

GEORGE ELIOT'S CRITICAL IMPRESSIONS

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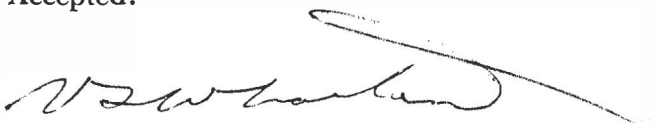
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PREFACE

George Eliot is generally recognized as a great nineteenth-century moral and philosophical teacher, possessed of one of the keenest minds of her age. Studies of her morality, philosophy, and intellectuality abound. The purpose of this study is to present her as what she pre-eminently is: not a moralist or philosopher but a literary artist.

In Chapter I, detailing her biography, I have attempted to discover the artist in the woman; but I have been mindful that perhaps Marian Evans and George Eliot are not to be too closely identified. According to a paper entitled "Assumed Personality, Insanity, and Poetry," which was presented by Professor Raymond D. Havens on December 29, 1951, at the sixty-sixth annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, one who prefers pseudonymous authorship may actually assume another personality in the act of creativity. Though Professor Havens did not mention George Eliot among those writers whose creative gifts may have found release through their inexplicable transformations into other beings, his theory is interesting in the light of her own admission that she sometimes felt seized by a "not-herself" while writing.

Succeeding chapters present the comments scattered throughout her letters, journals, essays, novels, and poetry, recording her impressions of specific arts and artists. Though she never posed as an art critic, these remarks are valuable in that they reveal her aesthetic theory, which is summarized in the last chapter.

In order to avoid tiresome repetition of sic, I have not always indicated that unusual punctuation or spellings within excerpts from her writings are George Eliot's own; I have, however, taken great care in seeing that the quotations are exact.

I am particularly indebted to J. W. Cross's authoritative edition of George Eliot's letters and journals and to Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson's George Eliot and Marian Evans, the most recent biography. I wish also to express my gratitude to Dr. Autrey Nell Wiley for her infinite kindness and wise counsel in the direction of this thesis and to Dr. Constance Beach and Miss Mamie Walker for their stimulation of my interest in George Eliot.

25 May 1953

Doris Lynn Crisp

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CHAPTER I

GEORGE ELIOT: THE WOMAN AND THE NOVELIST

Mary Ann Evans, known to the world as George Eliot, was born November 22, 1819, at Arbury Farm, in the parish of Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire. She was the third child of her father's second marriage. Robert Evans's first wife, Harriott Poynton, by whom he had two children, Robert and Frances Lucy, had died in 1809; and in 1813 he had married Christiana Pearson, who bore him Christiana, Isaac, and Mary Ann.

The Evans family was originally from Northop, Flintshire. Robert was born in 1773 at Roston Common, in the parish of Norbury, in the county of Derby and brought up in the trade of his father, George Evans, who was a carpenter. In 1806, in the capacity of land agent, Robert accompanied Francis Newdigate into Warwickshire. When his youngest child was born, Robert Evans was a man of forty-six, strongly conservative, orthodoxly religious, and much respected in his community. His dogmatic convictions, though she was to rebel against them, permeated Mary Ann; she never completely escaped their influence. Christiana Pearson Evans was a forceful, assertive, practical woman of yeoman stock. Except in matters relating to business, she ruled her husband and her children with an affectionate, but stern hand.

When Mary Ann was four months old, the Evans family, with the exception of young Robert and his sister Frances, who set up housekeeping on their own, moved to Griff House, still within the Arbury estate but on the main road between Nuneaton and Coventry. Here George Eliot spent the first twenty-one years of her life. Shortly after the change of house, Christiana, because Mrs. Evans's health was failing, was sent to a boarding school run by a Miss Lathom at Attleborough, a village close to Griff. Mary Ann and Isaac were soon attending a dame's school just opposite the gates of Griff.

The child Mary Ann showed no signs of precocity: "Mere sharpness, however, was not a characteristic of her mind. Hers was a large, slow-growing nature."¹ She early became possessed with a sense of her own importance. At the age of four, in order to impress her mother's maid, she sat down at the piano and played in grand manner, though she did not know one note from another.² Egotism is, of course, a childhood characteristic, but there was, beyond this, Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson think, "a sense of latent greatness in Marian's mind which no discouragement, no self-distrust was able for long to quell."³ She was extremely

¹Life of George Eliot: As Related in Her Letters and Journals, ed. J. W. Cross, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., n. d.), p. 8.

²Ibid., p. 7, anecdote related by George Eliot and told to Cross by Charles Lewes.

³Marian Evans and George Eliot (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 4. Though christened Mary Ann and

loving and jealous in her affections: "In her moral development she showed, from the earliest years, the trait that was most marked in her all through life--namely, the absolute need of some one person who should be all in all to her, and to whom she should be all in all."¹ Her childhood idol was Isaac, whom she followed like a shadow, begging to do everything he did. His pleasure was the source of her keenest enjoyment; his disapproval, the cause of her deepest woe. Sensitive to the slightest rebuff, she was at the mercy of a brother who was never to understand the depth and intensity of her feelings.

When she was five, Mary Ann was sent to join her sister at Attleborough. She was unhappy and lonely at school:

She was by far the youngest child, and although the other girls tried to make a pet of her, calling 'little mamma'--a revealing nickname--this special treatment emphasized her loneliness. She was thought awkward, excessively serious and reserved for her age, and she used to sit in a corner, watching the elder girls. Little escaped her. In winter she was often, because of her smallness, excluded from the inadequate fire and felt cold and miserable. She learned slowly, being too young to keep up with the others. Worst of all, night terrors attacked her at bedtime. The girls could no longer try to shield her with kindness. She was forced to think of her home, of Isaac, of all she loved far away--of her solitude, emphasized by the darkness and the nearby sleepers. There was no mother, no father, no maid to come at her call and comfort, even if only by a scold. The darkness drained her of courage and

generally known by that name for many years, George Eliot eventually preferred and around 1841 adopted the name Marian. The Hansons consistently refer to her as Marian. Both names will be used here, Mary Ann in the account of her early life and Marian in the description of the years after 1841.

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 8.

even of personality. Night after night, when those terrors were upon her, her whole being dissolved into a quivering, inexplicable, annihilating fear.¹

She lived for the holidays when she could go home, back to Isaac, back to her father.

The old intimacy with Isaac, however, was receding with her childhood. He acquired new interests in which she had no part. He chafed at her old possessiveness. She turned to her father for consolation, frequently accompanying him on his visits to the tenants, absorbing from his affectionate conversation his views on politics and religion and insisting on the expression of her own opinions: "He seemed the fount, not of all wisdom, but of the major part of it. The rest she supplied, and was scarcely less dogmatic than he; although, having stated her own views, she was usually content to accept his; they agreed well together."²

In her eighth or ninth year she and her sister were transferred to a larger school kept by a Miss Wallington at Nuneaton. The principal governess was Miss Maria Lewis who became then, and remained for many years, an intimate friend and chief correspondent of George Eliot. Miss Lewis stimulated the child's awakening, groping mind, and encouraged her to read: "Books now became a passion with the child; she read everything she could lay hands on, greatly troubling the soul of her mother by the consumption of candles as

¹Hanson, op. cit., p. 7.

²Ibid., p. 9.

well as of eyesight in her bedroom."¹ She also introduced Mary Ann to evangelicalism, which Mary Ann accepted with fervor:

Her access of religious enthusiasm did not disturb her parents; they were used to fervencies of one kind or another, and as the main effect of this one appeared to be an almost hysterical anxiety to go to church every Sunday, they overlooked the hysteria in thankfulness that their daughter was acceding with such unexpected willingness to the ritual that convention demanded.²

In her thirteenth year Mary Ann was moved to the school of the Misses Franklin at Coventry. She was probably then very much like Maggie of the same age in The Mill on the Floss:

. . . . a creature full of eager, passionate longings for all that was beautiful and glad; thirsty for all knowledge; with an ear straining after dreamy music that died away and would not come near to her; with a blind, unconscious yearning for something that would link together the wonderful impressions of this mysterious life, and give her soul a sense of home in it.³

She became an enthusiastic student, particularly exhibiting her abilities in theme-writing:

In her classes for English Composition Mary Ann Evans was, from her first entering the school, far in advance of the rest; and while the themes of the other children were read, criticised, and corrected in class, hers were reserved for the private perusal and enjoyment⁴ of the teacher, who rarely found anything to correct.

She was the best music student in school.

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 11.

²Hanson, op. cit., p. 13.

³The Best-Known Novels of George Eliot: Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, Silas Marner, Romola (New York: Random House, Inc., n. d.), p. 569.

⁴Cross, op. cit., p. 13.

An atmosphere of evangelicalism prevailed in the school at Coventry, for the Misses Franklin were daughters of a Baptist minister. Mary Ann "was familiar with the atmosphere of good works, and soon established her leadership in this as in all else."¹ She took a prominent part in prayer meetings, in the organization of clothing clubs, and in charitable visits with the poor. She wrestled with her love of pleasure, because pleasure was a snare; she ignored her dress, because the love of dress was vanity. Not satisfied with a mere profession of faith, she tried to shape her life, and the lives of others, in accordance with her convictions.² She began an intensive campaign to convert Isaac, a member of the Tory High Church, to evangelicalism, urging him to give up the pleasures of this world and prepare for himself a place in the next. Many hot words passed between them:

. . . . she threw some exaggeration and wilfulness, some pride and impetuosity, even into her self-renunciation; her own life was still a drama for her, in which she demanded of herself that her part should be played with intensity. And so it came to pass that she often lost the spirit of humility by being excessive in the outward act; she often strove after too high a flight, and came down with her poor little half-fledged wings dabbled in the mud. . . . That is the path we all like when we set out on our abandonment of egoism--the path of martyrdom and endurance, where the palm-branches grow, rather than the steep highway of tolerance, just allowance, and self-blame, where there are no leafy honours to be gathered and worn.³

¹Hanson, op. cit., p. 15.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 16.

³The Mill on the Floss, p. 612.

In the summer of 1836 Mrs. Evans died. In the spring of the following year, Christiana having married, Mary Ann took charge of her father's household. She became an exemplary housekeeper, "learned thoroughly everything that had to be done, and with her innate desire for perfection, was never satisfied unless her department was administered in the very best manner that circumstances permitted."¹ She continued her music lessons, read prodigiously, studied Italian and German with a teacher who came over from Coventry, and read Greek and Latin with the headmaster of the Coventry grammar school:

But it requires no great effort of imagination to conceive that this life, though full of interests of its own, and the source from whence the future novelist drew the most powerful and the most touching of her creations, was, as a matter of fact, very monotonous, very difficult, very discouraging. It could scarcely be otherwise to a young girl, with a full passionate nature and hungry intellect, shut up in a farmhouse in the remote country. For there was no sympathetic human soul near with whom to exchange ideas on the intellectual and spiritual problems that were beginning to agitate her mind. 'You may try, but you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl.'² This is a point of view that must be distinctly recognized by any one attempting to follow the development of George Eliot's character, and it will always be corrected by the other point of view which she has made so prominent in all her own writing--the soothing, strengthening, sacred influences of the home life, the home loves, the home duties.³

Her conscience was convulsed with religious struggles and self-accusations. Though she steeped herself in evangelical reading, she could not find content. Her letters to

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 17.

²Daniel Deronda (New York: A. L. Burt Company, n. d.), pp. 635-636.

³Cross, op. cit., p. 17.

Miss Lewis during this period are almost frantic, begging for replies, as if she needed constant reassurance in her faith. She sought relentlessly after humility, trying to destroy what she considered her besetting sin: ambition, an insatiable desire for the esteem of her fellow men. She denied herself such pleasures as theater-going and even doubted whether she did rightly in reading novels:

The form of religion she was trying so desperately and unavailingly to conform to, was of all forms perhaps the most unsuited to her temperament and character. It demanded fanaticism, she was naturally tolerant; it was a highly individual faith concerned above all with the salvation of the individual soul, she was unfitted to stand alone and thought naturally in terms of herself and another. It was precisely for this last reason that she had embraced Evangelicalism with such ardour; indeed, that she had embraced it at all. It was to her not truly a life-giving, soul-saving faith, but the faith of her adored Miss Lewis, her highly respected Misses Franklin, through it she came into closer communion and love, not so much with God as with them. But of this she was naturally ignorant; it was a truth she could not afford to see until a greater one offered itself. Her Evangelicalism, built on sand, was destined to fall at the first blast of the trumpet. She awaited only the trumpeter, but he was long in coming.¹

While the Brontës were busy with their little Angrian and Gondal books and after they had begun to write poems of merit, "Marian at Griff was doing violence to her true gifts by compiling a Chart of Ecclesiastical History,"² by cooking, sewing, and making jam.

In 1841 Isaac married and took over the establishment at Griff; Mary Ann and her father moved to a house in Foleshill

¹Hanson, op. cit., pp. 23-24.

²Ibid., p. 24.

Road, Coventry. About the end of the year she formed an intimacy with the Brays and later Charles Hennell, whose influence was to help effect a powerful change in her way of thinking. Charles Bray was a ribbon-manufacturer who had a lovely house, Rosehill, in the outskirts of Coventry. Since only a portion of his time was devoted to business, he spent his leisure pursuing his interests in philosophy, religion, and science. Of an active, self-reliant mind, he had written several books of a freethinking tendency. His wife was Caroline Hennell, sister of the Charles Hennell who had published, in 1838, An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of Christianity, a book which attracted Mary Ann before she ever met the author. Mary Ann met the Brays in the house of Mrs. Pears, the sister of Charles Bray and the next-door neighbor of Mary Ann and her father. Perhaps she reminded Bray of his seven evangelical sisters, of whom he saw as little as possible; perhaps her plain appearance denoted to him dullness; in any event, he was not sufficiently interested in Mary Ann to pursue her acquaintance. But Mrs. Pears, fondly dreaming of drawing her brother back into the evangelical fold, decided that perhaps Mary Ann, a notable churchwoman herself, might use her power of argument, astounding when aroused, to worst Charles Bray on his own ground.¹ So in November she took Mary Ann to visit at Rosehill. Bray, remembering nothing of their first meeting, was fascinated with her; and Mary Ann, who now called herself Marian, became one of the most welcome visitors at Rosehill.

¹Ibid., p. 42.

Various influences effected Marian's loss of belief in Christianity. Isaac Taylor's Ancient Christianity had suggested doubts to her. She had been shocked by the union of low morals with strong religious feelings among the poor Methodists whom she had visited. Scott's novels had suggested to her the possibility of good lives being led by non-religious persons. The portrait of the artist in Bulwer-Lytton's Devereaux had left her "considerably shaken by the impression that religion was not a requisite to moral excellence."¹ Her increasing culture made her reluctant to believe in the exclusive claim of any sect. Her discovery of An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of Christianity and her acquaintance with the Brays and Charles Hennell introduced her to wider spheres of thought and hastened what was probably an inevitable result.

Once her decision was reached, Marian attempted to make her break with Christianity complete, despite the pleas and arguments of orthodox friends.² Feeling that it would be hypocritical to continue attending church, she informed her father of her change in attitude. Robert Evans, the conservative, the dogmatic, orthodox church-goer, was horrified at this rebellion against what he had believed ingrained. Thoroughly upset, he considered going to live with his married daughter, and Marian thought of establishing herself as a teacher at Leamington. She stayed for three weeks with Isaac

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 33, George Eliot to Miss Lewis, May 21, 1840.

²Mrs. Pears, John and Mary Sibree, Maria Lewis.

at Griff, however, and, through the intervention of friends, the breach was healed. She agreed, for her father's sake, to resume church attendance.

The break with Christianity was not easy for Marian. The quarrel with her father, the alienation of friends, the relinquishing of a faith she had painfully nourished for years caused her keen suffering; but love of truth would not permit her to accept with her heart that to which her intellect could not consent. For a time after her rejection of Christianity, she experienced some bitterness; but in later years no quality of George Eliot was more striking than her sympathetic respect for the religious sentiments of all genuine believers. She was always to love the Christ story and to be deeply moved by effective Christian themes in art.

Gerald Bullett, upon George Eliot's repudiation of orthodox religion, remarks:

It is part of the paradox of her enigmatic personality that she who repudiated the doctrine of original sin remained infected with a sense of it. Among the great novelists of her time she alone, who theologically speaking denied its existence, was deeply concerned with the human soul.

Anne Fremantle perceives a profound influence of her agnosticism upon not only her life but also her art:

Her agnosticism made an immense difference both to her life and, above all, to her writings. Forced to provide for and from herself the moral laws usually attributed to providence, she laboured under a burden of gravity, of conscience and earnestness, compared with which the Christian's load was of feathers. In denying the Kingdom

¹George Eliot: Her Life and Books (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), p. 173.

of Heaven she lost the power of wonder--the childlike acceptance of the spiritual as the real, which characterises her contemporaries, Turgenev and George Sand, and gives to their writings a light and subtle aroma, a width of vision, which is absent in George Eliot. Since she could not accept the laws of the universe as divine, she must explain them as ethical, in the absence of the Deity she must continually be invigilating the workings of the machine, and in all her actions and her writings she clung to an inexorable and unavoidable law of consequences, of inevitable causation and retribution, as the justification of her absolute ideal of Duty.¹

In 1843 Charles Hennell married Barbara Brabant, who had undertaken a translation of Strauss' Leben Jesu. Marian was persuaded to take over the translation, and in the beginning of 1844 she started work on it. By February of 1846 she had reached the analysis of the Crucifixion, and her fortitude almost collapsed. She complained to Caroline Bray of "Strauss-sickness"; "dissecting the beautiful story" made her ill.² It violated the feeling of reverence for the divine which had been born within her and which she could not completely stifle:

Now she was with her own hands tearing away this precious fabric, depriving herself of peace. She yearned for the imaginative love that is faith, but her intellect was too strong, too insistent, her imagination too inadequate for the effort. She wrote on heavily and in tears.

She wept for the loss of Jesus.³

Only the sight of a cast of Thorwaldsen's figure of Christ

¹George Eliot, Great Lives Series (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), pp. 34-35.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 70.

³Hanson, op. cit., p. 79.

gave her the strength to endure. The translation, praised by reviewers, appeared on June 15, 1846.

On May 31, 1849, Robert Evans died. Marian's grief was intense: "What shall I be without my father? It will seem as if a part of my moral nature were gone."¹

She sought a change of scene by joining the Brays in a visit to the Continent. She settled for some months in Geneva, taking an apartment in the house of M. d'Albert, an artist. He and his wife became Marian's permanent friends; he later translated into French several of her novels. Returning to England on March 23, 1850, she visited Griff and then made her home with the Brays for the next sixteen months.

Chapman and MacKay, who were planning to purchase the Westminster Review, came to Rosehill in October, 1850, to discuss the matter with Bray. Marian had already met John Chapman; he had published her Leben Jesu translation. It was then, or soon afterwards, proposed that Marian take part of the editorial work of the Westminster Review. From January 8 to March 21, 1851, she resided in the home of the Chapmans at 142 Strand, London.² After having returned to Rosehill, she went again in September to London, this time

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 104, George Eliot to the Brays, May 31, 1849.

