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The Life of George Eliot, by John Morley**

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ESSAY 4: THE LIFE OF GEORGE ELIOT ***

**CRITICAL
MISCELLANIES**

BY

JOHN MORLEY

VOL. III.

Essay 4: The Life of George Eliot

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THE LIFE OF GEORGE ELIOT

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THE LIFE OF GEORGE ELIOT.^[1]

The illustrious woman who is the subject of these volumes makes a remark to her publisher which is at least as relevant now as it was then. Can nothing be done, she asks, by dispassionate criticism towards the reform of our national habits in the matter of literary biography? 'Is it

anything short of odious that as soon as a man is dead his desk should be raked, and every insignificant memorandum which he never meant for the public be printed for the gossiping amusement of people too idle to reread his books?' Autobiography, she says, at least saves a man or a woman that the world is curious about, from the publication of a string of mistakes called Memoirs. Even to autobiography, however, she confesses her deep repugnance unless it can be written so as to involve neither self-glorification nor impeachment of others—a condition, by the way, with which hardly any, save Mill's, can be said to comply. 'I like,' she proceeds, 'that *He being dead yet speaketh* should have quite another meaning than that' (iii. 226, 297, 307). She shows the same fastidious apprehension still more clearly in another way. 'I have destroyed almost all my friends' letters to me,' she says, 'because they were only intended for my eyes, and could only fall into the hands of persons who knew little of the writers if I allowed them to remain till after my death. In proportion as I love every form of piety—which is venerating love—I hate hard curiosity; and, unhappily, my experience has impressed me with the sense that hard curiosity is the more common temper of mind' (ii. 286). There is probably little difference among us in respect of such experience as that.

[1] *George Eliot's Life*. By J.W. Cross. Three volumes. Blackwood and Sons. 1885.

Much biography, perhaps we might say most, is hardly above the level of that 'personal talk,' to which Wordsworth sagely preferred long barren silence, the flapping of the flame of his cottage fire, and the under-song of the kettle on the hob. It would not, then, have much surprised us if George Eliot had insisted that her works should remain the only commemoration of her life. There be some who think that those who have enriched the world with great thoughts and fine creations, might best be content to rest unmarked 'where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,' leaving as little work to the literary executor, except of the purely crematory sort, as did Aristotle, Plato, Shakespeare, and some others whose names the world will not willingly let die. But this is a stoic's doctrine; the objector may easily retort that if it had been sternly acted on, we should have known very very little about Dr. Johnson, and nothing about Socrates.

This is but an ungracious prelude to some remarks upon a book, which must be pronounced a striking success. There will be very little dispute as to the fact that the editor of these memorials of George Eliot has done his work with excellent taste, judgment, and sense. He found no autobiography nor fragment of one, but he has skilfully shaped a kind of autobiography by a plan which, so far as we know, he is justified in calling new, and which leaves her life to write itself in extracts from her letters and journals. With the least possible obtrusion from the biographer, the original pieces are formed into a connected whole 'that combines a narrative of day-to-day life with the play of light and shade which only letters written in serious moods can give.' The idea is a good one, and Mr. Cross deserves great credit for it. We may hope that its success will encourage imitators. Certainly there are drawbacks. We miss the animation of mixed narrative. There is, too, a touch of monotony in listening for so long to the voice of a single speaker addressing others who are silent behind a screen. But Mr. Cross could not, we think, have devised a better way of dealing with his material: it is simple, modest, and effective.

George Eliot, after all, led the life of a studious recluse, with none of the bustle, variety, motion, and large communication with the outer world, that justified Lockhart and Moore in making a long story of the lives of Scott and Byron. Even here, among men of letters, who were also men of action and of great sociability, are not all biographies too long? Let any sensible reader turn to the shelf where his Lives repose; we shall be surprised if he does not find that nearly every one of them, taking the present century alone, and including such splendid and attractive subjects as Goethe, Hume, Romilly, Mackintosh, Horner, Chalmers, Arnold, Southey, Cowper, would not have been all the better for judicious curtailment. Lockhart, who wrote the longest, wrote also the shortest, the Life of Burns; and the shortest is the best, in spite of defects which would only have been worse if the book had been bigger. It is to be feared that, conscientious and honourable as his self-denial has been, even Mr. Cross has not wholly resisted the natural and besetting error of the biographer. Most people will think that the hundred pages of the Italian tour (vol. ii.), and some other not very remarkable impressions of travel, might as well or better have been left out.

As a mere letter-writer, George Eliot will not rank among the famous masters of what is usually considered especially a woman's art. She was too busy in serious work to have leisure for that most delightful way of wasting time. Besides that, she had by nature none of that fluency, rapidity, abandonment, pleasant volubility, which make letters amusing, captivating, or piquant. What Mr. Cross says of her as the mistress of a *salon*, is true of her for the most part as a correspondent:—'Playing around many disconnected subjects, in talk, neither interested nor amused her much. She took things too seriously, and seldom found the effort of entertaining compensated by the gain' (iii. 335). There is the outpouring of ardent feeling for her friends, sobering down, as life goes on, into a crooning kindness, affectionate and honest, but often tinged with considerable self-consciousness. It was said of some one that his epigrams did honour to his heart; in the reverse direction we occasionally feel that George Eliot's effusive playfulness does honour to her head. It lacks simplicity and *verve*. Even in an invitation to dinner, the words imply a grave sense of responsibility on both sides, and sense of responsibility is fatal to the charm of familiar correspondence.

As was inevitable in one whose mind was so habitually turned to the deeper elements of life, she lets fall the pearls of wise speech even in short notes. Here are one or two:—

'My own experience and development deepen every day my conviction that our moral progress may be measured by the degree in which we sympathise with individual suffering and individual

joy.'

'If there is one attitude more odious to me than any other of the many attitudes of "knowingness," it is that air of lofty superiority to the vulgar. She will soon find out that I am a very commonplace woman.'

'It so often happens that others are measuring us by our past self while we are looking back on that self with a mixture of disgust and sorrow.'

