

Afterword

John Rignall

Among the many tributes to George Eliot in this bicentenary year has been a small exhibition at the Herbert Art Gallery in Coventry which is attached to the few permanent exhibits about George Eliot and assembles objects, books, and pictures related to Marian Evans's early years in the city. In the catalogue there is a photograph from about 1919 of the study at Bird Grove, presumably much like it was when she lived there with her father from 1841 to 1849. A simple table and chair face a wall on the right while light floods in from a large sash window to the left of anyone seated there. It was here, we may assume, that she worked on her first book, the translation of David Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1846); and one of the exhibits is a 20-inch-high statuette of Bertel Thorvaldsen's Christ, *Christus Consolator*, which, according to Cross she had in front of her as she wrote.¹ There is also the engraving by the American J. C. Buttrey of Paul Delaroche's painting of Christ's head which serves as the frontispiece of her translation. The context of that first work is completed by Sara Hennell's copy of the *Life of Jesus*, and portraits of Dr Brabant and a less well-known albumen print of his daughter Rufa who began the task of translation before handing it on to Marian, showing a young woman with an intelligent and penetrating gaze. Rufa married Charles Christian Hennell whose portrait hangs here, and there are other tokens of Marian's crucial friendship with the Brays and Hennells, including further portraits and copies of the books they published. As Laurel Brake maintains, it was through the Brays that Marian first had contact with the world of print publication. There is also Cara Bray's painting of the view from the window of Rosehill and her sketchbook, open at a page of two early portraits of Marian, one of which bears a distinct resemblance to Princess Louise's much later sketch of the novelist at a concert in London. The young Marian already has the contours of the famous figure she was to become.

This miscellany of objects not only offers glimpses of George Eliot's early adult life in which her career as a writer began, but, if one were to include her Broadwood piano, which was not on display, it also points to the range of interests in literature, philosophy, and the arts that is addressed

¹ *George Eliot's Life*, arr. and ed. by J. W. Cross, new edn (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1886), p. 82.

in this collection of articles. In a very early letter written when she was nineteen, she defines her own mind as essentially miscellaneous, filled as it is by ‘such an assemblage of disjointed specimens of history, ancient and modern, scraps of poetry picked up from Shakespeare, Cowper, Wordsworth and Milton, newspaper topics, morsels of Addison and Bacon, Latin verbs, geometry entomology and chemistry, reviews and metaphysics’.² The self-deprecation is characteristic. She describes the state of her mind as ‘more than usually chaotic’, but then displays her precocious intellectual control by ordering the supposed chaos with a deft simile drawn from yet another branch of learning, palaeontology, likening her mind to

a stratum of conglomerated fragments that shews here a jaw and rib of some ponderous quadruped, there a delicate alt-relievo of some fernlike plant, tiny shells, and mysterious nondescripts, encrusted and united with some varied and uninteresting but useful stone. (*Eliot Letters*, 1, 29)

The analogy implies depth as well as variety, and the miscellaneous quality of her mind could just as well be defined in terms of the richness and complexity that were going to characterize the mind of the novelist. The extraordinary range and variety of her knowledge is particularly evident in the chapter epigraphs of her last three novels where, as Eirian Yem nicely describes it in a way which catches a faint echo of Marian’s palaeontological image of miscellany, ‘the author becomes a travelling naturalist, who has brought back fragments from foreign lands to intrigue, amuse, and educate the reader.’ *Daniel Deronda* (1876), whose epigraphs are longer and wider ranging than in the two preceding novels, becomes ‘a true cabinet of curiosities’ in this respect, and Yem explores intriguing affinities with that other curiosity, Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, which George Eliot reread during the composition of her last novel.

It is characteristic of the current direction of George Eliot criticism that *Daniel Deronda* features prominently in this collection, with the articles by Carolyn Burdett and Josephine McDonagh, as well as Yem’s discussion of its epigraphs. This was the case, too, at the International Conference ‘George Eliot 2019’ in Leicester in July 2019, where two panels were devoted entirely to the novel, and the number of papers which engaged with *Daniel Deronda* was matched only by the number on *Middlemarch* (1871–72), both well ahead of any other of Eliot’s works. Perhaps critical interest in the late work says something about Eliot’s preparedness to contemplate a future that she will no longer inhabit and about which she begins to think in radical ways. Carolyn Burdett sees even sympathy, so closely aligned by Eliot

² *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–78), 1: 1836–1851 (1954), 29.

with her novelistic method, undergoing transformation in *Daniel Deronda*, becoming a stranger force when read alongside its occult twin, antipathy. Helen Small, turning to Eliot's final work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), focuses on the treatment of the future in 'Shadows of the Coming Race', tracing Eliot's unresolved but pungent thinking about the technology of literary authority.

Middlemarch and *Daniel Deronda* were also the focus of Henry James's most important critical writing on George Eliot, which is marked by that doubleness that Rosemary Ashton succinctly defines as 'a tendency to praise and damn in a single phrase' in her analysis of James's accounts of his two ill-starred visits to the novelist. What he describes after his first visit as her 'circumference' — larger than in any woman he had ever seen — is his idiosyncratic term for the scope of her mind that is most fully displayed in her novels of the 1870s, and it is that circumference that largely explains their prominence in contemporary criticism, embracing as it does in the case of *Daniel Deronda* questions of cultural identity, gender, sexuality, religious faith, empire, and realism.