²According to Gordon S. Haight, letter to the editor, Times Literary Supplement (London), June 3, 1949, p. 365, George Eliot attended lectures on geometry given by Francis Newman at the Ladies' College of Bedford Square during this period. This assertion is based on a recently discovered

in the capacity of assistant editor of the magazine, to board with the Chapmans:

A new period now opens in George Eliot's life, and emphatically the most important period, for now she is to be thrown in contact with Mr. Lewes, who is to exercise so paramount an influence on all her future, with Mr. Herbert Spencer, and with a number of writers then representing the same fearless and advanced thought of the day.¹

Life at 142 Strand was exciting. To this house came Thackeray, Dickens, Carlyle, Thornton Hunt, Francis Newman, Froude, Emerson, Harriet Martineau, Bulwer-Lytton, Leigh Hunt, Mrs. Gaskell, Louis Blanc, and others--a galaxy of mid-Victorian talent. Intellectually stimulated, working harder than ever before in her life, Marian exhibited a quiet dignity and charm and an intellectual acuteness which won her many friends. Mark Rutherford, a fellow-boarder, particularly admired her:

I remember vividly the day on which I came to No. 142 and had lunch there. I was a mere youth, a stranger, awkward and shy. She was then almost unknown to the world, but I had sense enough to discern she was a remarkable creature. I was grateful to her because she replied even with eagerness to a trifling remark I happened to make, and gave it some importance. That was always her way. If there was any sincerity (an indispensable qualification) in the person with whom she came into contact, she strove to elicit his best, and generally disclosed to him something in himself of which he was not aware. I have never seen anybody whose search for the meaning and worth of persons and things was so unresting as hers.²

letter of George Eliot's to the Brays, January 28, 1851, and is advanced in answer to Kathleen Tillotson, letter to the editor, *ibid.*, April 30, p. 281, who proposes proof that George Eliot attended the college in 1850.

¹Cross, *op.cit.*, p. 131.

²Bullett, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-68, quoted.

Herbert Spencer became her intimate and lifelong friend. For awhile there were even rumours of a romance between them.

Though stimulated by the atmosphere of 142 Strand, Marian's life there, because of her relationship with Chapman, became increasingly difficult. The scenes brought on by the unfounded jealousy of Chapman's wife Susanna and of his mistress Elizabeth were a continual drain on her composure. She had no privacy for receiving guests. And, too, Chapman's facile charm, at first fascinating to her, had begun to wear thin. In October, 1853, she moved to lodgings in Cambridge Street. The next year she resigned her editorial position.

It was Spencer who fostered the relationship between her and George Lewes, frequently bringing Lewes with him on visits to Chapman's house. Though at first disapproving of Lewes, Marian was gradually won to affection by his charm. On April 16, 1853, she wrote to Mrs. Bray:

People are very good to me. Mr. Lewes especially is kind and attentive, and has quite won my regard, after having had a good deal of my vituperation. Like a few other people in the world, he is much better than he seems. A¹ man of heart and conscience wearing a mask of flippancy.

Lewes came to Marian at a time when she was especially hungry for love. By the time of their meeting, she had attained what almost any woman might have desired: "a faithful body of old friends, a growing body of new friends; a busy and useful life, in which the results of her work were to be seen and measured; a position in the intellectual world of London which had rarely been rivalled by a woman."² She was

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 157.

²Hanson, op. cit., p. 151.

recognized and praised as the power behind the Westminster Review. In great demand at social functions, she frequently had to refuse invitations because of prior engagements:

Joseph Parkes so much admired her unassuming manner, her rectitude and comprehensiveness of mind, that he paid her the exceptional honour of invitations to dinner in Savile Row at which she was the only woman guest. She was a favoured visitor at the Leigh Smith house in Blandford Square. In all advanced circles of London society, she was coming to be considered an indispensable asset. She had begun to take for granted conversation on¹ equal terms with the finest intellects of the day

But she was not happy; her letters of this period, despite their many references to her exciting social and intellectual activities, are characterized by a kind of wistfulness, a weariness. Her craving for admiration was abundantly gratified, but her need of love, as intense as in the days of her childhood, remained unsatisfied.

George Henry Lewes was a literary and dramatic critic. He shared the editorship of the Leader, a radical journal, with Thornton Hunt. His philosophical, political, and scientific papers were admired by many Victorians. At the time he met Marian he was engaged in writing a biography of Goethe, which is still read and admired. A lively and charming conversationalist of wit, humor, and broad-mindedness, he was loved by such a discriminating person as Jane Welsh Carlyle. He did, however, on many occasions annoy people with his impudence, freely expressed radical views, and social crudities. He was, as the Hansons comment, no gentleman; his manner often offended and his clothes were usually slovenly. But Marian

¹Ibid., pp. 150-151.

herself, in a sense, was no lady: " . . . her manner, for all its gentility, showed her lack of breeding, and her clothes were and remained utterly tasteless."¹ He was of small stature, with an ugly, pockmarked face, having only fine eyes and a beautiful smile to recommend it. His reputation with women was rather unsavoury. Despite his joviality and ready charm, however, Lewes, though oblivious to social censure, was an intensely unhappy man when he met Marian. His marriage with the young and beautiful Agnes Jervis had failed; Agnes had borne Thornton Hunt, Lewes's friend, two children. Lewes, because of strict marriage laws, could not obtain a divorce from her. And though he had tried to console himself with hard work and play, he remained lonely, physically ill, and mentally depressed. His good friend Spencer had relieved Lewes's melancholy by arousing his dormant interest in science; but "Lewes was not a Spencer, he could not live on a love of science."² He craved companionship, sympathy, and the love of an understanding woman.

Lewes, after a comparatively brief acquaintance with Marian, approached her with his problems, not because he admired her intellectual prowess, but because he sensed in her a depth of kindness and sympathetic feeling:

His intuition did not fail him. Her response to the appeal--the first that had ever been made to her by a

¹Ibid., p. 154.

²Ibid., p. 158.

man--was immediate. Few women could be more tender-hearted or considerate than this intellectual wonder of London literary salons.¹

For the first time she was asked to support instead of hoping she might lean. The compliment, from this man of all men, who had tried beauty and found it wanting, was prodigious and armed her with strength. And who better able than she to sympathize with a man who was seeking precisely what she sought?²

Much had been written about George Eliot's constant need of someone to cling to, but, as Arthur Paterson remarks, "while few women needed love more, not one ever gave stronger support to those she loved" than George Eliot: "In the larger issues of life her greatest need was not a person to lean upon, but of someone to lean upon her."³ Her response to Lewes's appeal was immediate. She took over a part of his work that he might rest and find relief from the headaches which had been plaguing him for months. She spent as much time with him as she could possibly spare from her work and the other demands made upon her.

Marian's decision to live with Lewes outside the bonds of matrimony was doubtless the most difficult one of her life. Though bound to him by love, she was separated from him by her respect for convention and her regard of marriage as sacred. Though he had nothing to lose and everything to gain by an alliance with her, she had everything to lose and, if one was to consider his past reputation, perhaps

¹Ibid., p. 155.

²Ibid., p. 158.

³George Eliot's Family Life and Letters (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928), pp. 29-30.

nothing to gain but momentary happiness. Social ostracism, cruel and unyielding, was the inevitable result of a defiance of Victorian morality. How could she be, as she had long yearned to be, a power for good in a world that would brand her immoral?

Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson think that George Eliot's decision to live with Lewes was, according to her nature, inevitable; but, they contend, her decision was probably made easier by Feurbach, an authority to which she could refer for justification of her action.¹ Marian was, at the time of her growing intimacy with Lewes, working on a translation of Feuerbach's Essence of Christianity. According to his teachings, the only bond of true marriage is love within perfect freedom. The merely external bond, not the voluntary bond of love, is not true marriage, and therefore not truly moral.

In July, 1854, Marian and Lewes left England together. They stayed in Germany for eight months, working, reading, meeting famous contemporaries, attending concerts and plays, and visiting art galleries together. Except for perhaps an occasional apprehension about their reception on their return to England, Marian was completely happy:

Lewes, whose health improved quickly, gave her all she seemed to want and more than she had dared to hope for. As a companion he was gay, stimulating, serious when and as she desired it; as a husband he was tender, solicitous, and yet passionate. He engaged her feelings

¹Op. cit., pp. 169-170.

and her intellect, satisfied her mind and body. To a woman of close on thirty-five, such delayed fulfillment was very heaven. Love and gratitude (they are scarcely to be distinguished in such a case) filled her heart and, despite all the incredulity that was to be lavished on the strange union,¹ her devotion grew and strengthened day by day

They returned to England in March, 1855, and in September settled at 8 Park Street, Richmond, where they lived for three years. Marian suffered because of the alienation of many of her friends, but never enough to make her regret what she regarded as marriage with Lewes. Her Brother Isaac, the beloved of her youth, refused all correspondence with her. Even the Brays, from whom she might have expected better treatment, were cold and disapproving. Forced into a defensive attitude, Marian, disappointed in their lack of understanding, eager that they should know her true position, and longing for their blessing, wrote to Mrs. Bray on September 4, 1855:

If there is any one action or relation of my life which is and always has been profoundly serious, it is my relation to Mr. Lewes. . . . Light and easily broken ties are what I neither desire theoretically nor could live for practically. Women who are satisfied with such ties do not act as I have done. That any unworldly, unsuperstitious person who is sufficiently acquainted with the realities of life can pronounce my relation to Mr. Lewes immoral, I can only understand by remembering how subtle and complex are the influences that mould opinion. But I do remember this: and I indulge in no arrogant or uncharitable thoughts about those who condemn us, even though we might have expected a somewhat different verdict.²

Spencer and Chapman were among the few old friends who behaved

¹ Ibid., p. 173.

² Cross, op. cit., pp. 166-167.

kindly, understandingly, and even generously. Spencer attempted to reconcile the Brays to Marian's action. Chapman asked her to write articles for the Westminster Review.

The years just after their return from Germany were intensely busy ones for Marian and Lewes. Since they were supporting not only themselves but also Agnes and her children, they worked hard at what would bring them immediate profit. Marian contributed to both the Westminster Review and the Leader.

It is interesting to note that George Eliot's great talent for the writing of fiction did not come to fruition until she was almost forty years old. The careful observer can discern in her letters before the commencement of her creative writing some indications of the novelist-to-be, such as her passion for utterance, expressed in a letter to Miss Sara Hennell, April, 1849: "What is anything worth until it is uttered? Is not the universe one great utterance? Utterance there must be in word or deed to make life of any worth. Every true pentecost is a gift of utterance."¹ The powers on which her greatness as a novelist depended--insight into character, depth of sympathetic feeling, and keen perception of the essential, the true--were in action long before she wrote her first story; but they apparently could not be directed toward creativity until she had found peace from the warring passions of her youth, until she had attained the emotional security which her relationship with Lewes provided.

¹Ibid., p. 102.

Since the time of her early youth she had been obsessed with the ambition to do something great and lasting, though she knew not what; but her ambition was frustrated with sterility until after her union with Lewes. The Hansons assert that she was unable to stand alone in any creative act, that her lack of self-confidence bound the talent whose release was effected by the influence of Lewes: "The incipient greatness, which, when not disabled by this lack of confidence, she believed to be hers had to be expressed through or because of another person."¹

An entry in her journal dated July 20, 1856, heralded the birth of George Eliot the novelist: "I am anxious to begin my fiction writing."² In a later memorandum is an account of the genesis of her first story, "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton":

September 1856 made a new era in my life, for it was then I began to write fiction. It had always been a vague dream of mine that some time or other I might write a novel; and my shadowy conception of what the novel was to be, varied, of course, from one epoch of my life to another. But I never went further towards the actual writing of the novel than an introductory chapter describing a Staffordshire village and the life of the neighboring farmhouses; and as the years passed on I lost any hope that I should ever be able to write a novel, just as I desponded about everything else in my future life. I always thought I was deficient in dramatic power, both of construction and dialogue, but I felt I should be at my ease in the descriptive parts of a novel. My 'introductory chapter' was pure description, though there were good materials in it for dramatic presentation. It happened to be among the papers I had with me in Germany,

¹ Op. cit., p. 24.

² Cross, op. cit., p. 209.

and one evening at Berlin something led me to read it to George. He was struck with it as a bit of concrete description, and it suggested to him the possibility of my being able to write a novel, though he distrusted--indeed disbelieved in--my possession of any dramatic power. Still, he began to think that I might as well try some time what I could do in fiction; and by and by, when we came back to England, and I had greater success than he ever expected in other kinds of writing, his impression that it was worth while to see how far my mental power would go, towards the production of a novel, was strengthened. He began to say very positively, 'You must try and write a story,' and when we were at Tenby [where she and Lewes went to relax and to collect specimens for his scientific studies of marine life] he urged me to begin at once.¹

For awhile, according to her account, she procrastinated, entertaining merely the idea of writing fiction. Then one morning, while partially asleep, she imagined herself writing a story entitled, "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton." On September 22 she began writing; on November 5 she completed the story. Lewes, after reading it, was convinced that she could write good dialogue and command pathos.

On November 6, Lewes sent the story to the publisher John Blackwood, saying that the author, whose identity he concealed, proposed it as the first of a series to be entitled Sketches of Clerical Life. Blackwood accepted the story, and "Amos Barton" appeared serially in Blackwood's Magazine. "Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story" and "Janet's Repentance" followed shortly thereafter; and in January, 1858, the three stories were published in a two-volume edition called Scenes of Clerical Life. Marian's pseudonym appeared on the title page; even Blackwood did not know who George Eliot was.

¹Ibid., pp. 210-211.

Scenes of Clerical Life evoked a chorus of praise from, among others, Thackeray, Dickens, Froude, and Jane Welsh Carlyle. It excited much curiosity as to the identity of its author. Among those who sent laudatory letters to her, Dickens was the only one to suppose that George Eliot was a woman.

Accused, even before the stories had appeared in book form, of portraiture in Scenes of Clerical Life, George Eliot wrote to Blackwood (August 17, 1857): "I should consider it a fault which would cause me lasting regret if I had used reality in any other than the legitimate way common to all artists, who draw their materials from their observation and experience."¹ Later, however, in a letter to the Brays (June, 1859), she admitted the truth of the charge: "There were portraits in the 'Clerical Scenes;' [sic] but that was my first bit of art, and my hand was not well in. I did not know so well how to manipulate my materials."²

George Eliot's remarks on her writing during the period of the composition of Scenes of Clerical Life expressed attitudes she was always to maintain towards her work. Objecting to some of Blackwood's suggestions for altering "Janet's Repentance," she informed him that she would abide by his decisions regarding details; but she refused, as an artist, to depart from her own conceptions of life and character: "There is nothing to be done with the story, but either to let

¹Ibid., p. 236.

²Ibid., p. 306.

Dempster and Janet and the rest be as I see them, or to renounce it as too painful."¹ Always insisting on truth in her writings, she relied on her own conceptions of characters, repeatedly refusing to modify characterizations she felt to be true:

. . . . I am unable to alter anything in relation to the delineation or development of character, as my stories always grow out of my psychological conception of the dramatis personae. . . . My artistic bent is directed not at all to the presentation of eminently irreproachable characters, but to the presentation of mixed human beings in such a way as to call forth tolerant judgment, pity, and sympathy. And I cannot stir a step aside from what I feel to be true in character."²

Writing, she stated, was a part of her religion: "I can write no word that is not prompted from within."³

Adam Bede was growing in George Eliot's mind some time before she finished Scenes of Clerical Life. On October 17, 1857, she wrote to Blackwood: "My new story haunts me a good deal, and I shall set about it without delay. It will be a country story--full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay."⁴

This remark has a special value for us as showing how the book in embryo felt to her. Without suggesting that there exists any radical opposition between imaginative impregnation and deliberate plotting or planning, we recognize in that description the true germ of all that is best and most enduring in the finished work."⁵

¹Ibid., p. 234, June 11, 1857.

²Ibid., p. 220, George Eliot to John Blackwood, February 18, 1857.

³Ibid., p. 236, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, August 19, 1857.

⁴Ibid., p. 237.

⁵Bullett, op. cit., p. 131.

Five days later she began writing. Blackwood wanted an outline of the story before it was completed, but she refused his request on the grounds that she would not have her work judged apart from its treatment, "which alone determines the moral quality of art."¹ After a trip to Munich and Dresden, she finished the work.

The germ of Adam Bede, according to George Eliot's own account, was an anecdote related to her by the Methodist wife of her father's younger brother:

We were sitting together one afternoon during her visit in 1839 or 1840, when it occurred to her to tell me how she had visited a condemned criminal--a very ignorant girl, who had murdered her child and refused to confess; how she had stayed with her praying through the night, and how the poor creature at last broke out into tears, and confessed her crime. My aunt afterwards went with her in the cart to the place of execution; and she described to me the great respect with which this ministry of hers was regarded by the official people about the gaol. The story, told by my aunt with great feeling, affected me deeply, and I never lost the impression of that afternoon and our talk together; but I believe I never mentioned it, through all the intervening years, till something prompted me to tell it to George in December, 1856, when I had begun to write the 'Scenes of Clerical Life.' He remarked that the scene in the prison would make a fine element in a story; and I afterwards began to think of blending this and some other recollections of my aunt in one story, with some points in my father's early life and character.²

Though the character of Dinah grew out of her recollections of her aunt, and the character of Adam was suggested by her father, George Eliot stressed the fact that "there is not a single portrait in 'Adam Bede;' [sic] only the suggestions of experience wrought up into new combinations."³

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 281, "History of Adam Bede."

²Ibid., p. 280.

³Ibid., p. 281.

In February, 1859, she and Lewes moved to Holly Lodge, Wandsworth. Adam Bede was published at the same time. According to Oscar Browning, "the sensation caused by its appearance has seldom been equalled in literary history":

It was felt that a new power had arisen in English letters. Darwin's 'Origin of Species' appeared in the same year, and the two books, so different in their characters, so similar in their originality, divided the attentions of the thinking world.¹

George Eliot herself, before it was released to the public, said of Adam Bede: "I love it very much, and am deeply thankful to have written it."² She felt that it was "worth living through long years to write."³ The enthusiastic response of the reading public must have been particularly gratifying to the author who was "as much in need of sympathy from my readers as I am incapable of bending myself to their tastes."⁴ Characteristically, though, in the midst of success, she was weighted with depression: "Shall I ever write another book as true as 'Adam Bede'? The weight of the future presses on me, and makes itself felt even more than the deep satisfaction of the past and present."⁵

¹Life of George Eliot (London: Walter Scott, 1890), pp. 61-62.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 282.

³Ibid., p. 301, George Eliot to Major Blackwood, [brother of John Blackwood] May 6, 1859.

⁴Ibid., p. 239, George Eliot to John Blackwood, November 7, 1857.

⁵Ibid., p. 297, journal entry, April 17, 1859.