The following is one of the best examples, one of the few examples, of her best manner:—

I have been made rather unhappy by my husband's impulsive proposal about Christmas. We are dull old persons, and your two sweet young ones ought to find each Christmas a new bright bead to string on their memory, whereas to spend the time with us would be to string on a dark shrivelled berry. They ought to have a group of young creatures to be joyful with. Our own children always spend their Christmas with Gertrude's family; and we have usually taken our sober merry-making with friends out of town. Illness among these will break our custom this year; and thus *mein Mann*, feeling that our Christmas was free, considered how very much he liked being with you, omitting the other side of the question—namely, our total lack of means to make a suitably joyous meeting, a real festival, for Phil and Margaret. I was conscious of this lack in the very moment of the proposal, and the consciousness has been pressing on me more and more painfully ever since. Even my husband's affectionate hopefulness cannot withstand my melancholy demonstration. So pray consider the kill-joy proposition as entirely retracted, and give us something of yourselves only on simple black-letter days, when the Herald Angels have not been raising expectations early in the morning.

This is very pleasant, but such pieces are rare, and the infirmity of human nature has sometimes made us sigh over these pages at the recollection of the cordial cheeriness of Scott's letters, the high spirits of Macaulay, the graceful levity of Voltaire, the rattling dare-devilry of Byron. Epistolary stilt among men of letters went out of fashion with Pope, who, as was said, thought that unless every period finished with a conceit, the letter was not worth the postage. Poor spirits cannot be the explanation of the stiffness in George Eliot's case, for no letters in the English language are so full of playfulness and charm as those of Cowper, and he was habitually sunk in gulfs deeper and blacker than George Eliot's own. It was sometimes observed of her, that in her conversation, *elle s'écoutait quand elle parlait*—she seemed to be listening to her own voice while she spoke. It must be allowed that we are not always free from an impression of self-listening, even in the most caressing of the letters before us.

This is not much better, however, than trifling. I daresay that if a lively Frenchman could have watched the inspired Pythia on the sublime tripod, he would have cried, *Elle s'écoute quand elle parle*. When everything of that kind has been said, we have the profound satisfaction, which is not quite a matter of course in the history of literature, of finding after all that the woman and the writer were one. The life does not belie the books, nor private conduct stultify public profession. We close the third volume of the biography, as we have so often closed the third volume of her novels, feeling to the very core that in spite of a style that the French call *alambiqué*, in spite of tiresome double and treble distillations of phraseology, in spite of fatiguing moralities, gravities, and ponderosities, we have still been in communion with a high and commanding intellect and a great nature. We are vexed by pedantries that recall the *précieuses* of the Hôtel Rambouillet, but we know that she had the soul of the most heroic women in history. We crave more of the Olympian serenity that makes action natural and repose refreshing, but we cannot miss the edification of a life marked by indefatigable labour after generous purposes, by an unsparing struggle for duty, and by steadfast and devout fellowship with lofty thoughts.

Those who know Mr. Myers's essay on George Eliot will not have forgotten its most imposing passage:—

I remember how at Cambridge, I waited with her once in the Fellows' Garden of Trinity, on an evening of rainy May; and she, stirred somewhat beyond her wont, and taking as her text the three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-calls of men,—the words *God, Immortality, Duty*,—pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the *first*, how unbelievable the *second*, and yet how peremptory and absolute the *third*. Never, perhaps, had sterner accents affirmed the sovereignty of impersonal and unreciprocating law. I listened, and night fell; her grave, majestic countenance turned toward me like a Sibyl's in the gloom; it was as though she withdrew from my grasp, one by one, the two scrolls of promise, and left me the third scroll only, awful with inevitable fates.

To many, the relation which was the most important event in George Eliot's life will seem one of those irretrievable errors which reduce all talk of duty to a mockery. It is inevitable that this should be so, and those who disregard a social law have little right to complain. Men and women whom in every other respect it would be monstrous to call bad, have taken this particular law into their own hands before now, and committed themselves to conduct of which 'magnanimity owes no account to prudence.' But if they had sense and knew what they were about, they have braced themselves to endure the disapproval of a majority fortunately more prudential than themselves. The world is busy, and its instruments are clumsy. It cannot know all the facts; it has neither time nor material for unravelling all the complexities of motive, or for distinguishing mere

libertinage from grave and deliberate moral misjudgment; it is protecting itself as much as it is condemning the offenders. On all this, then, we need have neither sophistry nor cant. But those who seek something deeper than a verdict for the honest working purpose of leaving cards and inviting to dinner, may feel, as has been observed by a contemporary writer, that men and women are more fairly judged, if judge them we must, by the way in which they bear the burden of an error than by the decision that laid the burden on their lives. Some idea of this kind was in her own mind when she wrote to her most intimate friend in 1857, 'If I live five years longer, the positive result of my existence on the side of truth and goodness will outweigh the small negative good that would have consisted in my not doing anything to shock others' (i. 461). This urgent desire to balance the moral account may have had something to do with that laborious sense of responsibility which weighed so heavily on her soul, and had so equivocal an effect upon her art. Whatever else is to be said of this particular union, nobody can deny that the picture on which it left a mark was an exhibition of extraordinary self-denial, energy, and persistency in the cultivation and the use of great gifts and powers for what their possessor believed to be the highest objects for society and mankind.

A more perfect companionship, one on a higher intellectual level, or of more sustained mental activity, is nowhere recorded. Lewes's mercurial temperament contributed as much as the powerful mind of his consort to prevent their seclusion from degenerating into an owlish stagnation. To the very last (1878) he retained his extraordinary buoyancy. 'Nothing but death could quench that bright flame. Even on his worst days he had always a good story to tell; and I remember on one occasion in the drawing-room at Witley, between two bouts of pain, he sang through with great *brio*, though without much voice, the greater portion of the tenor part in the *Barber of Seville*, George Eliot playing his accompaniment, and both of them thoroughly enjoying the fun' (iii. 334). All this gaiety, his inexhaustible vivacity, the facility of his transitions from brilliant levity to a keen seriousness, the readiness of his mental response, and the wide range of intellectual accomplishments that were much more than superficial, made him a source of incessant and varied stimulation. Even those, and there were some, who thought that his gaiety bordered on flippancy, that his genial self-content often came near to shockingly bad taste, and that his reminiscences of poor Mr. Fitzball and the green-room and all the rest of the Bohemia in which he had once dwelt, were too racy for his company, still found it hard to resist the alert intelligence with which he rose to every good topic, and the extraordinary heartiness and spontaneity with which the wholesome spring of human laughter was touched in him.