On James's first visit George Eliot and Lewes were preoccupied with the latter's dying son Thornton, while the second came shortly before Lewes's death, which may explain the uncharacteristic brusqueness with which Lewes treated him. That death removed the central support of George Eliot's career as a writer, but, despite her devastating grief, it did not reduce her to helplessness and paralysis, and Joanne Shattock's careful analysis of the Blackwood archives and her correspondence with John Blackwood helps us to understand why. However important Lewes was in the dealings with Blackwood, George Eliot established her own relationship with the publisher and was firm in defending her aesthetic principles and in resisting his suggestions of changes to the fiction to accommodate the prejudices of the readership. In the early exchanges between them, as Margaret Oliphant later shrewdly observed, George Eliot 'does her business herself, with the clear head and strong intelligence which might be divined from her work' (quoted by Shattock).

That 'strong intelligence' was already manifest in the arduous translations she undertook before turning to fiction, and it is a mark of that large circumference of which James writes that it is European thinkers and philosophers who are most readily brought to mind by her novels. Isobel Armstrong makes a strong case here for the importance of Hegel and his master/slave dialectic in her reading of the fiction; while at a Philosophy and Literature Symposium at the University of Warwick in December 2019 the novelist's connections with Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer were explored. European relations were also the subject of an earlier conference at the Victoria and Albert Museum in June 2019: 'Two Centuries of Anglo-German Correspondences: Celebrating Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, George Eliot and Theodor Fontane'; while the coincidence of birth

year between monarch and novelist was celebrated, too, in May 2019 at a conference at Loughborough on ‘Queen Victoria and George Eliot: Lives & Afterlives 1819–2019’.

George Eliot’s large circumference took in, of course, the other arts and, like all her interests, her knowledge of music, sculpture, and painting inform the fiction in ways which this collection richly illuminates. Delia da Sousa Correa shows in fascinating detail how allusions to works by Handel and Purcell contribute to the intricate structure of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), with some reference, too, to ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’ (1857) where passionate feelings are also bound up with music. As she claims, the ‘extent to which musical allusions are integral to the intertextual forces at work in the composition of literary works and their evolving reception’ is ‘routinely overlooked’, and her analysis reveals just how much is missed by a casual reading of the fiction. We certainly benefit from having the music referred to in the text added to those experiences which form the context of our reading.

Purcell and Handel were already the music of the past for George Eliot, but that past is brought to bear both on the time of the fiction and on the present in which we are reading. Similarly, Gail Marshall shows how the classical statues and sculptures alluded to or described in the novels are liberated from the time of their composition and the moment they depict and are made to enter into a dialogue with the present and future. Female characters like Dorothea are not restrictively defined by the sculptures to which they are compared, for the novelist exploits the narrative possibilities implied in the classical statue to transcend the rarefied moment that it represents and to show how women’s lives are not confined by the bounds of their physical form. Sculpture can thus be seen as one of the means by which her realism explores and expands the representation of women and challenges the reader to embrace new ways of seeing and understanding.

Painting, too, was from the first associated by George Eliot with her own practice as a writer of realist fiction, most famously in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* (1859) where she celebrates the rare and precious truthfulness of those ‘faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence’ that she finds in Dutch paintings. It is another, much later, Dutch painter whose connections with George Eliot’s work Ruth Livesey explores, since one of the happy coincidences of this 200th anniversary year has been the Tate Gallery exhibition of ‘Van Gogh and Britain’ with its revelation of the artist’s familiarity with English literature and with the fiction of George Eliot in particular. His letters reveal that *Felix Holt* (1866) was a particular favourite of his and that, in one of his most famous paintings, *Bedroom in Arles*, he was attempting to arrive at ‘an effect of simplicity’ such as he found described in that novel. Livesey takes this as her starting point in an intriguing comparative study which shows how Van Gogh’s interest in George Eliot has a legacy in the forms and techniques of his painting. Both artists experiment with

colour and perspective to present a radical new vision of everyday rural life. Just as Van Gogh takes the scene of Hetty setting out from Stoniton on her journey in hope and describes it in terms of paintings he knows, so, as Livesey argues, one constant feature of George Eliot's style is 'the evocation of a painting that then loosens into life and movement'. Interestingly, it was the novelist's early work that seized Van Gogh's interest most fully, and Livesey's analysis makes a strong case for the innovative achievement of the early stories and novels in creating the 'radiant realism' that writer and painter have in common. The emphasis here on George Eliot's radical vision is indicative of a welcome readiness in contemporary criticism to challenge the once prevailing view of her as an essentially conservative writer who did nothing to question the status quo. Josephine McDonagh similarly stresses her radical power of interrogation in demonstrating how the treatment of hospitality to strangers in *Silas Marner* (1861) and *Daniel Deronda* raises uncomfortable questions about refuge and asylum, the position of women, and the nature of colonial settlement, that are left unresolved at the end of the novel.