George Eliot probably had several reasons for her long refusal to reveal publicly her identity. Perhaps she feared that her relationship with Lewes would prejudice people against her books. Always somewhat lacking in self-confidence, perhaps she shrank from the shame of possible failure. Perhaps also, since there was some prejudice in Victorian England against women writers, she felt that her work would be more respected if it were thought to be that of a man. Eventually, however, she was forced out of her incognito. Although no formal acknowledgement of her authorship was issued, by the end of 1859, all England knew who the real George Eliot was. And even the Victorians, with the exception of a few dissentient ones, were willing to make concessions to greatness.

The Mill on the Floss was finished in March, 1860. It proved an even greater popular success than Adam Bede. Queen Victoria herself expressed admiration of it. There were, however, some harsh criticisms. Anne Fremantle notes that Ruskin called this novel "the most striking instance of the study of subcutaneous disease" and complained that the landscape was "of the Cockney school, by excursion train to Gravesend, with a return ticket from the City Road."¹ Bulwer-Lytton, and later Swinburne, were pained by serious, sensitive Maggie's falling in love with Stephen Guest. George Eliot, always sensitive to any censure of her character conceptions, replied to Bulwer-Lytton's criticism by way

¹Op. cit., pp. 93-94, quoted.

of John Blackwood (July 9, 1860):

. . . . Maggie's position towards Stephen is too vital a part of my whole conception and purpose for me to be converted to the condemnation of it. If I am wrong there--if I did not really know what my heroine would feel and do under the circumstances in which I deliberately placed her--I ought not to have written this book at all, but quite a different book, if any. If the ethics of art do not admit the truthful presentation of a character essentially noble, but liable to great error --then, it seems to me, the ethics of art are too narrow, and must be widened to correspond with a widening psychology.¹

From March to June of 1860 George Eliot and Lewes traveled in Italy. While they were staying in Florence, she conceived the idea of Romola, a historical novel, the setting of which would be Florence at the time of Savonarola. But after their return to England, soon followed by their move from Wandsworth to London, the idea of Silas Marner thrust itself between her and Romola: "It came to me first of all quite suddenly, as a sort of legendary tale, suggested by my recollections of having once, in early childhood, seen a linen weaver with a bag on his back; but as my mind dwelt on the subject, I became inclined to a more realistic treatment."² The story was finished in March, 1861, and published in April. It received deserved popularity: "Silas Marner is a good-natured, unworried book. It has charm; a quality not readily found in the other works of George Eliot."³

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 385.

²Ibid., p. 401, George Eliot to John Blackwood, February 24, 1861.

³Hanson, op. cit., p. 239.

"The next two years were given up to the struggle that was Romola."¹ In April of 1861 George Eliot and Lewes went to Italy and spent a month in Florence doing preparatory research for the novel that, according to Cross, "ploughed into her more than any of her other books."² They returned to England in June, and on August 12 she recorded in her journal: "Got into a state of so much wretchedness in attempting to concentrate my thoughts on the construction of my story, that I became desperate, and suddenly burst my bonds, saying I will not think of writing!"³ Not until October did she actually begin writing. By November 6 she was so utterly dejected that she almost resolved to give up Romola. On January 1, 1862, she abandoned what she had written and began anew. The first part of the novel appeared in the Cornhill Magazine in July, 1862; the last part in August, 1863.

Critics and readers since the time of its publication have been almost unanimous in condemning the lifelessness and pedantry of Romola; nevertheless, it has attracted many ardent admirers. Henry James considered it a magnificent failure destined to survive, for its finest pages, as a part of our greatest literature:

Romola is on the whole the finest thing she wrote, but its defects are almost on the scale of its beauties. The great

¹Ibid., p. 240.

²Op. cit., p. 434.

³Ibid., p. 412.

defect is that, except in the person of Tito Melema, it does not seem positively to live. It is overladen with learning, it smells of the lamp, it tastes just perceptively of pedantry. In spite of its want of blood, however, it assuredly will survive in men's remembrance, for the finest pages in it belong to the finest part of our literature. It is on the whole a failure, but such a failure as only a great talent can produce; and one may say of it that there¹ are many 'hits' far less interesting than such a mistake.

George Eliot herself acknowledged the flaws in Romola.

In answer to R. H. Hutton's criticism of her excessive use of careful atmospheric detail in this novel, she explained, perhaps painfully (August 8, 1863):

Perhaps even a judge so discerning as yourself could not infer from the imperfect result how strict a self-control and selection were exercised in the presentation of details. I believe there is scarcely a phrase, an incident, an allusion, that did not gather its value to me from its supposed subservience to my main artistic objects. But is likely enough that my mental constitution would always render the issue of my labor something excessive--wanting proportion. It is the habit of my imagination to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself. The psychological causes which prompted me to give such details of Florentine life and history as I have given, are precisely the same as those which determined me in giving the details of English village life in 'Silas Marner,' or the 'Dodson' life, out of which were developed the destinies of poor Tom and Maggie. But you have correctly pointed out the reason why my tendency to excess in this effort after artistic vision makes the impression of a fault in 'Romola' much more perceptible than in my previous books.²

Of course the reason for her failure to achieve in Romola the effectiveness of setting realized in each of her earlier novels is obvious: Romola was agonizingly produced out of deliberate, intensive scholarship; Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, and

¹"The Life of George Eliot," Partial Portraits (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1919), pp. 55-56.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 440.

Silas Marner were born, not without some birth pangs, but with spontaneity, out of personal experience. She even acquiesced, for once, to criticism of her characterization; her conception she believed good but perhaps not adequately realized:

. . . . I am not surprised at your dissatisfaction with Romola herself. I can well believe that the many difficulties belonging to the treatment of such a character have not been overcome, and that I have failed to bring out my conception with adequate fullness. I am sorry she has attracted you so little; for the great problem of her life, which essentially coincides with a chief problem in Savonarola's, is one that readers need helping to understand. But with regard to that and to my whole book, my predominant feeling is,--not that I have achieved anything, but--that great, great facts have struggled to find a voice through me, and have only been able to speak brokenly. That consciousness makes me cherish the more any proof that my work has been seen to have some true significance by minds prepared not simply by instruction, but by that religious and moral sympathy with the historical life of man which is the larger half of culture.¹

But Romola was to remain, of all her books, the most beloved by her. In June of 1873, when all her novels except Daniel Deronda had been written, she told Alexander Main, after reading through his collection of excerpts from her works, that she felt wonder at anyone's thinking she had written anything better than Romola.²

George Eliot did not publish another book until May, 1866. In November, 1863, she and Lewes moved to the Priory, 21 North Bank, Regent's Park. In July of 1864 she was again obsessed with the old fear of possible sterility in the future:

¹Ibid., p. 441.

²Ibid., p. 605.

"Horrible scepticism about all things paralyzing my mind. Shall I ever be good for anything again? Ever do anything again?"¹

. . . . she could gain no confidence from what she had done; on the contrary, each book written appeared as so much of herself spent, so much good that could never again be given to men and women. She was not alone in her fears for her writing, in her lack of confidence; all artists agonize over their work, unable to believe good of it. But her fears passed far beyond the usual fears of the creator. Her artistry was overburdened by a moral purpose, part heritage of her upbringing and ancestry, part conscious repayment of the debt she owed to society for flaunting its most cherished law. As the years passed, she drove herself almost frantic with dread that her hand would lose its cunning or that her voice would be altogether silenced before she had done the work she must do to obtain salvation--not the divine grace, though the thought had its origin² there, but the appeasement of her own uneasy conscience.

In September she took up the subject of her verse drama, The Spanish Gypsy; but in February, 1865, she became ill and Lewes insisted that she abandon work on it for a time.

The idea of Felix Holt had been in her mind for about five years. It had temptingly intruded itself into her studies for Romola, only to be, with difficulty, dismissed. In March, 1865, during a period of deep misery, it was finally begun and in May of the next year finished. Perhaps her wretchedness left its mark on the novel; in any event, it was not warmly greeted by the public and has never become a general favorite.

In January, 1867, George Eliot and Lewes went to Spain to gather impressions for The Spanish Gypsy, a work she described as "very near my heart."³ In her account of the genesis

¹Ibid., p. 453, journal entry.

²Hanson, op. cit., p. 253.

³Cross, op. cit., p. 492, George Eliot to John Blackwood, February 21, 1867.

of this drama is an explanation of her conception of tragedy:

A good tragic subject must represent a possible, sufficiently probable, not a common action; and to be really tragic, it must represent irreparable collision between the individual and the general (in differing degrees of generality). It is the individual with whom we sympathize, and the general of which we recognize the irresistible power.¹

"A tragedy," she elaborated, "has not to expound why the individual must give way to the general: it has to show that it is compelled to give way, the tragedy consisting in the struggle involved, and often in the entirely calamitous issue in spite of a grand submission."²

Despite her fine theory, however, and the largeness of her theme--that of a maiden's renunciation of happiness in the ordinary lot of womanhood in order to fulfill a great, predetermined destiny--The Spanish Gypsy is a failure for the same reason that Romola is; it is labored and lifeless, unsuited to the talent that was at its best in treating English country life. Also the medium of verse encumbered her; critics agree that she was no poet. The Spanish Gypsy was respectfully received by the Victorians, as almost any work of hers would have been; but it was not acclaimed.

Middlemarch was begun in August, 1869, in a mood of pessimism. On September 11 she wrote in her journal: "I do not feel very confident that I can make anything satisfactory of 'Middlemarch.' I have need to remember that other things

¹Ibid., p. 509, "Notes on The Spanish Gypsy."

²Ibid., p. 510.

which have been accomplished by me were begun under the same cloud."¹ When Blackwood complained, in 1871, of the proposed length of the novel, she replied with an explanation of her design:

I don't see how I can leave anything out, because I hope there is nothing that will be seen to be irrelevant to my design, which is to show the gradual action of ordinary causes rather than exceptional, and to show this in some directions which have not been from time immemorial the beaten path--the Cremorne walks and shows of fiction. But the best intentions are good for nothing until execution has justified them. And you know I am always compassed about with fears. I am in danger in all my designs of parodying dear Goldsmith's satire on Burke, and think of refining when novel readers only think of skipping.²

George Eliot told Cross that in the creation of all her best works

. . . . there was a 'not herself' which took possession of her, and that she felt her own personality to be merely the instrument through which this spirit, as it were, was acting. Particularly she dwelt on this in regard to the scene in 'Middlemarch' between Dorothea and Rosamond, saying that, although she always knew they had, sooner or later, to come together, she kept the idea resolutely out of her mind until Dorothea was in Rosamond's drawing-room. Then, abandoning herself to the inspiration of the moment, she wrote the whole scene exactly as it stands, without alteration or erasure, in an intense state of excitement and agitation, feeling herself entirely possessed by the feelings of the two women.³

With the completion of Middlemarch she found peace, not because she was convinced of its perfection, but because she had lived to give out what was in her to give:

¹Ibid., p. 541.

²Ibid., p. 561, July 24, 1871.

³Ibid., p. 724, commentary by Cross.

When a subject has begun to grow in me, I suffer terribly until it has wrought itself out--become a complete organism; and then it seems to take wing and go away from me. That thing is not to be done again--that life has been lived. I could not rest with a number of unfinished works on my mind. When they--or rather, when a conception has begun to shape itself in written words, I feel that it must go on to the end before I can be happy about it. Then I move away and look at it from a distance without any agitations.¹

Her popularity reached its peak with the publication of Middlemarch, in eight monthly installments, the last one appearing in December, 1872. Even the success of Adam Bede paled beside that of this novel. And, according to Anne Fremantle, its influence was far-reaching; George Moore, Flaubert, Hardy, and Proust, among others, felt it.²

Daniel Deronda, her last novel, was begun in 1874 and published in 1876. Its sale was even greater than that of Middlemarch, though it is not nearly so much admired now. Henry James is one of the few discriminating readers to have expressed enthusiastic praise of it: "I was to remain a very Deronda of Derondists, for my own wanton joy: which amounts to saying that I found the figured, coloured tapestry always vivid enough to brave no matter what complications of the stitch."³

George Lewes died November 28, 1878. For many weeks George Eliot, occupying herself with preparing for publication

¹ Ibid., p. 586, George Eliot to Alexander Main, November 4, 1872.

² Op. cit., p. 127.

³ Op. cit., p. 43.

the manuscripts he had left, refused to see anyone except Lewes's son Charles and a few people she was obliged to receive on business. On January 1, 1879, she wrote in her journal: "Here I and sorrow sit."¹

When she did begin to see friends again, J. W. Cross, who had just lost his mother, was one of her most frequent callers. George Eliot had met Cross and his mother for the first time in Rome in 1869, Lewes having been previously introduced to Mrs. Cross by Herbert Spencer. Later in that same year George Eliot and Lewes had visited Mrs. Cross at Weybridge, and a close intimacy had developed between the two families.

In the months that followed Lewes's death, their common grief, intellectual compatibility, and fondness for each other knit George Eliot and J. W. Cross closely together. On May 6, 1880, they were married. They left immediately afterwards for a tour of France, Italy, Austria, and Germany, returning to England at the end of July.

On December 22, 1880, not quite eight months after her marriage, George Eliot died. She was buried in Highgate Cemetery, next to Lewes.

"Her death," Edmund Gosse says, "caused a great sensation, for she had ruled the wide and flourishing province of English prose fiction for ten years, since the death of Dickens."² She had been a solace to many Victorians:

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 681.

²"George Eliot," Aspects and Impressions (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), p. 2.

She seemed to take the ordinary life and convert its ordinariness into something bigger and better. She did not controvert, but she showed that there was truth above the struggles, and also showed that there was a spiritual element running through all the events of life without which they would be incomprehensible. This, for those who puzzled and troubled over the conclusions that Darwin's and Huxley's reasoning led to, was the greatest possible solace and help.¹

"People who started controversies about evolutionism, a favourite Victorian pastime, bowed low at the mention of her name, and her own strong good sense alone prevented her from being made the object of a sort of priggish idolatry."² Though adoration of her was not unanimous,³ Lord Acton's words of grief doubtless expressed the feelings of many at the news of her death: "It seems to me as if the sun had gone out. You cannot think how much I loved her."⁴

Henry James, her most ardent American devotee, has written perhaps the loveliest of tributes to George Eliot. Admiring her "love of justice, truth, and light," her "large, generous way of looking at things," and her "constant effort to hold high the torch in the dusky spaces of man's conscience," he has praised her both as woman and novelist:

¹Elizabeth S. Haldane, George Eliot and her Times: A Victorian Study (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1927), p. 322.

²Gosse, op. cit., p. 3.

³The Pre-Raphaelites harshly criticized her works, while Browning and Matthew Arnold, among others, politely refrained from publicly expressing their impatience with her sometimes oracular manner.

⁴Haldane, op. cit., p. 299, quoted.

To her own sex her memory, her example, will remain of the highest value; those of them for whom the 'development' of woman is the hope of the future ought to erect a monument to George Eliot. She helped in the cause more than any one, in proving how few limitations are of necessity implied in the feminine organism. She went so far that such a distance seems enough, and in her effort she sacrificed no tenderness, no grace. There is much talk to-day about things being 'open to women'; but George Eliot showed that there is nothing that is closed. If we criticize her novels we must remember that her nature came first and her work afterwards, and that it is not remarkable they should not resemble the productions, say, of Alexandre Dumas. What is remarkable, extraordinary--and the process remains inscrutable and mysterious--is that this quiet, anxious, sedentary, serious, invalidical English lady should have made us believe that nothing in the world was alien to her; should have produced such rich, deep, masterly pictures of the multiform life of man.¹

¹Op. cit., p. 62.

CHAPTER II

ON FICTION

In her youth George Eliot was torn between an instinctive love of fiction and a Platonic fear of its "pernicious" effect on the reader. As a child she eagerly devoured every work of fiction and romance which came within her reach. Once when a copy of Scott's Waverly, lent to her older sister by a neighbor, was returned before little Mary Ann could read to the end of it, she, in her distress at the loss of the fascinating volume, began to write out as much of the narrative as she could remember.¹ But the unaffected, fun-loving, story-hungry little girl developed into a self-conscious, inhibited, moralizing young woman. On March 16, 1839, she wrote a letter to Miss Lewis condemning all fiction, with the possible exception of a few standard works.² She would not, she told Miss Lewis, recommend the denial of fiction to "persons of perceptions so quick, memories so electric and retentive, and minds so comprehensive, that nothing less than omnivorous reading, as Southey calls it, can satisfy their intellectual man"; but for herself and her fellow-creatures with counterparts of

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 11. Cross relates the incident as told by Miss Simcox in her article published in the Nineteenth Century Review (June, 1881).

²Don Quixote, Hudibras, Robinson Crusoe, Gil Blas, Scott's novels, and others.

"the same causes which exist in my own breast to render novels and romances pernicious," she would legislate against the reading of fiction.¹ She recalled her earlier reading with a sense of injury:

I am, I confess, not an impartial member of a jury in this case; for I owe the culprits [novelists] a grudge for injuries inflicted upon myself. When I was quite a little child, I could not be satisfied with the things around me: I was constantly living in a world of my own creation, and was quite contented to have no companions, that I might be left to my own musings, and imagine scenes in which I was chief actress. Conceive what a character novels would give to these Utopias. I was early supplied with them by those who kindly sought to gratify my appetite for reading, and of course I made use of the² materials they supplied for building my castles in the air.

Not only children, she believed at that time, respond imitatively to fiction; adults, also, she was convinced, as was Plato,³ are influenced to pattern their actions after those of fictitious characters:

But it may be said -- 'No one ever dreamed of recommending children to read them [novels]: all this does not apply to persons come to years of discretion, whose judgments are in some degree matured.' I answer that men and women are but children of a larger growth: they are still imitative beings. We cannot (at least those who ever read to any purpose at all)--we cannot, I say, help being modified by the ideas that pass through our minds. We hardly wish to lay claim to such elasticity as retains no impress. We are active beings too. We are each one of the dramatis personae in some play on the stage of Life: hence our actions have their share in the effects of our reading.⁴

¹Cross, op. cit., pp. 25-26.

²Ibid., p. 26.

³See Republic, Bk. III, sec. 386-392B.

⁴Cross, op. cit., p. 26.