Lewes had plenty of egotism, not to give it a more unamiable name, but it never mastered his intellectual sincerity. George Eliot describes him as one of the few human beings she has known who will, in the heat of an argument, see, and straightway confess, that he is in the wrong, instead of trying to shift his ground or use any other device of vanity. 'The intense happiness of our union,' she wrote to a friend, 'is derived in a high degree from the perfect freedom with which we each follow and declare our own impressions. In this respect I know *no* man so great as he—that difference of opinion rouses no egotistic irritation in him, and that he is ready to admit that another argument is the stronger the moment his intellect recognises it' (ii. 279). This will sound very easy to the dispassionate reader, because it is so obviously just and proper, but if the dispassionate reader ever tries, he may find the virtue not so easy as it looks. Finally, and above all, we can never forget in Lewes's case how much true elevation and stability of character was implied in the unceasing reverence, gratitude, and devotion with which for five-and-twenty years he treated her to whom he owed all his happiness, and who most truly, in his own words (ii. 76), had made his life a new birth.

The reader will be mistaken if he should infer from such passages as abound in her letters that George Eliot had any particular weakness for domestic or any other kind of idolatry. George Sand, in *Lucrezia Floriani*, where she drew so unkind a picture of Chopin, has described her own life and character as marked by 'a great facility for illusions, a blind benevolence of judgment, a tenderness of heart that was inexhaustible; consequently great precipitancy, many mistakes, much weakness, fits of heroic devotion to unworthy objects, enormous force applied to an end that was wretched in truth and fact, but sublime in her thought.' George Eliot had none of this facility. Nor was general benignity in her at all of the poor kind that is incompatible with a great deal of particular censure. Universal benevolence never lulled an active critical faculty, nor did she conceive true humility as at all consisting in hiding from an impostor that you have found him out. Like Cardinal Newman, for whose beautiful passage at the end of the *Apologia* she expresses such richly deserved admiration (ii. 387), she unites to the gift of unctious and brotherly love a capacity for giving an extremely shrewd nip to a brother whom she does not love. Her passion for Thomas-a-Kempis did not prevent her, and there was no reason why it should, from dealing very faithfully with a friend, for instance (ii. 271); from describing Mr. Buckle as a conceited, ignorant man; or castigating Brougham and other people in slashing reviews; or otherwise from showing that great expansiveness of the affections went with a remarkably strong, hard, masculine, positive, judging head.

The benefits that George Eliot gained from her exclusive companionship with a man of lively talents were not without some compensating drawbacks. The keen stimulation and incessant strain, unrelieved by variety of daily intercourse, and never diversified by participation in the external activities of the world, tended to bring about a loaded, over-conscious, over-anxious state of mind, which was not only not wholesome in itself, but was inconsistent with the full freshness and strength of artistic work. The presence of the real world in his life has, in all but one or two cases, been one element of the novelist's highest success in the world of imaginative creation. George Eliot had no greater favourite than Scott, and when a series of little books upon

English men of letters was planned, she said that she thought that writer among us the happiest to whom it should fall to deal with Scott. But Scott lived full in the life of his fellow-men. Even of Wordsworth, her other favourite, though he was not a creative artist, we may say that he daily saturated himself in those natural elements and effects, which were the material, the suggestion, and the sustaining inspiration of his consoling and fortifying poetry. George Eliot did not live in the midst of her material, but aloof from it and outside of it. Heaven forbid that this should seem to be said by way of censure. Both her health and other considerations made all approach to busy sociability in any of its shapes both unwelcome and impossible. But in considering the relation of her manner of life to her work, her creations, her meditations, one cannot but see that when compared with some writers of her own sex and age, she is constantly bookish, artificial, and mannered. She is this because she fed her art too exclusively, first on the memories of her youth, and next from books, pictures, statues, instead of from the living model, as seen in its actual motion. It is direct calls and personal claims from without that make fiction alive. Jane Austen bore her part in the little world of the parlour that she described. The writer of *Sylvia's Lovers*, whose work George Eliot appreciated with unaffected generosity (i. 305), was the mother of children, and was surrounded by the wholesome actualities of the family. The authors of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* passed their days in one long succession of wild, stormy, squalid, anxious, and miserable scenes—almost as romantic, as poetic, and as tragic, to use George Eliot's words, as their own stories. George Sand eagerly shared, even to the pitch of passionate tumult and disorder, in the emotions, the aspirations, the ardour, the great conflicts and controversies of her time. In every one of these, their daily closeness to the real life of the world has given a vitality to their work which we hardly expect that even the next generation will find in more than one or two of the romances of George Eliot. It may even come to pass that their position will be to hers as that of Fielding is to Richardson in our own day.

In a letter to Mr. Harrison, which is printed here (ii. 441), George Eliot describes her own method as 'the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me first in the flesh and not in the spirit.' The passage recalls a discussion one day at the Priory in 1877. She was speaking of the different methods of the poetic or creative art, and said that she began with moods, thoughts, passions, and then invented the story for their sake, and fitted it to them; Shakespeare, on the other hand, picked up a story that struck him, and then proceeded to work in the moods, thoughts, passions, as they came to him in the course of meditation on the story. We hardly need the result to convince us that Shakespeare chose the better part.