As a footnote to Livesey's article, one might add that the residue of Van Gogh's reading of George Eliot may be present even where radiant colour plays no part, as, for instance, in a letter of March 1884 where he is describing his drawing of a loom. It seems to be a drawing that is still in progress and he distinguishes between what he is attempting and the kind of drawing of the same machine that a mechanical engineer would produce, describing his loom in graphic, even Gothic terms:

When that black monster of begrimed oak with all its slats somehow shows up like this against the greyness in which it stands, then *there*, in the centre of it, sits a black ape or goblin or apparition, and clatters with those slats from early to late.³

He claims that this drawing would be more haunting than a mere design and one in which 'you couldn't help thinking of the *workman*', since, if he can find the right model, 'then the black apparition in the background must become the centre, [...] the *heart*, and the most felt, worked up' (emphases in original). This central focus on the toiling weaver recalls a scene in the first of George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) which, when Van Gogh first encountered it in 1876, he pronounced 'a beautiful book' (Letter 70 (19 February 1876)). In 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton' attention shifts at one point from the unprepossessing figure of

³ Vincent Van Gogh to Anthon van Rappard, Letter 437 (c. 13 March 1884), in *Vincent van Gogh — The Letters*, ed. by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, 6 vols (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum and Huygens ING, 2009). All letters are cited by number and date in the translations provided in the online version at <<http://vangoghletters.org>> [accessed 21 February 2020].

Barton himself, as he is walking through the sleet to the workhouse on a winter's day, and focuses instead on the surrounding countryside:

A flat ugly district this; depressing enough to look at, even on the brightest days. The roads are black with coal-dust, the brick houses dingy with smoke; and at that time — the time of the handloom weavers — every other cottage had a loom at its window, where you might see a pale, sickly-looking man or woman pressing a narrow chest against a board, and doing a sort of tread-mill work with legs and arms.⁴

Where Van Gogh conveys the dehumanizing nature of the work by representing the loom as a monster and its operator as 'a black ape or goblin or apparition', George Eliot brings out its destructive effects by focusing on the frail human being who is condemned to perform this 'tread-mill work with legs and arms'. Here, indeed, Van Gogh's apparition does 'become the centre, [...] the *heart*' of the scene and the most 'felt' element in the composition; and it raises the question of whether a memory of George Eliot's words may not have contributed to his understanding of the weaver's lot as he worked on his drawing.

George Eliot was familiar with Lessing's argument about the difference between literature and the plastic arts, but in her own writing she moved as freely as Van Gogh between paintings and literary texts as comparable forms of art, most notably in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*. Had she lived to see Van Gogh's work, she would surely have counted his drawings and paintings of everyday life, however brilliantly they diverged from the art she knew, as belonging to those 'Dutch paintings' which she admired. The painting of his simple bedroom at Arles could be classed among the kind of Dutch interiors she praised: 'those homes with their tin pans' and 'their brown pitchers' which embodied 'the faithful representing of commonplace things'. He for his part would doubtless have been pleased to be counted among those 'men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how the light of heaven falls on them'.⁵ George Eliot's words could be read as a description of the kind of artists he himself was most attracted to, 'those artists in whom I see the soul most at work' (Letter 332 (c. 21 March 1883)), and whom he would surely have wished to emulate.

Van Gogh's admiring response to George Eliot is one surprising aspect of her afterlife, whose precariousness she was all too aware of, as

⁴ George Eliot, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. by Thomas A. Noble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 3–64 (p. 20 (Chap. 2)).

⁵ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. by Stephen Gill (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 224 (Chap. 17).

Fionnuala Dillane shows in this collection with particular reference to *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems* (1874). The bicentenary celebrations, it is pleasing to note, were not inclined to emphasize the combination of physical plainness and clamant sexuality that, as Dillane points out, have been the focus of recent fictional representations of the novelist. The symposia that were held in Senate House and the British Library on 21 November 2019 touched interestingly on the more positive ways in which the novelist lives on: in the adaptations for television by Andrew Davies, for example, and in her impact on contemporary writers like Deborah Moggach and Sathnam Sanghera. Two of George Eliot's blood relations, Matthew and Serena Evans, direct descendants of her brother Isaac, represented a more intimate kind of afterlife. Serena, who in her youth had been entirely indifferent to her illustrious forebear, discovered as an actress the power of her family connection when she revealed it to a particularly difficult woman director, who immediately sank to her knees in front of her in homage. Both these symposia concluded with the most effective demonstration of how George Eliot lives on, despite her own doubts, when, at Senate House, Serena joined Gabriel Woolf in a reading which brought to amusing life Casaubon's proposal to Dorothea; and, at the British Library, Juliet Stevenson, another great admirer of the novelist, read the opening of *Middlemarch* in a way that brought out the arresting power and subtlety of the fiction.

The enduring appeal of George Eliot has been amply demonstrated by the various conferences and celebrations of this bicentenary year, among them this collection of articles which offers eloquent testimony to the extraordinary range and lasting richness of her writing.