The discipline our minds receive from the perusal of fiction, she believed, can be better obtained through the study of history, the contemplation of truth rather than fanciful creation. She well appreciated the enjoyment derived from the pursuit of knowledge, but if she experienced aesthetic pleasure in the presence of fiction, she denied its validity and value and suppressed it. She impartially dismissed romantic, religious, and realistic novels. Her discussion of only the discipline, not the delight, of fiction and her complete neglect of the truth of art are particularly indicative of the immature, evangelical attitude which was soon to undergo great change:

When a person has exhausted the wonders of truth, there is no other resort than fiction: till then, I cannot imagine how the adventures of some phantom conjured up by fancy, can be more entertaining than the transactions of real specimens of human nature from which we may safely draw inferences. I dare say Mr. James's 'Huguenot' would be recommended as giving an idea of the times of which he writes; but as well may one be recommended to look at landscapes for an idea of English scenery. The real secret of the relaxation talked of is one that would not generally be avowed; but an appetite that wants seasoning of a certain kind cannot be indicative of health. Religious novels are more hateful to me than merely worldly ones: they are a sort of centaur or mermaid, and, like other monsters that we do not know how to class, should be destroyed for the public good as soon as born. The weapons of the Christian warfare were never sharpened at the forge of romance. Domestic fictions, as they come more within the range of imitation, seem more dangerous. For my part, I am ready to sit down and weep at the impossibility of my understanding or barely knowing a fraction of the sum of objects that present themselves for our contemplation in books and life. Have I, then, any time to spend on things that never existed?¹

But her dogmatic stand, even then, was neither unshakable nor

¹Ibid., pp. 26-27.

unassailed. The artist's soul was struggling with the moralist's conviction and the student's passion for facts: "My imagination is an enemy that must be cast down ere I can enjoy peace or exhibit uniformity of character."¹

Examination of her early views about fiction and truth shows George Eliot's guiding principle in the creation of her own novels and in her estimations of the novels of others, artistic truth, to have had deep roots in her character. To her, a truthful novel had to present people as they really are and life as it exists. And the real people were, for the most part, the commonplace, ordinary ones leading simple lives. In her first story, "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton," she expressed the desire which would inspire her best writing: "I wish to stir your sympathy with commonplace troubles,--to win your tears for real sorrow: sorrow such as may live next door to you,--such as walks neither in rags nor in velvet, but in very ordinary decent apparel."² The works of other novelists which moved her most were usually the ones that presented this type of reality.

Extravagant, unrealistic, or silly novels drew forth her most pungent satire. She considered idealized and false characters an unbearable violation of truth that blunts the reader's capacity for sympathizing with characters that are real. In her presentation of Amos Barton she speaks with

¹Ibid., p. 36.

²Scenes of Clerical Life (New York: E. B. Hall and Co., Inc., n. d.), p. 83.

caustic intent directly to the reader accustomed to the exaggerated type of fiction:

The Rev. Amos Barton, whose sad fortunes I have undertaken to relate, was, you perceive, in no respect an ideal or exceptional character; and perhaps I am doing a bold thing to bespeak your sympathy on behalf of a man who was so very far from remarkable,--a man whose virtues were not heroic, and who had no undetected crime within his breast; who had not the slightest mystery hanging about him, but was palpably and unmistakably commonplace; who was not even in love, but had had that complaint favourably many years ago. 'An utterly uninteresting character!' I think I hear a lady reader exclaim,--Mrs. Farthingale, for example, who prefers the ideal in fiction; to whom tragedy means ermine tippets, adultery, and murder; and comedy, the adventures of some personage who is quite a 'character.'

But, my dear madam, it is so very large a majority of your fellow-countrymen that are of this insignificant stamp. At least eighty out of a hundred of your adult male fellow-Britons returned in the last census are neither extraordinarily silly, nor extraordinarily wise; their eyes are neither deep and liquid with sentiment, nor sparkling with suppressed witticisms; they have probably had no hairbreadth escapes or thrilling adventures; their brains are certainly not pregnant with genius, and their passions have not manifested themselves at all after the fashion of a volcano. They are simply men of complexions more or less muddy, whose conversation is more or less bald and disjointed. . . . Nay, is there not a pathos in their very insignificance,--in our comparison of their dim and narrow existence with the glorious possibilities of that human nature which they share?

. . . . you can, if you please, decline to pursue my story farther; and you will easily find reading more to your taste, since I learn from the newspapers that many remarkable novels, full of striking situations, thrilling incidents, and eloquent writing, have appeared within the last season.¹

In Adam Bede is a perhaps sharper thrust at the unrealistic novelist: "Considering these things, we can hardly think Dinah and Seth beneath our sympathy, accustomed as we may be to weep over the loftier sorrows of heroines in satin boots and crinoline, and of heroes riding fiery horses, themselves

¹Ibid., pp. 58-59.

ridden by still more fiery passions."¹ Falsity, according to George Eliot, is easy for the "clever" novelist; truthfulness is difficult: "The pencil is conscious of a delightful facility in drawing a griffin--the longer the claws, and the larger the wings, the better; but that marvellous facility which we mistook for genius is apt to forsake us when we want to draw a real unexaggerated lion."²

It is logical to assume that she believed women novelists and women readers more inclined than men toward the silly, the superficial, the sentimental, and the "eloquent" in fiction. In the excerpt from "Amos Barton" it is a "Mrs. Farthingale" who typifies the foolish reader of poor novels. In the title of her only article on British novelists printed in the Westminster Review (October, 1856),³ "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," the feminine author is linked with silly fiction. She considered the "most mischievous form of feminine silliness" to be "the literary form, because it tends to confirm the popular prejudice against the more solid education of women."⁴ Silly novels she divided into the frothy, the prosy, the pious, and the pedantic; and she particularly lamented oracular novels, the "mind-and-millinery" school, and the "white neck-cloth" species. The "mind-and-millinery"

¹p. 29.

²Ibid., p. 130.

³LXI, 243-254. Since George Eliot's articles for the Westminster Review appeared anonymously, some may yet remain unidentified. The most recent source of information concerning her articles is the bibliography by Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson, op. cit., p. 320.

⁴Ibid., p. 250.

school consists of novelists whose heroines are "charming" socialites with "intellectual depths," their great mental abilities being proven by perhaps occasional quotations in Greek or Latin or professions of devotion to some classical writer. The "white neck-cloth" novelists sentimentally present idealized pictures of the clergy. As for technique, she regretted that novel-writing presents no technical barriers to bad writers:

Every art which has its absolute technique is, to a certain extent, guarded from the intrusions of left-handed imbecility. But in novel-writing there are no barriers for incapacity to stumble against, no external criteria to prevent a₂ writer from mistaking foolish facility for mastery.

In her article she lists for silly lady novelists the moral qualities which contribute to literary excellence: "patient diligence, a sense of the responsibility involved in publication, and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer's art." And she stresses three important elements of fine writing: "genuine observation, humour, and passion."

George Eliot wrote no long expositions on the novelist's technique. A brief essay entitled "Story-Telling" from one of her notebooks is her only particularized discussion of the fiction writer's craft.³ In it she examines the various approaches to a story. Since a particular method of narration is valuable in proportion to its reader-interest, there are

¹Ibid., p. 250.

²Ibid., p. 254.

³George Eliot, Essays (Boston: Aldine Publishing Co., n. d.), pp. 240-243.

many good ways of telling a story rather than one best way: "For we get interested in the stories life presents to us through divers orders and modes of presentation." Our desire to know a person's past or future may be stimulated by seeing him as a stranger in some pathetic, humorous, or unusual situation, or by witnessing his manifestation of some remarkable characteristics. We may hear something uncommon about a person whom we have never seen, "and hence we look round with curiosity when we are told that he is present." Always, even in relation to impersonal subjects, indirect approaches to knowledge are the most stirring:

To see a chemical experiment gives an attractiveness to a definition of chemistry, and fills it with a significance which it would never have had without the pleasant shock of an unusual sequence, such as the transformation of a solid into gas, and vice versa. To see a word for the first time either as substantive or adjective in a connection where we care about knowing its complete meaning, is the way to vivify its meaning in our recollection. Curiosity becomes the more eager from the incompleteness of the first information.¹

The early story-teller had to present, before anything else, rousing, dramatic events to grasp the attention of his audience. Early poetry told of daring deeds and glorious adventures, without bothering with what went before:

The desire for orderly narration is a later, more reflective birth. The presence of the Jack in the box affects every child: it is the more reflective lad, the miniature philosopher, who wants to know how he got there.²

Life presents few stories to us in orderly arrangement, and it takes great art to prevent the sequence of associations

¹Ibid., p. 241.

²Ibid., p. 242.

from overmastering the sense of proportion in the relation of such narratives as we can recount from the very beginnings. A long story carefully wrought out with numerous events arranged in chronological order may make good reading for a summer-day lounge, but it is the story arousing immediate interest that affords "the cup of self-forgetting excitement to the busy who can snatch an hour of entertainment."¹ The simple story, however, which begins with a date and a necessary account of places and people and passes on to the more moving elements of the narrative, without need of retrospect, has its advantages which must be measured by the nature of the story.

George Eliot believed an author should be permitted the selection of any approach to his art, on the condition that he take for his criterion the enjoyment of his readers. And readers should cultivate a taste for innumerable interesting approaches:

Why should a story not be told in the most irregular fashion that an author's idiosyncrasy may prompt, provided that he gives us what we can enjoy? The dear public would do well to reflect that they are often bored from the want of flexibility in their² own minds. They are like the toppers of 'one liquor.'

Always she urged "freedom from the vulgar coercion of conventional plot, which is become hardly of higher influence on imaginative representation than a detailed 'order' for a picture sent by a rich grocer to an eminent painter,--allotting

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 243.

a certain portion of the canvas to a rural scene, another to a fashionable group, with a request for a murder in the middle distance, and a little comedy to relieve it."¹

Her theory of literary originality was much like that of the classicists in the century before her:

The supremacy given in European cultures to the literatures of Greece and Rome has had an effect almost equal to that of a common religion in binding the Western nations together. It is foolish to be forever complaining of the consequent uniformity, as if there were an endless power of originality in the human mind. Great and precious origination must always be comparatively rare, and can only exist on condition of a wide, massive uniformity. When a multitude of men have learned to use the same language in speech and writing, then and then only can the greatest masters of language arise. For in what does their mastery consist? They use words which are already a familiar medium of understanding and sympathy in such a way as greatly to enlarge the understanding and sympathy. Originality of this order changes the wild grasses into world-feeding grain. Idiosyncrasies are pepper and spices of questionable aroma.²

She intimated in her "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" and frequently explained in her comments on her own writing her strong conviction of the social responsibility of the author who writes for publication. In a short essay on authorship from one of her notebooks she voiced her belief that any man or woman who publishes writings must inevitably assume the position of teacher or influencer of the public mind:

Let him protest as he will that he only seeks to amuse, and has no pretension to do more than while away an hour of leisure or weariness,--'the idle singer of an empty day'--he can no more escape influencing the moral taste, and with it the action of the intelligence, than a setter

¹Ibid., p. 244, "Historic Imagination."

²Ibid., p. 245, "Value in Originality."

of fashions in furniture and dress can fill the shops with his designs and leave the garniture of persons and houses unaffected by his industry.¹

But she would not have the writer moralize or prescribe definite remedies for social evils. In "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" she denounced the oracular novelist. Fiction should present the lovely, the good, and the true in such a way that the reader's affections will be gently directed toward the best life has to offer, thus influencing his taste.

She censured the writer who pursues his art for mercenary gain. It is right for an author to get as good a price as he honorably can for the best writing he is capable of, but he should not force his production or cheapen his work in order to raise his income. A writer should be motivated by "a profound sense that literature is good for nothing if it is not admirably good; he must detest bad literature too heartily to be indifferent about producing it if only other people don't detest it."²

It is interesting to note, in view of the fact that she did not begin her own writing until she was thirty-seven, that she was dubious of the fiction of young writers. Rare genius excepted, she believed that the young writer must necessarily produce replicas of other books.³

As a preface to her specific comments on writers of fiction, it is illuminating to observe the questions she

¹Ibid., pp. 235-236, "Authorship."

²Ibid., p. 236.

³Paterson, op. cit., p. 192.

considered in attempting to evaluate an author's work:

In endeavoring to estimate a remarkable writer who aimed at more than temporary influence, we have first to consider what was his individual contribution to the spiritual wealth of mankind. Had he a new conception? Did he animate long-known but neglected truths with new vigor, and cast fresh light on their relation to other admitted truths? Did he impregnate any ideas with a fresh store of emotion, and in this way enlarge the area of moral sentiment? Did he, by a wise emphasis here, and wise disregard there, give a more useful or beautiful proportion to aims or motives? And even where his thinking was most mixed with the sort of mistake which is obvious to the majority, as well as that which can only be discerned by the instructed, or made manifest by the progress of things, has it that salt of a noble enthusiasm which should rebuke our critical discrimination if its correctness is inspired with a less admirable habit of feeling?¹

She admitted the difficulty of critical evaluation, which requires a considerable knowledge of all a writer has done as well as of what others have done before him and are doing contemporaneously with him. It demands "deliberate reflection as to the degree in which our own prejudices may hinder us from appreciating the intellectual or moral bearing of what on a first view offends us."² The only sensitivity that a reader who accepts, sheep-like, others' critical judgments keeps alive is a sensitivity to his own reputation for passing the correct judgment, not a sensitivity to the qualities in the object of judgment. Nobody "learns to discriminate shades of color by considering what is expected of him":

The habit of expressing borrowed judgments stupefies the sensibilities, which are the only foundation of genuine judgments, just as the constant reading and retailing of results from other men's observations through the microscope, without ever looking through the lens one's self,

¹"Judgments on Authors," Essays, pp. 238-239.

²Ibid., p. 239.

is an instruction in some truths and some prejudices, but is no instruction in observant susceptibility; on the contrary, it breeds a habit of inward seeing according to verbal statement, which dulls the power of outward seeing according to visual evidence.¹

Of course we should learn nothing without a tendency to implicit acceptance; but if there is no limit to mental submission, we come to an intellectual standstill and decay sets in. A man who "dares to say that he finds an eminent classic feeble here, extravagant there, and in general over-rated, may chance to give an opinion which has some genuine discrimination in it concerning a new work or a living thinker,--an opinion such as can hardly ever be got from the reputed judge who is a correct echo of the most approved phrases concerning those who have been already canonized."² In considering her own critical impressions we may well remember that on March 6, 1852, she wrote to Mrs. Peter Taylor: "Our opinion of a book often depends on the state of the liver."³

Her reading lists indicate extensive acquaintance with Eighteenth-century English fiction. Her few comments on the writers of this period are succinct but revealing.

¹Ibid., p. 240.

²Ibid.

³Cross, op. cit., p. 139.

Johnson's Rasselas gave her a "childish delight."¹ After reading Sir Charles Grandison she decided that Richardson was worth much more than she had before realized; his morality, she said, "is perfect--there is nothing for the new lights to correct."² Fielding's digressive style, though probably desirable in his own slower-paced age, was not an example to be followed by novelists of her day:

A great historian, as he insisted on calling himself, who had the happiness to be dead a hundred and twenty years ago, and so to take his place among the colossi whose huge legs our living pettiness is observed to walk under, glories in his copious remarks and digressions as the least imitable part of his work, and especially in those initial chapters to the successive books of his history, where he seems to bring his arm-chair to the proscenium and chat with us in all the lusty ease of his fine English. But Fielding lived when the days were longer (for time, like money, is measured by our needs), when summer afternoons were spacious, and the clock ticked slowly in the winter evenings. We belated historians must not linger after his example; and if we did so, it is probable that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from a camp-stool in a parrot-house. I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe.³

¹Ibid., p. 631, George Eliot to John Blackwood, February, 1875.

²Ibid., p. 85, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, October 13, 1847.

³Middlemarch (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1930), I, 122.

She was much disappointed in Smollett's Humphrey Clinker, after Thackeray's and Dickens' praise of it.¹ Goldsmith's Vicar of Wakefield she regarded as representing the most wholesome vein in the sentimentalism of the century, and her biographer, Leslie Stephen, thinks there is something characteristic in her love of "a book in which the pathos is made effective by a combination of the tenderest feeling with the most exquisite literary tact; and in which we can indulge 'great dispositions to cry' without the sense that the crying would have an absurd side."²

The great Scottish romanticist of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Sir Walter Scott, was probably her favorite novelist:

I like to tell you that my worship for Scott is peculiar. I began to read him when I was seven years old; and afterwards, when I was grown-up and living alone with my father, I was able to make the evenings cheerful for him during the last five or six years of his life by reading aloud to him Scott's novels. No other writer would serve as a substitute for Scott, and my life at that time would have been much more difficult without him. It is a personal grief, a heart-wound to me, when I hear a depreciatory or slighting word about Scott.³

She praised him as having had the "greatest combination of experience and faculty," although "even he never made the most of his treasures, at least in his mode of presentation."⁴

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 330, journal entry.

²George Eliot (New York: Macmillan Company, 1909), p. 61.

³Cross, op. cit., p. 564, George Eliot to Alex. Main, August 9, 1871.

⁴Ibid., p. 399, George Eliot to John Blackwood, February 15, 1861.

Perhaps by "mode of presentation" she meant his romanticism, for George Eliot was, regarding fiction, "radically and permanently anti-romantic."¹ Probably his striking a sympathetic chord in her is explained by the fact that he was a man of sympathies wide enough to do justice to many different types, and she was convinced that literature should enlarge men's sympathies.

George Eliot was well read in the fiction of her own day, though she frequently liked to pretend a "glorious ignorance of the current literature."² She considered herself a bad judge of comparative merits among the popular writers because she was often obliged to fast from fiction, and "fasting is known sometimes to weaken the stomach."³ It is interesting to note, however, that even when she was "fasting," she couldn't resist the stories of Anne Thackeray, the daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray, and "bits of Mr. Trollope, for affection's sake."⁴ Anthony Trollope she regarded as "admirable in the presentation of even average life and character [like herself]" and "so thoroughly wholesome-minded that one delights in seeing his books lie about to be read."⁵

¹Gosse, op. cit., p. 5. Romanticism is here defined as an exaggerated, sentimental, or unrealistic attitude toward life.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 445, George Eliot to Madame Bodichon, December 4, 1863.

³Ibid., p. 631, George Eliot to John Blackwood, February 7, 1875.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 422, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, January 14, 1862.

She valued Thackeray as the most powerful of contemporary novelists. Perhaps she was most impressed by his truthful portrayals:

. . . there are too many prolific writers who devote themselves to the production of pleasing pictures, to the exclusion of all disagreeable truths, for me to desire to add to their number. In this respect, at least, I may have some resemblance to Thackeray, though I am not conscious of being in any way a disciple of his, unless it constitute discipleship to think him, as I suppose the majority of people with any intellect¹ do, on the whole the most powerful of living novelists.

In a letter to the Brays (November, 1852) she spoke of his Henry Esmond as "the most uncomfortable book you can imagine."² But in 1863 (June 21) she wrote to Lewes's son, Charles; "I am glad you enjoyed 'Esmond.' It is a fine book."³ It is probable that the inconsistency lay in her amiable desire to encourage the young man's reading, or perhaps by then her unfavorable impression of the book had dimmed.

Her fine evaluation of Dickens, though perhaps weighted with a characteristic discussion of morality, is probably her most penetrating criticism:

We have one great novelist who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population; and if he could give us their psychological character--their conception of life, and their emotions--with the same truth as their idiom and manners, his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to the awakening of social sympathies. But while he can copy Mrs. Plornish's colloquial style with the delicate accuracy of a sun-picture, while there is

¹Ibid., pp. 234-235, George Eliot to John Blackwood, June, 1857.

²Ibid., p. 151.