The influence of her reserved fashion of daily life was heightened by the literary exclusiveness which of set purpose she imposed upon herself. 'The less an author hears about himself,' she says, in one place, 'the better.' 'It is my rule, very strictly observed, not to read the criticisms on my writings. For years I have found this abstinence necessary to preserve me from that discouragement as an artist, which ill-judged praise, no less than ill-judged blame, tends to produce in us.' George Eliot pushed this repugnance to criticism beyond the personal reaction of it upon the artist, and more than disparaged its utility, even in the most competent and highly trained hands. She finds that the diseased spot in the literary culture of our time is touched with the finest point by the saying of La Bruyère, that 'the pleasure of criticism robs us of the pleasure of being keenly moved by very fine things' (iii. 327). 'It seems to me,' she writes (ii. 412), 'much better to read a man's own writings than to read what others say about him, especially when the man is first-rate and the others third-rate. As Goethe said long ago about Spinoza, "I always preferred to learn from the man himself what *he* thought, rather than to hear from some one else what he ought to have thought."' As if the scholar will not always be glad to do both, to study his author and not to refuse the help of the rightly prepared commentator; as if even Goethe himself would not have been all the better acquainted with Spinoza if he could have read Mr. Pollock's book upon him. But on this question Mr. Arnold has fought a brilliant battle, and to him George Eliot's heresies may well be left.

On the personal point whether an author should ever hear of himself, George Eliot oddly enough contradicts herself in a casual remark upon Bulwer. 'I have a great respect,' she says, 'for the energetic industry which has made the most of his powers. He has been writing diligently for more than thirty years, constantly improving his position, and profiting by the lessons of public opinion and of other writers' (ii. 322). But if it is true that the less an author hears about himself the better, how are these salutary 'lessons of public opinion' to penetrate to him? 'Rubens,' she says, writing from Munich in 1858 (ii. 28), 'gives me more pleasure than any other painter whether right or wrong. More than any one else he makes me feel that painting is a great art, and that he was a great artist. His are such real breathing men and women, moved by passions, not mincing, and grimacing, and posing in mere imitation of passion.' But Rubens did not concentrate his intellect on his own ponderings, nor shut out the wholesome chastenings of praise and blame, lest they should discourage his inspiration. Beethoven, another of the chief objects of George Eliot's veneration, bore all the rough stress of an active and troublesome calling, though of the musician, if of any, we may say, that his is the art of self-absorption.

Hence, delightful and inspiring as it is to read this story of diligent and discriminating cultivation, of accurate truth and real erudition and beauty, not vaguely but methodically interpreted, one has some of the sensations of the moral and intellectual hothouse. Mental hygiene is apt to lead to mental valetudinarianism. 'The ignorant journalist,' may be left to the torment which George Eliot wished that she could inflict on one of those literary slovens whose manuscripts bring even the most philosophic editor to the point of exasperation: 'I should like to stick red-hot skewers through the writer, whose style is as sprawling as his handwriting.' By all means. But much that

even the most sympathetic reader finds repellent in George Eliot's later work might perhaps never have been, if Mr. Lewes had not practised with more than Russian rigour a censorship of the press and the post-office which kept every disagreeable whisper scrupulously from her ear. To stop every draft with sandbags, screens, and curtains, and to limit one's exercise to a drive in a well-warmed brougham with the windows drawn up, may save a few annoying colds in the head, but the end of the process will be the manufacture of an invalid.

Whatever view we may take of the precise connection between what she read, or abstained from reading, and what she wrote, no studious man or woman can look without admiration and envy on the breadth, variety, seriousness, and energy, with which she set herself her tasks and executed them. She says in one of her letters, 'there is something more piteous almost than soapless poverty in the application of feminine incapacity to literature' (ii. 16). Nobody has ever taken the responsibilities of literature more ardently in earnest. She was accustomed to read aloud to Mr. Lewes three hours a day, and her private reading, except when she was engaged in the actual stress of composition, must have filled as many more. His extraordinary alacrity and her brooding intensity of mind prevented these hours from being that leisurely process in slippers and easy-chair which passes with many for the practice of literary cultivation. Much of her reading was for the direct purposes of her own work. The young lady who begins to write historic novels out of her own head will find something much to her advantage if she will refer to the list of books read by George Eliot during the latter half of 1861, when she was meditating *Romola* (ii. 325). Apart from immediate needs and uses, no student of our time has known better the solace, the delight, the guidance that abide in great writings. Nobody who did not share the scholar's enthusiasm could have described the blind scholar in his library in the adorable fifth chapter of *Romola*; and we feel that she must have copied out with keen gusto of her own those words of Petrarch which she puts into old Bardo's mouth—'*Libri medullitus delectant, colloquuntur, consulunt, et viva quadam nobis atque arguta familiaritate junguntur.*'

As for books that are not books, as Milton bade us do with 'neat repasts of wine,' she wisely spared to interpose them oft. Her standards of knowledge were those of the erudite and the savant, and even in the region of beauty she was never content with any but definite impressions. In one place in these volumes, by the way, she makes a remark curiously inconsistent with the usual scientific attitude of her mind. She has been reading Darwin's *Origin of Species*, on which she makes the truly astonishing criticism that it is 'sadly wanting in illustrative facts,' and that 'it is not impressive from want of luminous and orderly presentation' (ii. 43-48). Then she says that 'the development theory, and all other explanation of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under processes.' This position it does not now concern us to discuss, but at least it is in singular discrepancy with her strong habitual preference for accurate and quantitative knowledge, over vague and misty moods in the region of the unknowable and the unreachable.

George Eliot's means of access to books were very full. She knew French, German, Italian, and Spanish accurately. Greek and Latin, Mr. Cross tells us, she could read with thorough delight to herself; though after the appalling specimen of Mill's juvenile Latinity that Mr. Bain has disinterred, the fastidious collegian may be sceptical of the scholarship of prodigies. Hebrew was her favourite study to the end of her days. People commonly supposed that she had been inoculated with an artificial taste for science by her companion. We now learn that she took a decided interest in natural science long before she made Mr. Lewes's acquaintance, and many of the roundabout pedantries that displeased people in her latest writings, and were set down to his account, appeared in her composition before she had ever exchanged a word with him.

