoted to her, and to preserving her memory. In particular, it whitewashes those women who early championed her legacy against patriarchal narrowing of the artist, including her pioneering biographers and critics, such as Mathilde Blind, Anne Fremantle, and Anna T. Kitchel. While so obviously striving to bring the sex back in, Duncker nonetheless replicates rather than interrogates the personal memorial pieces that took such a strongly gendered line. This overblown caricature does damage to the very radical and complex gendered, psychological, and sexual dimensions of the woman and the work that her early critics and subsequent scholars — including Barrett and biographers from Ruby Redinger and Gillian Beer to Rosemarie Bodenheimer and Nancy Henry — have brought to illuminating light in different ways. The strenuously personalized depiction of the writer that Duncker produces of course challenges Evans's own withdrawal from 'presence' in any afterlife described in the first part of this article. Although we could also ask how 'present' she is in these neo-historical fictions written so audaciously to their own historical moment.

⁵⁵ George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, ed. by Gregory Maertz (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2004), p. 83 (Chap. 8).

Souhami's *Gwendolen*, a second-person narrative addressed by the eponymous heroine to the great love of her life, Daniel Deronda, is less joyfully and outrageously vicious in its depiction of George Eliot. Souhami positions her Gwendolen in terms that strive to recuperate the silenced inner life and unwritten afterlife of one of George Eliot's most intriguing heroines (intriguing, I would suggest, precisely because that inner life is never fully parsed). In contrast Souhami explicates Gwendolen's every thought and feeling for Daniel and outlines the full force of marital rape committed by her brutal husband, Henleigh Grandcourt. George Eliot appears much later in this narrative as a friend of Daniel's guardian Hugo Mallinger in terms that again blur the boundaries between fictional and real worlds, as in Duncker's text. Souhami is more interested in the process of fictional creation: George Eliot observes and draws out Gwendolen's story when Gwendolen attends her famous Sunday salons at the Priory. The author is represented as epitomizing the omniscient narrator at one point by asking Gwendolen questions about the nature of her relationship with Grandcourt in ways that leave Gwendolen feeling entirely 'unnerved':

I feared she had power over me, a psychic ability to read my mind and innermost thoughts [...]. I wondered if she disliked me because I was beautiful [...]. Yet I was intrigued by her and hoped she would advise me what to do next with my life.
(pp. 218–19)

Once again, she is presented as love rival: the writer's intellectual companionship with Daniel produces a 'stab of jealousy' in Gwendolen, her 'heavy face [...] big nose, severe jaw and rather tired eyes' are recounted, 'so plain and so fiercely clever', and she is 'condescending' in her weighty, scholarly conversation (p. 214). Trev Broughton rightly asserts that Souhami's and Duncker's depictions of the writer 'contain more rotten teeth and plainer features than even the cattiest commentator ascribed to her at the time'.⁵⁶

Conclusion

There is no memory without separation from the past and without forgetting. There is no cultural memory without selection. Without all being part amnesiac, we could not function. We would be doomed to the fate of Jorge Luis Borges's Funes the Memorious (1942), paralysed in an ever-present 'vertiginous world' with his 'implacable memory' where nothing, no sensation, word, image, sound, or idea is ever forgotten.⁵⁷ And just as we have

⁵⁶ Trev Broughton, 'George Eliot's "after-throbs"', *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 July 2015, p. 19.

⁵⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, 'Funes the Memorious', trans. by James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 87–95 (pp. 95, 93).

to forget as communities (as opposed to individuals, subject to the sudden returns of repressed or sense memory), we choose what to remember as communities. ‘Cultural memory’, as Ann Rigney argues, ‘is always emergent, dependent on being periodically reiterated and adapted to new circumstances through an interplay between particular memory sites (“reusable texts and images”), acts of remembrance and shifting social frameworks’ (p. 19). In such a context, we have to ask on the basis of these versions of George Eliot, how our shifting social frameworks have shifted so little in some respects. ‘There’s a lot more to George Eliot than her less than conventionally beautiful appearance and her possession of a sexual drive — as there is to every other woman whose looks and sexual drive have been the subject of popular commentary’, Rebecca Mead is compelled to remind us in 2013 in the *New Yorker*. She was writing in response to a tweet from Lena Dunham, creator, writer, director, and star of the hugely popular HBO series *Girls* (2012–17), declaring that George Eliot’s Wikipedia page was ‘the soapiest most scandalous thing you’ll read this month. Thesis: she was ugly AND horny!’.⁵⁸ Yet the obsessive focus on the big masculine head and small feminine body; the dependent seeker of male attention and craggy witch/bewitching sibyl; the capacious thinker turned Casaubon bore; the parasitic manipulator of other people’s truths and miner of other people’s lives all persist and overwhelm in these most recent biofictions.

Two hundred years after the birth of the remarkable Mary Anne Evans — editor, translator, journalist, poet, novelist, intellectual, historian, humourist, European — we can continue to reimagine other George Eliots, as Gillian Wearing’s recent film or this collection of articles suggest. Her hope, however hedged, was for the continued relevance of her work. We might take note then of an intervention by a British-based professor of European languages published in an Austrian daily newspaper. He proposed (in February 2019) that some wisdom and direction to inform frustrating, ongoing Brexit negotiations might be gleaned from returning to that great novel of political reform, *Middlemarch*. He suggested returning, in particular, to the mediating intelligence of its author who, throughout this work, as in all her writings, exposed the blustering positioning of the opportunistic in search of power and personal advantage: ‘The discussion about Brexit is going round in circles. Maybe British parliamentarians should have a look at George Eliot now and again?’⁵⁹ Maybe indeed.

⁵⁸ Rebecca Mead, ‘George Eliot’s Ugly Beauty’, *New Yorker*, 19 September 2013 <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/george-eliot-ugly-beauty>> [accessed 25 January 2020].

⁵⁹ Ben Hutchinson, ‘Die Diskussion um den Brexit dreht sich fruchtlos im Kreis. Vielleicht sollten die britischen Parlamentarier zwischendurch einmal George Eliot lesen’, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 2 February 2019 <<https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/ueber-den-brexit-reden-die-literatur-machts-vor-ld.1455786>> [accessed 25 January 2020]. I thank my colleague, Associate Professor Gillian Pye, for drawing this piece to my attention and for her translation into English of the original.