³Paterson, op. cit., p. 110.

the same startling inspiration in his description of the gestures and phrases of Boots, as in the speeches of Shakspeare's mobs or numskulls, he scarcely ever passes from the humorous and external to the emotional and tragic, with becoming as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness. But for the precious salt of his humor, which compels him to reproduce external traits that serve in some degree as a corrective to his frequently false psychology, his preternaturally virtuous poor children and artisans, his melodramatic boatmen and courtesans, would be as obnoxious as Eugene Sue's idealized proletaires, in encouraging the miserable fallacy, that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance, and want; or that the working classes are in a condition to enter at once into a millennial state of altruism, wherein everyone is caring for every one else, and no one for himself.¹

She read the works of the Brontës with interest, but they did not gain her full appreciation and respect. To her they seemed too much limited and too lacking in reality and truth. She admired their fire and passion, as is shown in a comment upon Charlotte:

Lewes was describing Currer Bell [pseudonym of Charlotte Brontë] to me yesterday as a little, plain, provincial, sickly-looking old maid. Yet what passion, what fire in her! Quite as much² as in George Sand, only the clothing is less voluptuous.

But she could not quite approve of their confinement to the exceptional, the very romantic, the eccentric, the outrageous. They did not, as did George Eliot, aim to invest the commonplace with a universal significance. She wished the characters in Jane Eyre "would talk a little less like the heroes and heroines of police reports."³ It is characteristic that

¹"The Natural History of German Life," Essays, pp. 161-162.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 156, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, March 28, 1853.

³Ibid., p. 97, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, June 23, 1848.

she preferred the less popular but more realistic Villette to the masterful and more romantic Jane Eyre. "'Villette,' 'Villette'--have you read it?"¹

Although she loved the work of Elizabeth Gaskell, being especially fond of her "pretty and graphic . . . touches of description," she considered her fiction unenduring because Mrs. Gaskell was "constantly misled by a love of sharp contrasts--of 'dramatic' effects." She was not, as George Eliot advocated, "contented with the subdued coloring--the half tints of real life."²

Never enthusiastic about Disraeli's novels, she observed of Disraeli the man and author: "I am not utterly disgusted with D'Israeli [sic]. The man hath good veins, as Bacon would say, but there is not enough blood in them."³ His Tancred she thought thin and inferior to Coningsby and Sybil, and she teasingly rebuked one of her friends for enjoying it.⁴

She read Bulwer-Lytton's historical novels, however, with avid interest: "I have been reading the 'Life and Times of Louis the Fourteenth,' and am as eagerly waiting for the fourth and last as any voracious novel-reader for Bulwer's

¹Ibid., p. 156, George Eliot to the Brays, February 19, 1853.

²Ibid., p. 155, George Eliot to Mrs. Peter Taylor, February 1, 1853.

³Ibid., p. 65, George Eliot to Mrs. Bray, 1845.

⁴Ibid., p. 85, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, November 27, 1847.

last."¹ She respected his "energetic industry" and his willingness to profit by the lessons of public opinion and of other writers.

She liked Robert Landor's Fawn of Sertorius because it was "pure, chaste, and classic," beyond any attempt at fiction she had ever read.² She was "pleased" with Wilkie Collins. She praised Meredith's Shaving of Shagpat. She was in love with Charles Kingsley's genius and at the same time "riled" by his faults.

Though most of her comments refer to English writers, she was well acquainted with the fiction of the United States, Italy, and France. Next to the English novelists, she doubtless preferred, judging by her frequent allusions to them, the French.

Her favorite American contemporaries were Hawthorne and perhaps Harriet Beecher Stowe. As her praise of Mrs. Stowe is found chiefly in her letters to Mrs. Stowe, who initiated their correspondence, it is impossible to determine how much of it, if any, may have been due to George Eliot's kindly graciousness:

I think few of your many readers can have felt more interest than I have felt in that picture [Old Town Folks] of an elder generation; for my interest in it has a double root,--one in my own love for our old-fashioned provincial life, which had its affinities with a contemporary life, even all across the Atlantic,

¹Ibid., p. 41, George Eliot to Miss Lewis, February 11, 1841.

²Ibid., p. 76, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, August, 1846. Since the work was published anonymously, she would not have known the author's identity.

and of which I have gathered glimpses in different phases, from my father and mother with their relations; the other is, my experimental acquaintance with some shades of Calvinistic orthodoxy. I think your way of presenting the religious convictions, which are not your own except by indirect fellowship, is a triumph of insight and true tolerance. . . . I thank you sincerely for the gift (in every sense) of this book, which, I can see, has been a labor of love.¹

She loved the Italian style of writing, preferring its fashion of repeating an adjective or adverb, or even a noun, to give force to expression, and declaring that "there is so much more fire in it than in our circumlocutory phrases, our dull 'verys' and 'exceedinglys' and 'extremelys.'"² Boccaccio, however, is the only Italian story-writer mentioned in her journal: "Read Boccaccio's capital story of the Fra Cipolla--one of his few good stories."³

Though she was often caustic in her criticism of French literature, once remarking that the French needed truth to "purify their literary air," she found much to admire in it. She regarded the French mastery of the short tale as far surpassing that of the English writers, "who usually demand coarser flavors than are given by that delightful gayety [possessed by the best French novelists] which is well described by La Fontaine as not anything that provokes fits of laughter, but a certain charm, an agreeable mode of handling, which lends attractiveness to all subjects, even

¹Ibid., p. 537, George Eliot to Harriet Beecher Stowe, July 11, 1869.

²Ibid., p. 46, George Eliot to Miss Lewis, September 3, 1841.

³Ibid., p. 412, August 2, 1861.

the most serious."¹ Two of her greatest literary loves, George Sand and Rousseau, were French.

She believed that woman has a particular contribution to make to the realm of art:

In art and literature, which imply the action of the entire being, in which every fiber of the nature is engaged, in which every peculiar modification of the individual makes itself felt, woman has something specific to contribute. Under every imaginable social condition, she will necessarily have a class of sensations and emotions--the maternal ones--which must remain unknown to man; and the fact of her comparative physical weakness, which, however it may have been exaggerated by a vicious civilization, can never be cancelled, introduces a distinctly feminine condition into the wondrous chemistry of affections and sentiments, which inevitably gives rise to distinctive forms and combinations. A certain amount of psychological difference between man and woman necessarily arises out of the difference of sex, and instead of being destined to vanish before a complete development of woman's intellectual and moral nature, will be a permanent source of variety and beauty, as long as the tender light and dewy freshness of morning affect us differently from the strength and brilliancy of the mid-day sun.²

She was intensely ashamed, for the most part, of the novels produced by English woman:

With a few remarkable exceptions, our own feminine literature is made up of books which could have been better written by men; books which have the same relation to literature in general, as academic prize poems have to poetry; when not a feeble imitation, they are usually an absurd exaggeration of the masculine style, like the swaggering gait of a bad actress in male attire.³

She felt that one must turn to France for the highest examples of literary achievement by women, that "in France alone, if the writings of women were swept away, a serious gap would be

¹"Story-Telling," Essays, p. 243.

²"Woman in France: Madame de Sablé," Westminster Review, LXII (1854), p. 238.

³Ibid.

made in the national history." She probably had George Sand chiefly in mind.

Though George Sand was not an oracle to George Eliot, she was one of the writers who influenced her most profoundly, who "rolled away the waters from their bed, raised new mountains and spread delicious valleys" for her:

I should never dream of going to her writings as a moral code or text-book. I don't care whether I agree with her about marriage or not--whether I think the design of her plot correct, or that she had no precise design at all, but began to write as the spirit moved her, and trusted to Providence for the catastrophe, which I think the more probable case. It is sufficient for me, as a reason for bowing before her in eternal gratitude to that "great power of God manifested in her," that I cannot read six pages of hers without feeling that it is given to her to delineate human passion and its results and . . . some of the moral instincts and their tendencies, with such truthfulness, such nicety of discrimination, such tragic power, and withal, such loving, gentle humor, that one might live a century with nothing but one's own dull faculties,¹ and not know so much as those six pages will suggest.

This beautiful tribute to her French contemporary came not from George Eliot the moralist but from George Eliot the artist who could occasionally put aside her theory and be deeply moved by sheer artistry.

Rousseau was another whose force of inspiration elicited her passionate devotion:

. . . it would signify nothing to me if a very wise person were to stun me with proofs that Rousseau's views of life, religion, and government are miserably erroneous,--that he was guilty of some of the worst bassesses that have degraded civilized man. I might admit all this: and it would not be the less true that Rousseau's genius has awakened me to new perceptions,--which has made man and nature a fresh world of thought

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 101, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, February 9, 1849.

and feeling to me; and this not by teaching me any new belief. It is simply that the rushing mighty wind of his inspiration has so quickened my faculties that I have been able to shape more definitely for myself ideas which had previously dwelt as dim Ahnungen in my soul; the fire of his genius has so fused together old thoughts and prejudices that I have been ready to make new combinations.

Elizabeth Haldane suggests that her love of him may be explained by the fact that they both had the same passionate nature and warring instincts, though she, unlike him, was usually able, with constant struggle, to hold hers in check.²

Though she admired Balzac's colloquial style, she thought his Père Goriot "a hateful book." She particularly disliked his unrealistic character portrayal, which she laughed at in "Brother Jacob":

But David, you perceive, had reckoned without his host, or, to speak more precisely, without his idiot borthor --an item of so uncertain and fluctuating a character, that I doubt whether he would not have puzzled the astute heroes of M. de Balzac, whose foresight is so remarkably at home in the future.³

She considered Voltaire, "the intensest example of pure wit," frequently a failure in his fictions because of his lack of humor as distinguished from wit:

'Micromégas' is a perfect tale, because, as it deals chiefly with philosophic ideas and does not touch the marrow of human feeling and life, the writer's wit and wisdom were all-sufficient for his purpose. Not so with 'Candide.' Here Voltaire had to give pictures of life as well as to convey philosophic truth and satire, and here we feel the want of humor. The sense of the

¹Ibid.

²Op. cit., p. 62.

³Essays, p. 483.

ludicrous is continually defeated by disgust, and the scenes, instead of presenting us with an amusing or agreeable picture, are only the frame for a witticism.¹

George Eliot, as indicated in the preceding paper, measured the worth of a writer of fiction chiefly by her own guiding artistic principles, truthfulness of presentation and genuine inspiration. Since she herself, holding her art sacred, would not write a word unless it be dictated by her whole mind and heart, she valued only those works she felt to have come from the writer's "heart of hearts." Though generally preferring the gentler, more realistic, objective observers of life, she was quite capable of being moved by the sincere passion of such romanticists as the Brontës, George Sand, and Rousseau.

¹Ibid., p. 67, "German Wit: Heinrich Heine."

CHAPTER III

ON POETRY

George Eliot's love of poetry began in her youth and lasted throughout her lifetime. Indeed, to her, life was instinct with poetry:

Alas for the fate of poor mortals which condemns them to wake up some fine morning and find all the poetry in which their world was bathed, only the evening before, utterly gone!--the hard, angular world of chairs and tables and looking-glasses staring at them in all its naked prose! It is so in all the stages of life: the poetry of girlhood goes--the poetry of love and marriage--the poetry of maternity--and at last the very poetry of duty forsakes us for a season, and we see ourselves, and all about us, as nothing more than miserable agglomerations of atoms--poor tentative efforts of the Natur Princip to mould a personality. This is the state of prostration--the self-abnegation through which the soul must go, and to which it must again and again return, that its poetry or religion, which is the same thing, may be a real ever-flowing river, fresh from the windows of heaven and the fountains of the great deep.¹

She believed that only the terribly prosaic can fail to sense the poetry which pervades all human experience.²

While young and very much under the influence of evangelicalism, the great Victorian novelist-to-be could doubt the value of "fictions," but her zealous censoriousness was never directed towards her beloved poetry. Poetry, for the girl Mary Ann, was a refuge, a realm of delight to

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 96, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, June 4, 1848.

²"To the Prosaic All Things Are Prosaic," Essays.

which she might retire when her more factual, prosaic studies became tedious: "The fields of poesy look more lovely than ever, now I have hedged myself in the geometrical regions of fact."¹ For the mature novelist George Eliot, poetry was one of three favorite studies: "Science, history, poetry--I don't know which draws me most, and there is little time left me for any one of them."²

As for her own best medium of expression, she was evidently divided between prose fiction and poetry. It is particularly interesting to note that her very first extant piece of creativity is a poem enclosed in a letter to a friend and lightly referred to as "some doggerel lines," though the poem itself is written in a heavily serious, religious tone.³ Although her fame now rests wholly on her novels, she published thirteen poems and a sonnet series in addition to a verse drama, The Spanish Gypsy. Her "Oh May I Join the Choir Invisible" was immensely popular among the Victorians. Lewes himself, whose critical judgment was sometimes remarkably poor, believed that she would appear before the world as a poet. And Matthew Browne, a Victorian critic, expressed in the Argosy "reasons for looking forward with deep interest to anything George Eliot might do in the

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 33, George Eliot to Miss Lewis, May 21, 1840.

²Ibid., p. 486, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, December 7, 1866.

³Ibid., pp. 29-30. Cross notes that this poem was published in the Christian Observer for January, 1840; it is never included, however, in complete editions of her poetry.

shape of poetry."¹ Perhaps the chief reason for her failure in realizing her "noble ambition," as Browne terms it, is revealed in her statement to her publisher regarding her poems. She wrote Blackwood (March 6, 1874) that she intended them to represent ideas which she cared for strongly and wished to propagate as far as possible.² Great poetry, of course, must be much more than propaganda. Though her own poetic talent was meager, her critical appreciation of the larger talent in others was, in her maturity, remarkably keen.

George Eliot wrote no dissertations on the art of poetry. She left behind no definitions to what, to her, poetry was. But she scattered throughout her writings little scraps which, pieced together, partially present her theory regarding it. In a letter she bade one of her friends consider what the world would be like without poets:

Consider what the human mind en masse would have been if there had been no such combination of elements in it as has produced poets. All the philosophers and savants would not have sufficed to supply that deficiency.³

And in the same letter is her nearest approach to a definition of poetry: "And how can the life of nations be understood without the inward life of poetry--that is, of emotion blending with thought?" She evidently considered the finest

¹Matthew Browne, "George Eliot as a Poet," The Poems of George Eliot (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., n.d.), p. 8.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 616.

³Ibid., p. 632, George Eliot to Mrs. Ponsonby, February 11, 1875.

poetry as something sacred. In The Mill on the Floss Philip passionately tells Maggie that she must not, in narrow asceticism, deny herself the reading that her soul is hungry for: "Poetry and art and knowledge are sacred and pure."¹ And in Middlemarch Will Ladislaw says to Dorothea:

' . . . To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern, that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely-ordered variety on the chords of emotion-- a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge. One may have that condition by fits only.'²

The last sentence in this quotation is strongly reminiscent of Plato, with whose writings George Eliot was familiar. Plato, in his Ion, speaks of the "divine madness" of the poet; he says that the poet does not compose according to any art he has acquired but from the impulse of the divinity within him. And the poet can write only when he is seized by, possessed with, this divinity. In Romola she speaks of the mens divini of the poet.

In The Spanish Gypsy is voiced a very interesting idea in regard to the poet, an idea which another great Victorian had before her expressed, and an idea which perhaps can only be expressed in poetry. Little Pepita is in love with the poet Juan and is ecstatic when he sings her a love song, because she takes it to mean that he returns her love. Juan tries to explain to her that his love for her is real, but that its reality exists only within the song:

¹P. 621.

²I, 197.

Listen, little one.
 Juan is not a living man all by himself:
 His life is breathed in him by other men,
 And they speak out of him. He is their voice.
 Juan's own life he gave once quite away.
 It was Pepita's lover singing then,--not Juan.
 We old, old poets, if we kept our hearts,
 Should hardly know them from another man's.
 They shrink to make room for the many more
 We keep within us.¹

Matthew Arnold expresses it thus:

. . . . such a price
 The Gods exact for song;
 To become what we sing.²

In typical nineteenth century style, George Eliot often halts her stories in order to address the reader or make an observation.

In The Mill on the Floss, as the author obtrusive, she very briefly makes another poetic observation on the poet's art: ". . . . and does not a supreme poet blend light and sound into one, calling darkness mute, and light eloquent?"³

Again the author obtrusive in Adam Bede, she states her belief that a poet's best poems are written out of his richest experience:

How is it that the poets have said so many fine things about our first love, so few about our later love? Are their first poems their best? or are not those the best which come from their fuller thought, their larger experience, their deeper-rooted affections? The boy's flute-like voice has its own spring charm; but the man's should yield a richer, deeper music.⁴

¹Poems, p. 111.

²Matthew Arnold, "The Strayed Reveller," ll. 232-234, Victorian Poetry, ed. E. K. Brown (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1942), p. 394.

³p. 723.

⁴p. 365.

A poet may very well compose in "divine madness," but the raw material, or life-stuff, of his composition must come from his own experience. George Eliot had much and varied experience before she began novel-writing.

She considers briefly the relationship between the work of art and the reader's response to it. The modern poet and artist today frequently say to their public, "My art means whatever it means to you; its meaning for you lies within you." George Eliot would not go thus far with subjectivism, but in Middlemarch she does say, "The text, whether of prophet or of poet, expands for whatever we can put into it, and even his bad grammar is sublime,"¹

The mechanics of verse she mentioned only twice. In reply to a list of errata in The Spanish Gypsy sent her by the Reverend Canon MacIlwaine, she said that she adhered strongly in her poetry to two principles. She believed that material time must be determined frequently despite syllable-counting, and she considered redundant lines a power in blank verse.² To Blackwood she wrote that verses of twelve syllables were a principle with her, and that they are found in all the finest writers of blank verse.³

George Eliot was all her life a prodigious reader; and of the poets, she was not only a reader but also a student.

¹I, 40.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 517, July 30, 1868.

³Ibid., p. 517.

An account of the poets mentioned in her letters alone indicates that her range of appreciation extended from the classical poets to the great poets of her own day. She did not, however, pose as a literary critic. For the Westminster Review she wrote only two articles on English poets, one on Dryden, and the other on Edward Young. But in her letters and novels she often alluded to the poets, sometimes accompanying her allusions with remarks indicative of a penetrative understanding of their art and revelatory of her own artistic credo.

The first classical work mentioned in her letters is Vergil's Aeneid: "I am beginning to enjoy the 'Eneid,' though, I suppose, much in the same way as the uninitiated enjoy wine compared with the connoisseurs."¹ She always felt that a great work of art, in order to be fully appreciated, must be studied carefully, not just read. And to her favorite classics she returned again and again, always with an increased enjoyment. She loved the Iliad; she once told Oscar Browning that she always read some of it before beginning her own writing, in order to take the taste of the modern world out of her mouth.² She found its very equivocalness in meaning admirable.³ Philip, in The Mill on the Floss, entertains Tom with stories from the Iliad and the Odyssey--"a beautiful poem." George

¹Ibid., p. 58, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, September, 1842.

²Op. cit., p. 100.

³Cross, op. cit., p. 505, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, March 22, 1868.

Eliot always loved "old-fashioned reading": "I rush on the slightest pretext to Sophocles, and am as excited about blind old Oedipus as any young lady can be about the latest hero with magnificent eyes."¹ She once wrote Blackwood that she felt more cousinship with the elder dramatists than with the recent poets.² In Romola alone there are numerous allusions indicating her large familiarity with the classics.