All who knew her well enough were aware that she had what Mr. Cross describes as 'limitless persistency in application.' This is an old account of genius, but nobody illustrates more effectively the infinite capacity of taking pains. In reading, in looking at pictures, in playing difficult music, in talking, she was equally importunate in the search, and equally insistent on mastery. Her faculty of sustained concentration was part of her immense intellectual power. 'Continuous thought did not fatigue her. She could keep her mind on the stretch hour after hour; the body might give way, but the brain remained unwearied' (iii. 422). It is only a trifling illustration of the infection of her indefatigable quality of taking pains, that Lewes should have formed the important habit of rewriting every page of his work, even of short articles for Reviews, before letting it go to the press. The journal shows what sore pain and travail composition was to her. She wrote the last volume of *Adam Bede* in six weeks; she 'could not help writing it fast, because it was written under the stress of emotion.' But what a prodigious contrast between her pace and Walter Scott's twelve volumes a year! Like many other people of powerful brains, she united strong and clear general retentiveness with a weak and untrustworthy verbal memory. 'She never could trust herself to write a quotation without verifying it.' 'What courage and patience,' she says of some one else, 'are wanted for every life that aims to produce anything,' and her own existence was one long and painful sermon on that text.

Over few lives have the clouds of mental dejection hung in such heavy unmoving banks. Nearly every chapter is strewn with melancholy words. 'I cannot help thinking more of your illness than of the pleasure in prospect—according to my foolish nature, which is always prone to live in past pain.' The same sentiment is the mournful refrain that runs through all. Her first resounding triumph, the success of *Adam Bede*, instead of buoyancy and exultation, only adds a fresh sense of the weight upon her future life. 'The self-questioning whether my nature will be able to meet the heavy demands upon it, both of personal duty and intellectual production—presses upon me

almost continually in a way that prevents me even from tasting the quiet joy I might have in the *work done*. I feel no regret that the fame, as such, brings no pleasure; but it *is* a grief to me that I do not constantly feel strong in thankfulness that my past life has vindicated its uses.'

Romola seems to have been composed in constant gloom. 'I remember my wife telling me, at Witley,' says Mr. Cross, 'how cruelly she had suffered at Dorking from working under a leaden weight at this time. The writing of *Romola* ploughed into her more than any of her other books. She told me she could put her finger on it as marking a well-defined transition in her life. In her own words, "I began it a young woman—I finished it an old woman." She calls upon herself to make 'greater efforts against indolence and the despondency that comes from too egoistic a dread of failure.' 'This is the last entry I mean to make in my old book in which I wrote for the first time at Geneva in 1849. What moments of despair I passed through after that—despair that life would ever be made precious to me by the consciousness that I lived to some good purpose! It was that sort of despair that sucked away the sap of half the hours which might have been filled by energetic youthful activity; and the same demon tries to get hold of me again whenever an old work is dismissed and a new one is being meditated' (ii. 307). One day the entry is: 'Horrible scepticism about all things paralysing my mind. Shall I ever be good for anything again? Ever do anything again?' On another, she describes herself to a trusted friend as 'a mind morbidly desponding, and a consciousness tending more and more to consist in memories of error and imperfection rather than in a strengthening sense of achievement.' We have to turn to such books as Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* to find any parallel to such wretchedness.

Times were not wanting when the sun strove to shine through the gloom, when the resistance to melancholy was not wholly a failure, and when, as she says, she felt that Dante was right in condemning to the Stygian marsh those who had been sad under the blessed sunlight. 'Sad were we in the sweet air that is gladdened by the sun, bearing sluggish smoke in our hearts; now lie we sadly here in the black ooze.' But still for the most part sad she remained in the sweet air, and the look of pain that haunted her eyes and brow even in her most genial and animated moments, only told too truly the story of her inner life.

That from this central gloom a shadow should spread to her work was unavoidable. It would be rash to compare George Eliot with Tacitus, with Dante, with Pascal. A novelist—for as a poet, after trying hard to think otherwise, most of us find her magnificent but unreadable—as a novelist bound by the conditions of her art to deal in a thousand trivialities of human character and situation, she has none of their severity of form. But she alone of moderns has their note of sharp-cut melancholy, of sombre rumination, of brief disdain. Living in a time when humanity has been raised, whether formally or informally, into a religion, she draws a painted curtain of pity before the tragic scene. Still the attentive ear catches from time to time the accents of an unrelenting voice, that proves her kindred with those three mighty spirits and stern monitors of men. In George Eliot, a reader with a conscience may be reminded of the saying that when a man opens Tacitus he puts himself in the confessional. She was no vague dreamer over the folly and the weakness of men, and the cruelty and blindness of destiny. Hers is not the dejection of the poet who 'could lie down like a tired child, And weep away this life of care,' as Shelley at Naples; nor is it the despairing misery that moved Cowper in the awful verses of the *Castaway*. It was not such self-pity as wrung from Burns the cry to life, 'Thou art a galling load, Along a rough, a weary road, To wretches such as I;' nor such general sense of the woes of the race as made Keats think of the world as a place where men sit and hear each other groan, 'Where but to think is to be full of sorrow, And leaden-eyed despairs.' She was as far removed from the plangent reverie of Rousseau as from the savage truculence of Swift. Intellectual training had given her the spirit of order and proportion, of definiteness and measure, and this marks her alike from the great sentimentalists and the sweeping satirists. 'Pity and fairness,' as she beautifully says (iii. 317), 'are two little words which, carried out, would embrace the utmost delicacies of the moral life.' But hers is not seldom the severe fairness of the judge, and the pity that may go with putting on the black cap after a conviction for high treason. In the midst of many an easy flowing page, the reader is surprised by some bitter aside, some judgment of intense and concentrated irony with the flash of a blade in it, some biting sentence where lurks the stern disdain and the anger of Tacitus, and Dante, and Pascal. Souls like these are not born for happiness.

This is not the occasion for an elaborate discussion of George Eliot's place in the mental history of her time, but her biography shows that she travelled along the road that was trodden by not a few in her day. She started from that fervid evangelicalism which has made the base of many a powerful character in this century, from Cardinal Newman downwards. Then with curious rapidity she threw it all off, and embraced with equal zeal the rather harsh and crude negations which were then associated with the *Westminster Review*. The second stage did not last much longer than the first. 'Religious and moral sympathy with the historical life of man,' she said (ii. 363), 'is the larger half of culture;' and this sympathy, which was the fruit of her culture, had by the time she was thirty become the new seed of a positive faith and a semi-conservative creed. Here is a passage from a letter of 1862 (she had translated Strauss, we may remind ourselves, in 1845, and Feuerbach in 1854):—

Pray don't ask me ever again not to rob a man of his religious belief, as if you thought my mind tended to such robbery. I have too profound a conviction of the efficacy that lies in all sincere faith, and the spiritual blight that comes with no-faith, to have any negative propagandism in me. In fact, I have very little sympathy

with Freethinkers as a class, and have lost all interest in mere antagonism to religious doctrines. I care only to know, if possible, the lasting meaning that lies in all religious doctrine from the beginning till now (ii. 243).

Eleven years later the same tendency had deepened and gone farther:—

All the great religions of the world, historically considered, are rightly the objects of deep reverence and sympathy—they are the record of spiritual struggles, which are the types of our own. This is to me preeminently true of Hebrewism and Christianity, on which my own youth was nourished. And in this sense I have no antagonism towards any religious belief, but a strong outflow of sympathy. Every community met to worship the highest Good (which is understood to be expressed by God) carries me along in its main current; and if there were not reasons against my following such an inclination, I should go to church or chapel, constantly, for the sake of the delightful emotions of fellowship which come over me in religious assemblies—the very nature of such assemblies being the recognition of a binding belief or spiritual law, which is to lift us into willing obedience and save us from the slavery of unregulated passion or impulse. And with regard to other people, it seems to me that those who have no definite conviction which constitutes a protesting faith, may often more beneficially cherish the good within them and be better members of society by a conformity based on the recognised good in the public belief, than by a nonconformity which has nothing but negatives to utter. *Not*, of course, if the conformity would be accompanied by a consciousness of hypocrisy. That is a question for the individual conscience to settle. But there is enough to be said on the different points of view from which conformity may be regarded, to hinder a ready judgment against those who continue to conform after ceasing to believe in the ordinary sense. But with the utmost largeness of allowance for the difficulty of deciding in special cases, it must remain true that the highest lot is to have definite beliefs about which you feel that 'necessity is laid upon you' to declare them, as something better which you are bound to try and give to those who have the worse (iii. 215-217).

These volumes contain many passages in the same sense—as, of course, her books contain them too. She was a constant reader of the Bible, and the *Imitatio* was never far from her hand. 'She particularly enjoyed reading aloud some of the finest chapters of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and St. Paul's Epistles. The Bible and our elder English poets best suited the organ-like tones of her voice, which required for their full effect a certain solemnity and majesty of rhythm.' She once expressed to a younger friend, who shared her opinions, her sense of the loss which they had in being unable to practise the old ordinances of family prayer. 'I hope,' she says, 'we are well out of that phase in which the most philosophic view of the past was held to be a smiling survey of human folly, and when the wisest man was supposed to be one who could sympathise with no age but the age to come' (ii. 308).

For this wise reaction she was no doubt partially indebted, as so many others have been, to the teaching of Comte. Unquestionably the fundamental ideas had come into her mind at a much earlier period, when, for example, she was reading Mr. R.W. Mackay's *Progress of the Intellect* (1850, i. 253). But it was Comte who enabled her to systematise these ideas, and to give them that 'definiteness,' which, as these pages show in a hundred places, was the quality that she sought before all others alike in men and their thoughts. She always remained at a respectful distance from complete adherence to Comte's scheme, but she was never tired of protesting that he was a really great thinker, that his famous survey of the Middle Ages in the fifth volume of the *Positive Philosophy* was full of luminous ideas, and that she had thankfully learned much from it. Wordsworth, again, was dear to her in no small degree on the strength of such passages as that from the *Prelude*, which is the motto of one of the last chapters of her last novel:—

The human nature with which I felt
That I belonged and revered with love,
Was not a persistent presence, but a spirit
Diffused through time and space, with aid derived
Of evidence from monuments, erect,
Prostrate, or leaning towards their common rest
In earth, *the widely scattered wreck sublime*
Of vanished nations.

Or this again, also from the *Prelude* (see iii. 389):—

There is
One great society alone on earth:
The noble Living and the noble Dead.

Underneath this growth and diversity of opinion we see George Eliot's oneness of character, just, for that matter, as we see it in Mill's long and grave march from the uncompromising denials instilled into him by his father, then through Wordsworthian mysticism and Coleridgean conservatism, down to the pale belief and dim starlight faith of his posthumous volume. George Eliot was more austere, more unflinching, and of ruder intellectual constancy than Mill. She never withdrew from the position that she had taken up, of denying and rejecting; she stood to that to the end: what she did was to advance to the far higher perception that denial and rejection are not the aspects best worth attending to or dwelling upon. She had little patience

with those who fear that the doctrine of protoplasm must dry up the springs of human effort. Any one who trembles at that catastrophe may profit by a powerful remonstrance of hers in the pages before us (iii. 245-250, also 228).

The consideration of molecular physics is not the direct ground of human love and moral action, any more than it is the direct means of composing a noble picture or of enjoying great music. One might as well hope to dissect one's own body and be merry in doing it, as take molecular physics (in which you must banish from your field of view what is specifically human) to be your dominant guide, your determiner of motives, in what is solely human. That every study has its bearing on every other is true; but pain and relief, love and sorrow, have their peculiar history which make an experience and knowledge over and above the swing of atoms.

With regard to the pains and limitations of one's personal lot, I suppose there is not a single man or woman who has not more or less need of that stoical resignation which is often a hidden heroism, or who, in considering his or her past history, is not aware that it has been cruelly affected by the ignorant or selfish action of some fellow-being in a more or less close relation of life. And to my mind there can be no stronger motive than this perception, to an energetic effort that the lives nearest to us shall not suffer in a like manner from *us*.