The two great poets of heaven and hell, Dante and Milton, were favorites with her; Milton she referred to as "my demigod." And after the death of Lewes, when all work and reading were very painful to her, she and J. W. Cross, who had just lost his mother, took great solace in studying together Dante's Divine Comedy.

Shakespeare, with whom George Eliot herself was frequently compared in the days of her soaring popularity, is mentioned again and again in her letters. Mrs. John Cash, to whom she gave lessons when, as Marian Evans, she lived at Coventry, recalls George Eliot's enthusiasm at the mention of Shakespeare's name:

On the mention of Shakespeare, she praised him with her characteristic ardor, was shocked at the idea that mother should disapprove the perusal of his writings, and quite distressed lest, through her influence, I should be prevented from reading them. She could be content were she allowed no other book than Shakespeare; and in educating a child, this would be the first book she would place in its hand.³

¹Ibid., p. 225, April 16, 1857.

²Ibid., p. 505.

³Ibid., p. 739, appendix.

Characteristic of her earlier youthful moralizing, though, was this remark:

. . . . we have need of as nice a power of distillation as the bee, to suck nothing but honey from his [Shakespeare's] pages. However, as in life we must be exposed to malign influences from intercourse with others if we would reap the advantages designed for us by making us social beings, so in books.¹

She liked his colloquialism, found even in such lofty tragedies as Hamlet; in it, she said, one can hear the very accent of living men.² As for specific comments on his individual plays, though, she was regrettably laconic and usually rather trite. She was very much struck with the "masculine style" and "vigorous moderation" of Julius Caesar, as compared with Romeo and Juliet. She pronounced King Lear "sublimely powerful." The final scene of Two Gentlemen of Verona disgusted her.³ Though she did much reading of Shakespeare, she preferred seeing his dramas performed:

In opposition to most people, who love to read Shakespeare, I like to see his plays acted better than any others: his great tragedies thrill me, let them be acted how they may. I think it is something like what I used to experience in old days in listening to uncultured preachers--the emotions lay hold of one too strongly for one to care about the medium.⁴

Drayton and Donne are the only other Renaissance poets on whom she commented specifically. Drayton's

¹Ibid., p. 25, George Eliot to Miss Lewis, March 16, 1839.

²Ibid., p. 398, George Eliot to M. D'Albert, January 22, 1861.

³Cross, op. cit., pp. 190, 193.

⁴Ibid., p. 324, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, December 5, 1859.

Nymphidia she referred to as "a charming poem"; Donne's elegies are "incorrigible."

For the Westminster Review (January, 1855) she wrote a long critical study of Dryden, in which she considers him as the first and most representative poet of his day. In him, she believes, are mirrored the major merits and defects of the Restoration. She speaks of his panegyric as servile, his elegy as too quaint and curious for truth, and his drama as sometimes obscene; but she emphasizes the fact that he should be judged, not by modern standards alone, but according to his times:

We have ceased to flatter kings; we no longer mourn in verse for the decease of lords or ladies: we grant no privilege of apotheosis; we do not discern in the misfortune of the felicity of the great either a malign or a favourable aspect of the stars. . . . But when Dryden wrote, divinity was still conceived to hedge a king--and the conception was strengthened in the minds of all, except a few surly independents, by the horror awakened by the king's execution, by the special pleading of the pulpit and Eikon Basilike, by the restoration of peace at home, by the weariness of the Puritanic yoke, and by the almost unanimous voice of the press and the theatre. Marvel and Milton stood alone. But the herd of court-poets and court-preachers had other objects in view than poverty and freedom; and if Dryden took his station among the adulators of power, he was at least not singular in his choice, and extravagant as his eulogies appear to us, they were much less fulsome than those of his literary contemporaries in general.¹

And the Restoration should not be considered as the decadent aftermath of the great Renaissance, but as a new period in which Dryden stands as "a legitimate and powerful monarch."

¹"Dryden and his Times," Westminster Review, LXIII (1855), 181-182.

His plays she discards as making no particularly valuable contribution to literature; their only strength lies in his power of reasoning in verse and in his faithful and vivid characterization. Dryden could not, she thinks, construct a dramatic plot or bring his characters into relations with one another; he could not diversify his dialogue, nor could he move to mirth or tears. Her largest condemnation of any work of art is always its inability to move its audience. She admits that a large proportion of his most "nervous and emphatic" lines occur in his plays, but these, she says, are usually of the gnomic variety--such ethical, social, and sarcastic maxims as belong equally to satire and the stage.

Completely dismissing his prose criticism, she bases his immortality on these poems: Heroic Stanzas, Alexander's Feast, Character of a Good Parson, Mac Flecknoe, a few sketches from Absalom and Achitophel, and a few pregnant couplets which have passed into proverbs. The larger portion of his works she considers forgotten in her own day. Of The Hind and the Panther she says that the absurd allegory and the fable are awkwardly blended throughout.

His verse narration, powerful characterization, and pungent satire are what she most admires. She sums up his total contribution to English literature thus:

He performed in verse the most difficult task of prose history--the delineation of the principal actors on the political stage, and performed it with such vigour and vivacity that his "Characters" still remain the types of Shaftesbury, Buckingham, Oates, Seymour, and Monmouth. Burnet, Roger North, Hume, and in our own days, Macaulay,

owe no mean portion of their reputation to the skill with which they depict the men who have guided our counsels or our armies; but the most finished of their portraits are faint and defective when compared with the bold outline and vivid colours of Dryden. . . . The age of Charles II., indeed, owes little less to Dryden's pen, than that of Charles I. does to Vandyke's easel.¹

She feels that Dryden lived in the wrong age for the fullest and best development of his talents, and that he was too much influenced by that age. Her attitude toward the literature of the whole Restoration period is best summed up in her own words:

Yet, whatever may be the inferiority of the literature of the Restoration, as compared with that of the Elizabethan age, it has sterling merits of its own which should rescue it from "mere oblivion." It has at once an historical and a literary value. It represents our forefathers as faithfully as the portraits of Lely and Kneller. It embodies new forms and qualities of our language. It is full of instruction as the costume of the current imagination and philosophy of half a century. It is a link in the continuity of ages necessary to the completeness of the chain which unites Chaucer with Wordsworth and Tennyson. If wanting in the higher qualities of earnest thought and passion, if infinitely less profound in its essence, and infinitely less harmonious in its forms than our elder literature, it is yet pregnant with good sense and keen observation, and clad in an idiomatic purity of diction which we ourselves will do well to emulate. Compared with its predecessor, indeed, it is a St. Martin's summer. Its brightness is not that of a July noon; its mornings and evenings do not succeed or usher in a warm and starlit twilight. Its foliage is imbrowned by the approach of winter; the fresh and lusty vigour of the spring has passed away.

Yet conceding so much, and admitting also that the present century has widened the domain, and in some degree renewed the summer noon of poetry--that Byron, Scott, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Tennyson have explored regions of imagination unknown to Dryden and Pope--there yet remains for the age which opens with the Restoration the intrinsic and imperishable praise of having clothed

¹Ibid., pp. 186-187.

masculine good sense in strong idiomatic and often harmonious diction. They excelled so much in the rhetoric of verse as their predecessors had excelled in dramatic poetry, or their successors in lyrical and descriptive. Literature, like the history of man, is made up of continuous generations; each possessing, where it is really alive, its separate characteristics, each performing its appointed work. We should reluctantly behold any one of these links dropping from the chain.¹

The article on Edward Young which appeared in the Westminster Review (January, 1857) and which is reprinted in her Essays, is particularly interesting in that it represents a growth in the literary judgment and religious attitude of George Eliot. At the age of nineteen, she had begged Miss Lewis to love a passage of Young's "Infidel Reclaimed" for her sake. At the age of thirty-eight, she criticizes the man, his poetry, and his theology in an almost vitriolic manner. She condemns his bombast, his flattery of possible benefactors, his artificiality, his bad rhyme, and his offensive imagery. His rhetoric is stiff, and his sentiment false. He "substitutes interested obedience for sympathetic emotion, and baptizes egoism as religion." His characters are "transparent shadows." His juxtaposition of ideas is often illogical and sometimes ridiculous. The religious and moral spirit of his poetry is low and false; the ideas in Night Thoughts are "the reflex of a mind in which the higher human sympathies were inactive." His didacticism is blatant. She can remember "no mind in poetic literature that seems to have absorbed less of the beauty and the healthy breath of the common landscape than Young's."

¹Ibid., pp. 176-177.

Young's conception of Deity is especially disgusting to her; she detests his vulgar images and comparisons:

The God of the 'Night Thoughts' [sic] is simply Young himself, 'writ large,' -- a didactic poet, who 'lectures' mankind in the antithetic hyperbole of mortal and immortal joys, earth and the stars, hell and heaven, and expects the tribute of inexhaustible 'applause.' Young has no conception of religion as anything else than egoism turned heavenward; and he does not merely imply this, he insists on it.¹

His adherence to abstractions, she believes, is akin to his lack of any real emotion. Emotion, for George Eliot, "links itself with particulars, and only in a faint and secondary manner with abstractions. . . . Generalities are the refuge at once of deficient intellectual activity and deficient feeling." Virtue should not be represented as sitting far off on some serene mountain, above all the mists and storms of earth. Religion descending from the skies with this world in her left hand and the other world in her right is a meaningless image. Virtue and religion, as they really exist, are

. . . . in the emotions of a man dressed in an ordinary coat, and seated by his fireside of an evening, with his hand resting on the head of his little daughter, in courageous effort for unselfish ends, in the internal triumph of justice and pity over personal resentment, in all the sublime self-renunciation and sweet charities which are found in the details of ordinary country life.²

This credo George Eliot always followed in her own writing. She never permitted herself grandiloquent soarings. She believed that the true artist must be able to perceive life

¹Essays, p. 54.

²Ibid., p. 47.

as it is, and none of her condemnations of Young are more damning than this:

His muse never stood face to face with a genuine, living human being; she would have been as much startled by such an encounter as a necromancer whose incantations and blue fire had actually conjured up a demon.¹

Her distinction between grandiloquence and genuine fancy or bold imaginativeness is interesting. The grandiloquent man never says what he feels or what he sees, but strives for that which he believes will produce a certain effect on his audience. "The source of all grandiloquence is the want of taking for a criterion the true qualities of the object described, or the emotion expressed." The fantastic or the boldly imaginative poet may be just as sincere as the most realistic poet if he is true to his own sensibilities and inward vision, to the truth of his own mental state.

Unable to classify Young as a satirist of any high order, she criticizes his satire as having

. . . . neither the terrible vigor, the lacerating energy, of genuine indignation, nor the humor which owns loving fellowship with the poor human nature it laughs at; nor yet the personal bitterness which, as in Pope's characters of Sporus and Atticus, ensures those living touches by virtue of which the individual and particular in Art becomes the universal and immortal.²

Young's wit consists chiefly in the antithetic combination of ideas, the easiest form of wit. Also, he makes the

¹Ibid., p. 22.

²Ibid., pp. 36-37.

psychological mistake, like Pope, whom he imitated, of attributing all forms of folly to one passion; he is not, however, consistent in this mistake. She grants that Young's satires on women are superior to Pope's and then adds that this is "only saying that they are superior to Pope's greatest failure." She strongly objects to the platitudinizing in Young's satires.

She concludes her study with a comparison of Young and Cowper, selecting Night Thoughts and The Task for particular contrast and analogy. Both poems are written in blank verse, but how different is Young's from the easy, graceful melody of Cowper's! Both are professedly didactic, and both mingle much satire with their graver meditations. Both are the poems of men whose philosophies of life were formed in the light of a belief in immortality, of men who were strongly attached to Christianity. Cowper's religion, Calvinism, was more gloomy than Young's; there was a real and deep sadness in Cowper's personal lot, while Young seems to have had no great sorrow. Yet Cowper's is the lovely, sympathetic nature. His perception is truthful and his presentation sincere. He possesses a calm gladness which springs from a delight in objects for their own sake, without reference to himself. He lingers happily over the simplest scenes "with all the fond minuteness of attention that belongs to love." He does not rant vaguely in pompous rhetoric:

How Cowper's exquisite mind falls with the mild warmth of morning sunlight on the commonest objects, at once disclosing every detail, and investing every detail with beauty! No object is too small to prompt his song,—not the sooty film on the bars, or the spoutless teapot holding a bit of mignonette, that serves to cheer the dingy town-lodging with a 'hint that Nature lives;' and yet his song is never trivial, for he is alive to small objects, not because his mind is narrow, but because his glance is clear and his heart large.¹

Cowper handles greater themes with the same warmth of feeling and scrupulous truthfulness. "Young applauds God as a monarch with an empire, and a court superior to the English, or as an author who produces 'volumes for man's perusal.'" Cowper sees God's love in all the gentle pleasures of life. George Eliot sums up her comparison thus:

In Young we have the type of that deficient human sympathy, that impiety towards the present and the visible, which flies for its motives, its sanctities, and its religion, to the remote, the vague, and the unknown; in Cowper we have the type of that genuine love which cherishes things in proportion to their nearness, and feels its reverence grow in proportion to the intimacy of its knowledge.²

Nowhere in her letters or journals does George Eliot mention a "favorite" poet, but one man's name appears again and again. On November 22, 1839, she wrote to Miss Lewis:

I have been so self-indulgent as to possess myself of Wordsworth at full length, and I thoroughly like much of the contents of the first three vols., which I fancy are only the low vestibule of the three remaining ones. I never before met with so many of my own feelings expressed just as I could like them.³

¹Ibid., p. 58.

²Ibid., pp. 61-62.

³Cross, op. cit., p. 31.

In a letter written to Miss Charlotte Carmichael in December, 1877, she said ". . . . how we are agreed in loving our incomparable Wordsworth."¹ Cross remarks, apropos of these allusions, that George Eliot remained devoted to Wordsworth up to the day of her death. One of the very last books they read together was an edition of his poetry.

Her affinity with Wordsworth can perhaps be best explained by the attraction of like to like. "I never before met with so many of my own feelings expressed just as I could like them." Both writers share that sensitive, spiritual response to the beauties of nature which has come to be thought of as typically Wordsworthian: "The ocean and the sky and the everlasting hills are spirit to me, and they will never be robbed of their sublimity."² Both strongly sense and effectively portray the significance and beauty of commonplace subjects. Wordsworth wrought poetry from the simple story of a country lad and his father, Michael; he soared in his lyrics glorifying a simple, unsophisticated Lucy. George Eliot's best novels--Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, and Middlemarch--are peopled with such characters as she herself knew in her childhood. Both evidence great interest in the remedial effects of love upon simple souls. George Eliot recognized in Silas Marner a story Wordsworth most probably would have loved:

¹Ibid., p. 668.

²Ibid., p. 89, George Eliot to John Sibree, beginning of 1848.

I don't wonder at your finding my story, as far as you have read it, rather sombre: indeed, I should not have believed that any one would have been interested in it but myself (since Wordsworth is dead) if Mr. Lewes had not been strongly arrested by it. But I hope you will not find it all a sad story, as a whole, since it sets--or is intended to set--in a strong light the remedial influences of pure, natural human relations.

She even considered writing the story in verse. Throughout the work echoes what Wordsworth expresses in three lines:

A child more than all other gifts
That earth can offer to declining man,
Brings hope with it and forward-looking thoughts.

She resembles him in regard to memory. In the writing of her finest novels she followed his theory that poetry springs from "thoughts recollected in tranquillity." Like him, her heart apparently never forgot what her eyes had seen, and she realized that her imagination worked best upon the material which had aged and mellowed in her "heart of hearts." They both evince a profound seriousness about their art, and both share more or less in the ideas to which Ruskin fervidly gave expression

I venerate him John Ruskin as one of the great teachers of the day. The grand doctrines of truth and sincerity in art, and the nobleness and solemnity of our life, which he teaches with the inspiration of a Hebrew prophet, must be stirring up young minds in a promising way. . . .² He is strongly akin to the sublimest part of Wordsworth.

She loved the simplicity of Wordsworth's language and its power to arouse sympathy for noble qualities. But to his doctrine of Pantheism she could never subscribe:

¹ Ibid., p. 401, George Eliot to John Blackwood, February 24, 1861.

² Ibid., p. 250, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, January 17, 1858.

I do not find my temple in Pantheism, which, whatever might be its value speculatively, could not yield a practical religion, since it is an attempt to look at the universe from the outside of our relations to it (that universe) as human beings. As healthy, sane human beings, we must love and hate,--love what is good for mankind, hate what is evil for mankind. For years of my youth I dwelt in dreams of a pantheistic sort, falsely supposing that I was enlarging my sympathy. But I have travelled far away from that time.¹

Though Maggie, in The Mill on the Floss, loves Byron, the mature George Eliot was rather harsh in her criticism of him:

As to the Byron subject, nothing can outweigh to my mind the heavy social injury of familiarizing young minds with the desecration of family ties. The discussion of the subject in newspapers, periodicals, and pamphlets is simply odious to me, and I think it a pestilence likely to leave very ugly marks. One trembles to think how easily that moral wealth may be lost which it has been the work of ages to produce in the refinement and differencing of the affectionate relations. As to the high-flown stuff which is being reproduced about Byron and his poetry, I am utterly out of sympathy with it. He seems to me the most vulgar-minded [sic] genius that ever produced a great effect in literature.²

It is not surprising to find the writer who voiced lofty opinions on the relation of morality to art reacting thus to the poet who, flaunting all social conventions and pouring out his bitterness in verse, greatly shocked the pre-Victorians. The author of Don Juan could not very well be congenial to the author who created such a delicate character as Fedalma in The Spanish Gypsy. Her sense of humor would not give way to the offensive in Byron. She was repulsed by

¹Ibid., p. 534, George Eliot to Mrs. H. B. Stowe, May 8, 1869.

²Ibid., p. 541, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, September 21, 1869.

the vindictive rage, the gall so thinly veiled in his lines; she had "no pity for the rancor that corrects its proofs and revises, and lays it [sic] by chuckling with the sense of its future publicity." The venom and the bitter melancholy which the wounded and defensive poet injected into some of his verse was inexcusable to her: "The art which leaves the soul in despair is laming to the soul."¹ She did not admire the personal bitterness in Byron which she praised in Pope, because Byron's is too personal, too intense. She did, of course, admit his innate genius; she probably mourned over what she considered its misapplication.

A charming scene occurs in Felix Holt between Esther Lyon, her father, and Felix, when Felix accidentally upsets Esther's sewing basket and a copy of Byron's poems falls out. Esther reddens, but determinedly defends her fondness for the poet. Mr. Lyon knows scarcely anything about Byron, "whose books embodied the faith and ritual of many young ladies and gentlemen." Felix is openly scornful:

'A misanthropic debauchee,' said Felix, lifting a chair with one hand, and holding the book open in the other, 'whose notion of a hero was that he should disorder his stomach and despise mankind. His corsairs and renegades, his Alps and Manfreds, are the most paltry puppets that were ever pulled by the strings of lust and pride.'²

Other romantic English poets elicited brief mention. Coleridge is never commented upon in her letters or journals,

¹Ibid., p. 511, "Notes on The Spanish Gypsy."