As to duration and the way in which it affects your view of the human history, what is really the difference to your imagination between infinitude and billions when you have to consider the value of human experience? Will you say that since your life has a term of threescore years and ten, it was really a matter of indifference whether you were a cripple with a wretched skin disease, or an active creature with a mind at large for the enjoyment of knowledge, and with a nature which has attracted others to you?

For herself, she remained in the position described in one of her letters in 1860 (ii. 283):—'I have faith in the working out of higher possibilities than the Catholic or any other Church has presented; and those who have strength to wait and endure are bound to accept no formula which their whole souls—their intellect, as well as their emotions—do not embrace with entire reverence. The highest calling and election is *to do without opium*, and live through all our pain with conscious, clear-eyed endurance.' She would never accept the common optimism. As she says here:—'Life, though a good to men on the whole, is a doubtful good to many, and to some not a good at all. To my thought it is a source of constant mental distortion to make the denial of this a part of religion—to go on pretending things are better than they are.'

Of the afflicting dealings with the world of spirits, which in those days were comparatively limited to the untutored minds of America, but which since have come to exert so singular a fascination for some of the most brilliant of George Eliot's younger friends (see iii. 204), she thought as any sensible Philistine among us persists in thinking to this day:—

If it were another spirit aping Charlotte Brontë—if here and there at rare spots and among people of a certain temperament, or even at many spots and among people of all temperaments, tricky spirits are liable to rise as a sort of earth-bubbles and set furniture in movement, and tell things which we either know already or should be as well without knowing—I must frankly confess that I have but a feeble interest in these doings, feeling my life very short for the supreme and awful revelations of a more orderly and intelligible kind which I shall die with an imperfect knowledge of. If there were miserable spirits whom we could help—then I think we should pause and have patience with their trivial-mindedness; but otherwise I don't feel bound to study them more than I am bound to study the special follies of a peculiar phase of human society. Others, who feel differently, and are attracted towards this study, are making an experiment for us as to whether anything better than bewilderment can come of it. At present it seems to me that to rest any fundamental part of religion on such a basis is a melancholy misguidance of men's minds from the true sources of high and pure emotion (iii. 161).

The period of George Eliot's productions was from 1856, the date of her first stories, down to 1876, when she wrote, not under her brightest star, her last novel of *Daniel Deronda*. During this time the great literary influences of the epoch immediately preceding had not indeed fallen silent, but the most fruitful seed had been sown. Carlyle's *Sartor* (1833-1834), and his *Miscellaneous Essays* (collected, 1839), were in all hands; but he had fallen into the terrible slough of his Prussian history (1858-1865), and the last word of his evangel had gone forth to all whom it concerned. *In Memoriam*, whose noble music and deep-browed thought awoke such new and wide response in men's hearts, was published in 1850. The second volume of *Modern Painters*, of which I have heard George Eliot say, as of *In Memoriam* too, that she owed much and very much to it, belongs to an earlier date still (1846), and when it appeared, though George Eliot was born in the same year as its author, she was still translating Strauss at Coventry. Mr. Browning, for whose genius she had such admiration, and who was always so good a friend, did indeed produce during this period some work which the adepts find as full of power and beauty as any that ever came from his pen. But Mr. Browning's genius has moved rather apart from the general currents of his time, creating character and working out motives from within, undisturbed by transient shadows from the passing questions and answers of the day.

The romantic movement was then upon its fall. The great Oxford movement, which besides its purely ecclesiastical effects, had linked English religion once more to human history, and which was itself one of the unexpected outcomes of the romantic movement, had spent its original force, and no longer interested the stronger minds among the rising generation. The hour had sounded for the scientific movement. In 1859 was published the *Origin of Species*, undoubtedly the most far-reaching agency of the time, supported as it was by a volume of new knowledge which came pouring in from many sides. The same period saw the important speculations of Mr. Spencer, whose influence on George Eliot had from their first acquaintance been of a very decisive kind. Two years after the *Origin of Species* came Maine's *Ancient Law*, and that was followed by the accumulations of Mr. Tylor and others, exhibiting order and fixed correlation among great sets of facts which had hitherto lain in that cheerful chaos of general knowledge which has been called general ignorance. The excitement was immense. Evolution, development, heredity, adaptation, variety, survival, natural selection, were so many patent pass-keys that were to open every chamber.

George Eliot's novels, as they were the imaginative application of this great influx of new ideas, so they fitted in with the moods which those ideas had called up. 'My function,' she said (iii. 330), 'is that of the æsthetic, not the doctrinal teacher—the rousing of the nobler emotions which make mankind desire the social right, not the prescribing of special measures, concerning which the artistic mind, however strongly moved by social sympathy, is often not the best judge.' Her influence in this direction over serious and impressionable minds was great indeed. The spirit of her art exactly harmonised with the new thoughts that were shaking the world of her contemporaries. Other artists had drawn their pictures with a strong ethical background, but she gave a finer colour and a more spacious air to her ethics by showing the individual passions and emotions of her characters, their adventures and their fortunes, as evolving themselves from long series of antecedent causes, and bound up with many widely operating forces and distant events. Here, too, we find ourselves in the full stream of evolution, heredity, survival, and fixed inexorable law.

This scientific quality of her work may be considered to have stood in the way of her own aim. That the nobler emotions roused by her writings tend to 'make mankind desire the social right' is not to be doubted; but we are not sure that she imparts peculiar energy to the desire. What she kindles is not a very strenuous, aggressive, and operative desire. The sense of the iron limitations that are set to improvement in present and future by inexorable forces of the past, is stronger in her than any intrepid resolution to press on to whatever improvement may chance to be within reach if we only make the attempt. In energy, in inspiration, in the kindling of living faith in social effort, George Sand, not to speak of Mazzini, takes a far higher place.