²(Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1907), I, 98-99.

but in Adam Bede Arthur Donnithorne refers to The Rime of the Ancient Mariner as "a strange, striking thing." She praised Shelley's "Cloud" as containing "more poetic metal than is beat out in all Mr. B's [Browning's] pages."¹ And in a letter to Miss Sara Hennell dated April, 1849, she quoted the famous last lines of Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer."

About her own British contemporaries George Eliot had little to say, although she was intimate with the two very great Victorian poets, Tennyson and Browning. In spirit, she herself was much more akin to Tennyson than to Browning. She felt that she owed much to In Memoriam. In a letter to Cross, November 6, 1877, she expressed distress about seeming to have spoken, on a previous occasion, slightly about the great poet:

Apropos of authorship, I was a little uneasy on Sunday because I had seemed in the unmanageable current of talk to echo a too slight way of speaking about a great poet. I did not mean to say Amen when the 'Idylls of the Kind' seemed to be judged rather de haut en bas. I only meant that I should value for my own mind "In Memoriam" as the chief of the larger works; and that while I feel exquisite beauty in passages scattered through the "Idylls," I must judge some smaller wholes among the lyrics as the works most decisive of Tennyson's high place among the immortals.²

She valued his dramas more than most of the critics do: "I think Tennyson's dramas such as the world should be glad of--and would be, if there had been no prejudgment that he could not write a drama."³

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 37, George Eliot to Miss Lewis, September, 1840.

²Ibid., p. 665.

³Ibid., p. 666.

In her later life she much admired the genius of Browning. In a letter to Miss Sara Hennell (February 15, 1869) she defended one of his poems from the charge of obscurity:

I have looked back to the verses in Browning's poem about Elisha, and I find no mystery in them. The foregoing context for three pages described that function of genius which revivifies the past. Man, says Browning (I am writing from recollection of his general meaning) [sic] cannot create, but he can restore: the poet gives forth of his own spirit, and that reanimates the forms that lie breathless. His use of Elisha's story is manifestly symbolical, as his mention of Faust is--the illustration which he abandons the moment before, to take up that of the Hebrew seer. I presume you did not read the context yourself, but only had the two concluding verses pointed out or quoted to you by your friends. It is one of the afflictions of authorship to know that the brains which should be used in understanding a book, are wasted in discussing the hastiest misconceptions about it; and I am sure you will sympathize enough in this affliction to set any one right, when you can, about this quotation from Browning.¹

She loved Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh, reading it "for the third time with more enjoyment than ever." It gave her a deep sense of communion with a mind large as well as beautiful. She was delighted with Casa Guidi Windows, admiring particularly its noble expression of what George Eliot believed to be the true relation of the religious mind to the past.

She loved Matthew Arnold's poetry. Her only remark about Clough, besides an expression of sorrow just after his death, regards his philosophy: "That favorite view, expressed so often in Clough's poems, of doing duty in blindness as to the result, is likely to deepen the substitution of egoistic yearnings for really moral impulses."²

¹Ibid., p. 530.

²Ibid., p. 511, "Notes on The Spanish Gypsy."

Lowell, Emerson, and Whitman are the only American poets whom she commented upon. Lowell's poems she felt deserving of high appreciation. She very much admired Emerson, exclaiming after she had met him: "The first man I have ever seen!" Carlyle's eulogium on him delighted her. In a letter to Blackwood (April 18, 1876) she expressed her vexation at having left a motto from Walt Whitman in one of her books:

Of course the whole is irrevocable by this time; but I should have otherwise thought it worth while to have a new page, not because the motto itself is objectionable to me,--it was one of the finer things which had clung to me from among his writings,--but because, since I quote so few poets, my selection of a motto from Walt Whitman might be taken as a sign of a special admiration, which I am very far from feeling.¹

Of the German poets she loved Goethe, Heine, and Wieland. The first two are freely commented upon in her writings, but Wieland, though his name recurs often in her letters and journals, is nowhere discussed.

Goethe, according to George Eliot, is "the great German poet." Cross remarks that nothing in all literature moved her more than the pathetic situation and the whole character of Gretchen in his Faust; it touched her more than anything in Shakespeare. In a letter to Mrs. Stowe, November 11, 1874, she commented on the poet's mysticism:

. . . . I think he had a strain of mysticism in his soul,--of so much mysticism as I think inevitably belongs to a full poetic nature--I mean the delighted bathing of the soul in emotions which overpass the outlines of definite thought.²

¹Ibid., p. 644.

²Ibid., p. 625.

In Middlemarch Will Ladislaw quotes Goethe's remark: "The poet must know how to hate." While George Eliot lived, critics compared her with Goethe, even to the disadvantage of the sage of Weimar.

For the Westminster Review (January, 1856) George Eliot wrote an article, which now appears in the Essays,¹ on Heinrich Heine, whom she considered the greatest living German poet. Her study is of German wit as it is found in his work; therefore, she begins with a discussion of the difference between wit and humor, interesting in that she relates it to poetry. Humor, she says, has more affinity with the poetic tendencies than wit, which is more nearly allied to the ratiocinative intellect. Humor takes its materials from situations and characteristics, while wit seizes on unexpected and complex relations. "Humor is chiefly representative and descriptive; it is diffuse, and flows along without any other law than its own fantastic will." Wit is usually sharply defined, brief, and sudden; it makes no pictures nor is it fantastic. It finds unsuspected analogies or suggests startling or confounding inferences. Some of Johnson's best witticisms, she observes, are analogies that immediately expose the absurdity of certain actions or propositions. She defines such witticisms as "reasoning raised to a higher power." But humor, "in its higher forms, and in proportion

¹Pp. 63-104.

as it associates itself with the sympathetic emotions, continually passes into poetry; nearly all great modern humorists may be called prose poets." Of course wit and humor are often found in the highest degree in the same mind, as in Shakespeare and Molière:

A happy conjunction this, for wit is apt to be cold and thin-lipped and Mephistophelean in men who have no relish for humor, whose lungs do never crow like Chanticleer at fun and drollery; and broad-faced, rollicking humor needs the refining influence of wit. Indeed, it may be said that there is no really fine writing in which wit has not an implicit, if not an explicit action.¹

The German mind, for the most part, "shows the absence of that delicate perception, that sensibility to gradation, which is the essence of tact and taste, and the necessary concomitant of wit." All the German's subtlety seems to be reserved for the region of metaphysics. He has yielded very little fun for the palate of other lands. But Heine, she believes, is different; he is "a surpassing lyric poet, who has uttered our feelings for us in delicious song." He is a humorist who

. . . . touches leaden folly with the magic wand of his fancy, and transmutes it into the fine gold of art--who sheds his sunny smile on human tears, and makes them a beautiful rainbow on the cloudy background of life; a wit, who holds in his mighty² hand the most scorching lightnings of satire

Heine's style is light, delicate, lucid, rippling, and musical. She describes the best products of his genius with Tennyson's words:

¹Ibid., p. 66.

²Ibid., p. 70.

Short swallow-flights of song, that dip
Their wings in tears, and skim away.

He charms with quiet idyls, shakes his reader with laughter at his fun, and gives piquant sensations of surprise through the ingenuity of his transitions from the lofty to the ludicrous:

This last power is not, indeed, essentially poetical; but only a poet can use it with the same success as Heine, for only a poet can poise our emotion and expectation at such a height as to give effect to the sudden fall.¹

George Eliot most admires the power in Heine's simple pathos. She loves his poetic ability to express in a varied and natural manner the "tender emotions," his "pregnant simplicity." Some of his poetry is in the manner of Wordsworth and Tennyson.

She briefly compares Heine's lyrics with those of Goethe. Both poets have the same masterly, finished simplicity and rhythmic grace, but Goethe mingles more thought with his feeling. Goethe's lyrical genius is "a vessel that draws more water than Heine's, and, though it seems to glide along with equal ease, we have a sense of great weight and force accompanying the grace of its movement":

But, for this very reason, Heine touches our hearts more strongly; his songs are all music and feeling; they are like birds, that not only enchant us with their delicious notes, but nestle against us with their soft breasts, and make us feel the agitated beating of their hearts. He indicates a whole sad history in a single quatrain; there is not an image in it, not a thought; but it is beautiful, simple, and perfect as a 'big round tear;' it is pure feeling breathed in pure music²

¹Ibid., pp. 97-98.

²Ibid., p. 98.

But though feeling is Heine's habitual element, he occasionally soars to a higher region. He can impart deep significance to picturesque symbolism. He can flash sublime thoughts and pour forth lofty strains of hope and indignation. But Heine's real excellence lies in his imaginative expression of feeling:

. . . . he represents it by a brief image, like a finely cut cameo; he expands it into a mysterious dream, or dramatizes it in a little story, half-ballad, half-idyl; and in all these forms his art is so perfect that we never have a sense of artificiality or of unsuccessful effort, but all seems to have developed itself by the same beautiful necessity that brings forth vine-leaves and grapes and the natural curls of childhood.¹

She has but one objection to Heine's poetry; a strict Victorian, she naturally dislikes his coarseness and vulgarity. Before she would put his volumes within reach of immature minds, she would use a "friendly penknife to exercise a strict censorship."

In poetry George Eliot liked simple imagery and natural language, insisting that sincere emotion and moving truth cannot be expressed through pompous rhetoric and grandiloquent abstractions.

¹Ibid., p. 99.

CHAPTER IV

ON THE ARTS

George Eliot's interest in art was not confined to literature; she loved beauty, truth, and inspiration wherever she found them. In her letters, journals, essays, and novels there are references to music, painting, sculpture, and architecture as interesting as those to fiction and poetry. A Handel chorus or a Raphael Madonna moved her as profoundly as any of Dante or Milton.

Her familiarity with the arts was not merely that of the dilettante. On her trips to the Continent with Lewes, and later with Cross, she attended numerous concerts and spent many hours in art galleries, churches, and museums viewing art works. She knew personally some of the great artists of her day, including Liszt, Richard Wagner, Anton Rubinstein, Edward Burne-Jones, and Overbeck.

For reasons of clarity and emphasis her comments will be presented and discussed in this chapter in sections, a section being allotted to each art, with the exception of one section which combines sculpture and architecture. The organization of the two preceding chapters on the basis of nationality and chronology being not entirely feasible here, the plan of the present chapter will be adapted to the material of each section as follows: (a) the comments on music will

be grouped according to the particular forms considered; (b) the remarks on painting will be organized according to the nationality of the painters, with the Italians classified, whenever possible, according to the schools to which they belonged; and (c) the comments on sculpture and architecture will be arranged according to the places in which she saw the works remarked upon.

On Music

George Eliot's enthusiasm for music developed in her youth and increased throughout her lifetime. At the age of thirteen she was the most proficient piano student at the school of the Misses Franklin and a delight to her music master, who soon confessed that he had no more to teach her. Frequently called on to play for guests of the school, she would often after performances lapse into hysteria, induced perhaps as much by her intense emotional reaction to the music as by her extreme shyness in the presence of strangers. After she had left school to assume control of the Griff household, she continued her piano lessons, often playing in the evenings for the amusement of her father, who also was very fond of music. Of course evangelicalism inevitably blighted for a time even her love of music:

We have had an oratorio at Coventry lately, Braham, Phillips, Mrs. Knyvett, and Mrs. Shaw--the last, I think, I shall attend. I am not fitted to decide on the question of the propriety or lawfulness of such exhibitions of talent and so forth, because I have no soul for music. . . . I am a tasteless person, but it would not cost me any regrets if the only music heard in our land were that of strict worship, nor can I think a pleasure that

involves the devotion of all the time and powers of an immortal being to the acquirement of an expertness in so useless (at least in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred) an accomplishment, can be quite pure or elevating in its tendency.¹

But just two years after this rather absurd declaration she attended a Birmingham festival where she was so deeply affected by the music that she burst into loud sobbing, attracting the attention of people sitting nearby.²

Her response to music was almost mystical: "How music, that stirs all one's devout emotions, blends everything into harmony--makes one feel part of one whole which one loves all alike, losing the sense of a separate self."³ Beautiful music penetrated her entire being, blending together into one intense emotion all her love, tenderness, courage, resignation, sympathy, joy, and sorrow:

Is it any weakness to be wrought on by exquisite music?--to feel its wondrous harmonies searching the subtlest windings of your soul, the delicate fibres of life where no memory can penetrate, and binding together your whole past and present in one unspeakable vibration: melting you in one moment with all the tenderness, all the love that has been scattered through the toilsome years, concentrating in one emotion of heroic courage or resignation all the hard-learned lessons of self-renouncing sympathy, blending your present joy with past sorrow, and your present sorrow with all your past joy?⁴

Perhaps the best descriptions of her feeling for music are found in the remarks of Maggie and Philip in The Mill on the

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 22, George Eliot to Miss Lewis, November 6, 1838.

²Ibid., p. 22, note by Cross.

³Ibid., p. 258, journal entry, April, 1858.

⁴Adam Bede, pp. 257-258.

Floss. Maggie, a passionate lover of music, finds strength in it:

'I think I should have no other mortal wants, if I could always have plenty of music. It seems to infuse strength into my limbs and ideas into my brain. Life seems to go on without effort, when I am filled with music. At other times one is conscious of carrying a weight.'¹

She confesses to Philip: "I never felt that I had enough music--I wanted more instruments playing together--I wanted voices to be fuller and deeper."² In listening to music Philip experiences sublimation: "Certain strains of music affect me so strangely--I can never hear them without their changing my whole attitude of mind for a time, and if the effect would last, I might be capable of heroisms."³ George Eliot's explanation of Maggie's sensitivity to music might very well have been applied to herself: "Not that her enjoyment of music was of the kind that indicates a great specific talent; it was rather that her sensibility to the supreme excitement of music was only one form of that passionate sensibility which belongs to her whole nature"⁴

She regarded inferior music as degrading; great music must inspire, enrich, and enlarge man's spirit. Klesmer's condemnation of Gwendolen's choice of music in Daniel Deronda is George Eliot's own denunciation of the foolish, the meaningless in art:

¹P. 680.

²P. 638.

³P. 620.

⁴P. 692.

' . . . that music which you sing is beneath you. It is a form of melody which expresses a puerile state of culture--a dandling, canting, seesaw kind of stuff--the passion and thought of people without any breadth of horizon. There is a sort of self-satisfied folly about every phrase of such melody; no cries of deep, mysterious passion--no conflict--no sense of the universal. It makes men small as they listen to it.'¹

She exalted the musician as one who conveys significant meanings in a medium more difficult than that of language, who creates not for the amusement but for the ennoblement of man:

'No man has too much talent to be a musician. Most men have too little. A creative artist is no more a mere musician than a great statesman is a mere politician. We are not ingenious puppets, sir, who live in a box and look out on the world only when it is gaping for amusement. We help to rule the nations and make the age as much as any other public men. We count ourselves on level benches with legislators. And a man who speaks effectively through music is compelled to something more difficult than parliamentary eloquence.'²

Her comments on instrumental music are few. She loved sonatas, particularly those of Beethoven; and she was very fond of the Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Beethoven symphonies. Her two favorite instruments were probably the violin and the piano, the violin being superior in that it "gives that keen edge of tone which the piano wants."³ The music of all stringed instruments reminded her of the "passionate cries of imprisoned spirits."⁴ Chiefly, however,

¹Op. cit., pp. 47-48.

²Ibid., p. 242, Klesmer to Mr. Bult.

³Paterson, op. cit., p. 71, George Eliot to Charles Lewes, July 13, 1859.

⁴The Mill on the Floss, p. 606.

she was interested in vocal music, loving especially art songs, oratorios, and operas.

She was probably fond of the art song because it is a form which affords a greater literary and emotional expressiveness than that of purely instrumental music and also an intimacy impossible in the opera house. She loved Schubert's romantic "Erl King," being particularly impressed by a rendition she heard in Berlin in 1855:

Roger's singing of the 'Erl King' was a treat not to be forgotten. He gave the full effect to Schubert's beautiful and dramatic music; and his way of falling from melody into awe-struck speech in the final words 'War todt' abides with one. I never felt so thoroughly the beauty of that divine ballad before.¹

She considered Beethoven's "Adelaide" the "ne plus ultra of passionate song."²

The epic greatness and religious emotion of the oratorio appealed to her. She was deeply moved by the choruses of Handel: ". . . we are going on Friday to hear the 'Judas Maccabaeus,' and Handel's music always brings me a revival."³ His Messiah she loved not only for its beautiful music but also for its poetic theme: "What pitiable people those are who feel no poetry in Christianity! Surely the acme of poetry hitherto is the conception of the suffering Messiah, and the final triumph, 'He shall reign forever and forever.'"⁴

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 187, journal entry.

²Ibid., p. 396, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, December 20, 1860.

³Ibid., p. 448, George Eliot to Mrs. Peter Taylor, March 3, 1864.

⁴Ibid., p. 432, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, December 26, 1862.

She liked the oratorios of Haydn, naming particularly The Creation.¹ Hearing Mendelssohn himself conduct the "glorious" Elijah in London, she looked upon it "as a kind of sacramental purification of Exeter Hall, and a proclamation of indulgence for all that is to be perpetrated there during this month of May."²

Since both she and Lewes were devotees of the opera, loving its grand combination of lyricism and drama, most of her comments on music refer to this genre. She apparently did not feel competent to discuss at any length instrumental music, art songs, or oratorios; her remarks on these forms always stressed her own emotional reaction to the music, not attempting any critical evaluation of the intrinsic merit. But as the novelist, interested in character and dramatic situation, she was very much concerned with the relationship of the libretto and the music in opera and frequently voiced her criticism of a composer's effective or ineffective handling of it.

She loved the great innovator Gluck who, deploring the Italian conventionalities of surface brilliance and overornamentation, insisted that opera should hold to its original purpose of expressing in music the meaning or emotion conveyed by the words. She was struck by some of the absurdities

¹Ibid., p. 139, George Eliot to Mrs. Bray, March 25, 1852.

²Ibid., pp. 82-83, George Eliot to Miss Mary Sibree, May 10, 1847.

in an 1855 Berlin performance of his Orfeo ed Eurydice but considered Orpheus himself very fine:

The caricatures of the Furies, the ballet-girls, and the butcher-like Greek shades in Elysium, the ugly screaming Eurydice, and the droll appearance of Timzek as Amor, in which she looked like a shop-girl who has donned a masquerade dress impromptu, without changing her head-dress--all these absurdities were rather an amusement than a drawback to our pleasures; for the Orpheus was perfect in himself, and looked like a noble horse among mules and donkeys.¹

Describing the same performance to Miss Sara Hennell (January, 1855) she expressed some dissatisfaction with the scoring, but bowed to the superior judgment of Gluck:

The scene in which Orpheus enters Tartarus, is met by the awful Shades, and charms them into ecstatic admiration till they make way for him to pass on, is very fine. The voices--except in the choruses--are all women's voices; and there are only three characters--Orpheus, Amor, and Eurydice. One wonders that Pluto does not come as a basso; and one would prefer Mercury as a tenor to Amor in the shape of an ugly German soprano; but Gluck wished it otherwise, and the music is delightful.²

She insisted that the great operatic composer must possess the power of wedding good drama with fine music. Regarding opera as a great artistic form, she regretted such failures, to her, as Verdi's La Traviata:

The opera is a great, great product--pity we can't always have fine weltgeschichtliche dramatic motives wedded with fine music, instead of trivialities or hideousnesses. Perhaps this last is too strong a word for anything except the 'Traviata.'³

¹ Ibid., p. 185, journal entry.