It was certainly not the business of an artist to form judgments in the sphere of practical politics, but George Eliot was far too humane a nature not to be deeply moved by momentous events as they passed. Yet her observations, at any rate after 1848, seldom show that energy of sympathy of which we have been speaking, and these observations illustrate our point. We can hardly think that anything was ever said about the great civil war in America, so curiously far-fetched as the following reflection:—'My best consolation is that an example on so tremendous a scale of the need for the education of mankind through the affections and sentiments, as a basis for true development, will have a strong influence on all thinkers, and be a check to the arid narrow antagonism which in some quarters is held to be the only form of liberal thought' (ii. 335).

In 1848, as we have said, she felt the hopes of the hour in all their fulness. To a friend she writes (i. 179):—'You and Carlyle (have you seen his article in last week's *Examiner*?) are the only two people who feel just as I would have them—who can glory in what is actually great and beautiful without putting forth any cold reservations and incredulities to save their credit for wisdom. I am all the more delighted with your enthusiasm because I didn't expect it. I feared that you lacked revolutionary ardour. But no—you are just as *sans-culottish* and rash as I would have you. You are not one of those sages whose reason keeps so tight a rein on their emotions that they are too constantly occupied in calculating consequences to rejoice in any great manifestation of the forces that underlie our everyday existence.

'I thought we had fallen on such evil days that we were to see no really great movement—that ours was what St. Simon calls a purely critical epoch, not at all an organic one; but I begin to be glad of my date. I would consent, however, to have a year clipt off my life for the sake of witnessing such a scene as that of the men of the barricades bowing to the image of Christ, 'who first taught fraternity to men.' One trembles to look into every fresh newspaper lest there should be something to mar the picture; but hitherto even the scoffing newspaper critics have been compelled into a tone of genuine respect for the French people and the Provisional Government. Lamartine can act a poem if he cannot write one of the very first order. I hope that beautiful face given to him in the pictorial newspaper is really his: it is worthy of an aureole. I have little patience with people who can find time to pity Louis Philippe and his moustachioed sons. Certainly our decayed monarchs should be pensioned off: we should have an hospital for them, or a sort of zoological garden, where these worn-out humbugs may be preserved. It is but justice that we should keep them, since we have spoiled them for any honest trade. Let them sit on soft cushions, and have their dinner regularly, but, for heaven's sake, preserve me from sentimentalising over a pampered old man when the earth has its millions of unfed souls and bodies. Surely he is not so Ahab-like as to wish that the revolution had been deferred till his son's days: and I think the shades of the Stuarts would have some reason to complain if the Bourbons, who are so little better than they, had been allowed to reign much longer.'

The hopes of '48 were not very accurately fulfilled, and in George Eliot they never came to life again. Yet in social things we may be sure that undying hope is the secret of vision.

There is a passage in Coleridge's *Friend* which seems to represent the outcome of George Eliot's teaching on most, and not the worst, of her readers:—'The tangle of delusions,' says Coleridge, 'which stifled and distorted the growing tree of our well-being has been torn away; the parasite weeds that fed on its very roots have been plucked up with a salutary violence. To us there remain only quiet duties, the constant care, the gradual improvement, the cautious and unhazardous labours of the industrious though contented gardener—to prune, to strengthen, to engraft, and one by one to remove from its leaves and fresh shoots the slug and the caterpillar.' Coleridge goes farther than George Eliot, when he adds the exhortation—'Far be it from us to undervalue with light and senseless detraction the conscientious hardihood of our predecessors, or even to condemn in them that vehemence to which the blessings it won for us leave us now neither temptation nor pretext.'

George Eliot disliked vehemence more and more as her work advanced. The word 'crudity,' so frequently on her lips, stood for all that was objectionable and distasteful. The conservatism of an artistic moral nature was shocked by the seeming peril to which priceless moral elements of human character were exposed by the energumens of progress. Their impatient hopes for the present appeared to her rather unscientific; their disregard of the past very irreverent and impious. Mill had the same feeling when he disgusted his father by standing up for Wordsworth, on the ground that Wordsworth was helping to keep alive in human nature elements which utilitarians and innovators would need when their present and particular work was done. Mill, being free from the exaltations that make the artist, kept a truer balance. His famous pair of essays on Bentham and Coleridge were published (for the first time, so far as our generation was concerned) in the same year as *Adam Bede*, and I can vividly remember how the 'Coleridge' first awoke in many of us, who were then youths at Oxford, that sense of truth having many mansions, and that desire and power of sympathy with the past, with the positive bases of the social fabric, and with the value of Permanence in States, which form the reputable side of all conservatisms. This sentiment and conviction never took richer or more mature form than in the best work of George Eliot, and her stories lighted up with a fervid glow the truths that minds of another type had just brought to the surface. It was this that made her a great moral force at that epoch, especially for all who were capable by intellectual training of standing at her point of view. We even, as I have said, tried hard to love her poetry, but the effort has ended less in love than in a very distant homage to the majestic in intention and the sonorous in execution. In fiction, too, as the years go by, we begin to crave more fancy, illusion, enchantment, than the quality of her genius allowed. But the loftiness of her character is abiding, and it passes nobly through the ordeal of an honest biography. 'For the lessons,' says the fine critic already quoted, 'most imperatively needed by the mass of men, the lessons of deliberate kindness, of careful truth, of unwavering endeavour,—for these plain themes one could not ask a more convincing teacher than she whom we are commemorating now. Everything in her aspect and presence was in keeping with the bent of her soul. The deeply-lined face, the too marked and massive features, were united with an air of delicate refinement, which in one way was the more impressive because it seemed to proceed so entirely from within. Nay, the inward beauty would sometimes quite transform the external harshness; there would be moments when the thin hands that entwined themselves in their eagerness, the earnest figure that bowed forward to speak and hear, the deep gaze moving from one face to another with a grave appeal,—all these seemed the transparent symbols that showed the presence of a wise, benignant soul.' As a wise, benignant soul George Eliot will still remain for all right-judging men and women.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CRITICAL MISCELLANIES (VOL. 3 OF 3),
ESSAY 4: THE LIFE OF GEORGE ELIOT ***

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