² Ibid., pp. 185-186.

³ Ibid., pp. 437-438, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, July 11, 1863.

Although she considered his Rigoletto (based on a drama by Victor Hugo) unpleasant, she liked its "superlatively fine tragedy in the Nemesis."¹ She admired certain moments of Gounod's Faust but criticized it, too, as lacking a powerful blending of drama and music:

I am rather deaf and stupid this morning, for last night we went to hear Gounod's Faust for the second time. It is being performed at both our opera-houses, and last night we heard it with the advantage, not only of some preparation by a first hearing, but also of a superior, well-conducted orchestra. My first impressions were not favorable, but last night I was converted to considerable admiration,--converted by an intense enjoyment of certain moments. Faure, who is Mephistopheles, acts and sings the part with a striking effect. Nevertheless, I still feel that the composer is wanting in the great power of wedding passion and melody; he seems to me to be comparatively feeble in the pathetic and tragic moments.²

Two years later, however, she was more enthusiastic: "I was much thrilled by the great symbolical situations, and by the music--more, I think, than I had ever been before."³

The beautiful music of Weber's Der Freischütz, with which she was familiar long before seeing the opera, was spoiled for her "by the absence of recitative, and the terrible lapsus from melody to ordinary speech."⁴ The incongruity between the music and the dramatic action elicited her acrid disapproval:

The bacchanalian song seemed simply ridiculous, sung at a little pot-house table at a party of two, one of whom

¹Ibid., p. 438.

²Ibid., George Eliot to M. D'Albert, July 18, 1863.

³Ibid., p. 463, journal entry, July, 1865.

⁴Ibid., p. 172, 1854.

was sunk in melancholy; and the absurdity reached a ne plus ultra, when Caspar climbed the tree, apparently with the sole purpose of being shot.¹

Wagner's Lohengrin wearied her:

The declamation appeared to me monotonous, and situations, in themselves trivial or disagreeable, were dwelt on fatiguingly. Without feeling competent to pass a judgment on this opera as music, one may venture to say that it fails in one grand requisite of art, based on an unchangeable element in human nature--the need for contrast.²

She was, however, delighted with his Fliegender Holländer because "the poem and the music are alike charming."³ The Tannhäuser created in her a desire to hear it again: "Many of the situations, and much of the music, struck me as remarkably fine."⁴

Other operas received brief notice in her letters and journals. In her music library were four Mozart operas from which she and some of her guests were fond of singing selections: Don Giovanni, Figaro, Il Barbiere di Siviglia, and Flauto Magico.⁵ She enjoyed even a poor performance of Beethoven's Fidelio because "the divine music positively triumphs over the defects of execution. One is entirely wrapt in the idea of the composer."⁶ Although in Daniel

¹Ibid., pp. 172-173.

²Ibid., p. 172.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 423, George Eliot to Mrs. Bray, February 8, 1862.

⁶Ibid., p. 185, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, January 9, 1855.

Deronda Meyerbeer's music is described as "mechanical-dramatic,"¹ she evidently liked his Huguenots, calling one performance "a rich treat,"² and speaking again of the "divine duet" between his Valentine and Raoul.³ She mentioned upon numerous occasions her enjoyment of various performances of Rossini's William Tell. Several favorite singers are mentioned in the letters and journals: Johanna Wagner, the niece of Richard Wagner, Grisi, and Henschel.

It is interesting to note that in speaking of music she usually considered specific works, only rarely expressing all-inclusive criticism of a composer. It may be safely surmised that Wordsworth, Milton, and Dante were her favorite poets, that Scott and George Sand were her most beloved novelists, and that Rubens was the painter she most admired; but it is impossible to determine which musicians she loved best. Her loveliest tribute was paid to Liszt, with whom she and Lewes visited in Weimar in 1854. She was perhaps as much impressed by his personality and character, void of all pettiness and egotism, as by his artistic genius:

I sat next to Liszt, and my great delight was to watch him and observe the sweetness of his expression. Genius, benevolence, and tenderness beam from his whole countenance, and his manners are in perfect harmony with it. Then came the thing I had longed for--his playing. I sat near him, so that I could see both his hands and face. For the first time in my life I beheld real

¹P. 117.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 142, George Eliot to the Brays, May 5, 1852.

³Ibid., p. 438, George Eliot to M. D'Albert, July 18, 1863.

inspiration--for the first time I heard the true tones of the piano. He played one of his own compositions--one of a series of religious fantasies. There was nothing strange or excessive in his manner. His manipulation of the instrument was quiet and easy, and his face was simply grand--the lips compressed and the head thrown a little backward. When the music expressed quiet rapture or devotion, a sweet smile flitted over his features: when it was triumphant, the nostrils dilated. There was nothing petty or egoistic to mar the picture.¹

Though loving painting and sculpture, she believed music superior to these arts. Fascinated by the medium of sound, she was moved to greater emotional depths by music than by any other art, with the possible exception of literature. In January, 1848, she wrote to John Sibree:

And do you really think that sculpture and painting are to die out of the world? If that be so, let another deluge come as quickly as possible, that a new race of Glums and Gowries may take possession of this melancholy earth. I agree with you as to the inherent superiority of music--as that questionable woman, the Countess Hahn-Hahn, says painting and sculpture are but an idealizing of our actual existence. Music arches over this existence with another and a diviner.²

On Painting

Although George Eliot's comments on paintings, and occasionally drawings, are, for the most part, those of the art gallery tourist who viewed long successions of them and tersely recorded later in journals and in letters her remembered impressions, she, by nature a student and contemplator, regretted the necessity, while in Italy and Germany, of passing quickly from gallery to gallery. Particularly sensitive to great art works, she was tired by the emotional drain

¹Ibid., pp. 176-177, journal entry.

²Ibid., p. 88.

of too many at one time. Latimer's observation in "The Lifted Veil" might well have been her own words: "I could never look at many pictures in succession; for pictures, when they are at all powerful, affect me so strongly that one or two exhaust all my capability of contemplation."¹ Her remarks, however, though brief, often unoriginal, and sometimes merely descriptive, reveal her deep appreciation of the visual arts and her rather broad familiarity with art history. They are also consistent in mirroring the aesthetic principles observable in her comments upon the other arts.

There are few general remarks upon the visual arts in her writings; her theories must usually be deduced from her comments upon specific works. Once, however, in Middlemarch, she has a character briefly compare the medium of language with that of painting, specifically portraiture. Will Ladislaw discourages his artist friend Naumann, who wishes to paint a portrait of Dorothea, thus:

' you want to express too much with your painting. You would only have made a better or worse portrait with a background whichever connoisseur would give a different reason for or against. And what is a portrait of a woman? Your painting and Plastik ~~are~~ poor stuff after all. They perturb and dull conceptions instead of raising them. Language is a finer medium.'

'Yes, for those who can't paint,' said Naumann.

'Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, the true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with an insistent imperfection. I feel that especially about representations of women. As if a woman were a mere coloured superficies! You must wait for movement and tone. There is a difference in their very breathing: they

¹Essays, p. 445.

change from moment to moment.--This woman whom you have just seen, for example: how would you paint her voice, pray? But her voice is much diviner than anything you have seen of her.¹

And in a letter to Miss Sara Hennell (May 18, 1870) she expressed the same feeling about portraits: "One must not be unreasonable about portraits. How can a thing which is always the same be an adequate representation of a living being who is always varying?"²

In the presence of great Italian art, to which most of her comments refer, George Eliot felt mingled humiliation and inspiration. The abundance of beauty created by the masters of the past awed her, and yet, even in Italy, she could mourn over much in art that seemed to her false and be moved to a greater striving after sincerity in her own work:

As for me, I am thrown into a state of humiliating passivity by the sight of the great things done in the far past: it seems as if life were long enough to learn, and as if my own activity were so completely dwarfed by comparison, that I should never have courage for more creation of my own. There is only one thing that has an opposite and stimulating effect: it is the comparative rarity, even here, of great and truthful art, and the abundance of wretched imitation and falsity. Every hand is wanted in the world that can do a little genuine sincere work.³

Among the Florentine painters, she liked the fore-runner of the realistic Florentine school of the early Renaissance, Cimabue, particularly admiring one of his

¹I, 167-168.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 546.

³Ibid., p. 368, George Eliot to John Blackwood, May 18, 1860.

Madonnas which gave her an idea of "his superiority over the painters who went before him."¹ She considered Giotto, the pupil of Cimabue, not only as having surpassed his master but also as having had "a clear vision of the noble in art."² She enjoyed his frescoes in the choir of a little church in Naples but believed them not in his ripest manner, "for they are inferior to his frescoes in the Santa Croce at Florence--more uniform in the type of face."³ Of the Santa Croce frescoes, she liked best his "'Challenge to pass through the Fire' in the series representing the history of St. Francis, and the rising of some saint (unknown to me) from his tomb, while Christ extends his arms to receive him above, and wondering venerator look on, on each side."⁴ She found her favorite Giotto fresco in the apsis of the Arena Chapel at Padua: "It is in this apsis that the lovely Madonna, with the Infant at her breast, is painted in a niche, now quite hidden by some altar-piece or woodwork, which one has to push by in order to see the tenderest bit of Giotto's painting."⁵ She pronounced Taddeo Gaddi's frescoes "not good: one sees in him a pupil of Giotto, and nothing more."⁶ But she later praised some of his human groups for their conception,

¹Ibid., p. 366, journal entry, 1860.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 357, George Eliot to Mrs. Congreve, May 5, 1860.

⁴Ibid., p. 363, journal entry, 1860.

⁵Ibid., p. 371.

⁶Ibid., p. 363.

life-likeness, and admirable costume studies.¹ She liked Orcagna's frescoes of Paradise and Hell: "The Hell has been repainted, but the Paradise has not been maltreated in this way; and it is a splendid example of Orcagna's powers" ²

She spoke several times of "fine" Fra Lippo Lippi paintings. She considered Domenico Ghirlandajo, the master of Michelangelo, "excellent." Of his frescoes in the Church of the Trinità at Florence she wrote: "They represent the history of St. Francis, and happily the best of them is in the best light: it is the death of St. Francis, and is full of natural feeling, with well-marked gradations from deepest sorrow to indifferent spectatorship."³ She loved also his "Adoration of the Shepherds,"⁴ She liked a Pietà "of memorable expression"⁵ and a "sweet" Madonna and Child with a bird by Fra Bartolomeo.⁶ She alluded to two "remarkable" pictures, which she did not name, by Ridolfo Ghirlandajo.⁷ She liked an Angelo Bronzino picture of a little prince in pink dress.⁸ She felt that she had seen Andrea del Sarto

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 362.

³Ibid., p. 363.

⁴Ibid., p. 366.

⁵Ibid., p. 365.

⁶Ibid., p. 344.

⁷Ibid., p. 365.

⁸Ibid.

in "his highest glory of oil-painting" at the Pitti Palace in Florence: "There are numerous large pictures of his-- Assumptions and the like--of great technical merit; but better than all these I remember a Holy Family with a very fine St. Ann, and the portraits of himself and his fatal arburn-haired wife."¹

Of the Sienese artists, she admired Simone Martini, or Memmi, especially liking his frescoes in the chapel at Santa Maria Novella, Florence.² She praised the famous "Virgin and Child Enthroned" at San Domenico, Siena, signed by a Guido da Siena, whose existence is controversial among art historians, as "superior to any Cimabue we had seen."³ She loved Fra Angelico who, though not of the Sienese school, was closely akin to the early Sienese masters in spirit. His frescoes were the ones she liked best in Florence:

The frescoes I cared for most in all Florence were the few of Fra Angelico's that a donna was allowed to see in the Convent of San Marco. In the Chapterhouse, now used as a guard-room, is a large Crucifixion, with the inimitable group of the fainting mother, upheld by St. John and the younger Mary, and clasped round by the kneeling Magdalene. The group of adoring, sorrowing saints on the right hand are admirable for earnest truthfulness of representation. The Christ in this fresco is not good, but there is a deeply impressive original crucified Christ outside in the cloisters: St. Dominic is clasping the cross, and looking upward at the agonized Saviour, whose real, pale, calmly enduring face is quite unlike any other Christ I have ever seen.⁴

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 363.

³Ibid., p. 367.

⁴Ibid., p. 363.

She found his angels particularly lovely: "At this church [Santa Maria Novella], too, in the sacristy, is the 'Madonna della Stella,' with an alter-step by Fra Angelico--specimens of his minuter painting in oil. The inner part of the frame is surrounded with his lovely angels, with their seraphic joy and flower-garden coloring."¹ And again, of his paintings at the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, she remarked:

In the entrance gallery, where the early paintings are, is a great Fra Angelico--a Madonna and Child--a triptych, the two side compartments containing very fine figures of saints, and the inner part of the central frame a series of unspeakably lovely angels. Here I always paused with longing, trying to believe that a good copyist there could make an imitation angel good enough to be worth buying.²

At the Pitti Palace she admired a "lovely" Pietà of his.³

She liked, among the Umbrians, Gentile da Fabriano.

Delighted with his "Adoration of the Magi" at the Pitti Palace, she wrote in her journal:

A delightful picture--very much restored, I fear--of the Adoration of the Magi made me acquainted with Gentile da Fabriano. The head of Joseph in this picture is masterly in the delicate rendering of the expression; the three kings are very beautiful in conception; and the attendant group, or rather crowd, shows a remarkable combination of realism with love of the beautiful and splendid.⁴

She liked an Assumption by Perugino "for its cherubs and angels, and for some of the adoring figures below."⁵

¹ Ibid., pp. 363-364.

² Ibid., p. 364.

³ Ibid., p. 366.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

She commented on Luini and Correggio of the Lombard school. Though she admired the "Herodias" of Luini¹ and liked a "delicious" Holy Family of his,² she felt him incapable of great art:

At the Church of San Maurizio Maggiore [at Milan] we saw Luini's power tested by an abundant opportunity. The walls were almost covered with frescoes by him; but the only remarkable felicity he has is his female figures, which are eminently graceful. He has not³ power enough for a composition of any high character.

Moderate in her praise of Correggio, she said of his paintings in the Dresden Gallery:

The four large Correggios hanging together,--the Nacht; the Madonna with St. Sebastian, of the smiling graceful character, with the little cherub riding astride a cloud; the Madonna--with St. Hubert; and a third Madonna--very grave and sweet, painted when he was nineteen,--remain with me very vividly. They are full of life, though the life is not of a high order; and I should have surmised, without any previous knowledge, that the painter was among the first masters of technique.⁴

She referred to his "Jupiter and Io" as a gem which remains in the imagination⁵ and considered his "Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine" one of the few memorable pictures in Naples.⁶

She loved, among the Venetian painters, Giovanni Bellini who "shines with a mild, serious light that gives one an affectionate respect towards him."⁷ One of his

¹Ibid., p. 365.

²Ibid., p. 377.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., pp. 276-277, 1858.

⁵Ibid., p. 188, 1855.

⁶Ibid., p. 357, 1860.

⁷Ibid., p. 375.

"exquisite" Madonnas she believed "comparable to Raphael's for sweetness."¹ There are more references in her writings to Titian, Bellini's pupil and one of the most celebrated Venetians of the High Renaissance, than to any other painter. Her impression of an Assumption of his at the Scuola di San Rocco, Venice, was particularly significant:

For a thoroughly rapt expression I never saw anything equal to the Virgin in this picture; and the expression is the more remarkable because it is not assisted by the usual devices to express spiritual ecstasy, such as delicacy of feature and temperament or pale meagreness. Then what cherubs and angelic heads bathed in light! The lower part of the picture has no interest; the attitudes are theatrical; and the Almighty above is as unbecoming as painted Almighties usually are: but the middle group falls short only of the Sistine Madonna.²

It was this picture that inspired The Spanish Gypsy.³ Another Titian painting, "The Tribute Money," which haunted her for years after she saw it in the Dresden Gallery, suggested to her the personal appearance of Daniel Deronda.⁴ She loved his "Death of Peter the Martyr" so much that she visited the sacristy of San Giovanni and Paolo five different times while in Venice just to see it: "In this picture, as in that of the Tribute-money at Dresden, Titian seems to have surpassed himself, and to have reached as high a point in expression as in color."⁵ She considered a Venus of his

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 508, "Notes on The Spanish Gypsy."

⁴Haldane, op. cit., p. 266.

⁵Cross, op. cit., p. 375, journal entry, 1860.

at Dresden "fit for its purity and sacred loveliness to hang in a temple with Madonnas."¹ Other Titian paintings she specifically admired were the "Woman with the Golden Hair," the "Marriage of St. Catherine," "Danaë," "Zinsgroschen," and a portrait of Vesalius. Only twice did she express any unfavorable criticism of him. She disliked his "Ecce Homo," which, "she observed, is thought highly of, and is splendid in composition and color, but the Christ is abject, the Pontius Pilate vulgar; amazing that they could have been painted by the same man who conceived and executed the 'Christo della Moneta'!"² And she found a Magdalen of his "failing in expression."³

She spoke admiringly of the elder Jacopo Palma:

And Palma Vecchio, too, must be held in grateful reverence for his Santa Barbara, standing in calm, grand beauty above an altar in the Church of Santa Maria Formosa. It is an almost unique presentation of a hero-woman, standing in calm preparation for martyrdom, without the slightest air of pietism, yet with the expression of a mind filled with serious conviction.⁴

A Venus of his in Dresden, however, she considered "common and unmeaning" beside that of Titian, though it was "pretty and pure" by itself.⁵ Il Giorgione's "Lucrezia Borgia," with the "cruel, cruel eyes," haunted her.⁶ It is this

¹Ibid., p. 276, 1858.

²Ibid., p. 273.

³Ibid., p. 365, 1860.

⁴Ibid., p. 375.

⁵Ibid., p. 276.

⁶Ibid., p. 273, 1858.

picture, in the Belvedere Gallery, Munich, which fascinates Latimer, the narrator of "The Lifted Veil," so much that he is unable to look at any other pictures in the gallery.¹

Though admiring the vigor and freshness of Tintoretto's conceptions, she saw nothing that delighted her in his expression; she felt that much of his work was ugly and preposterous.² In 1858 she pronounced Veronese "ignoble as a painter of human beings,"³ but she was converted to high admiration of him by "The Marriage of Cana" which she saw at the Louvre in 1859.⁴ In 1860, in Venice, she found a painting of his which she loved for its realistic figures:

. . . . we saw the Church of San Sebastiano, where Paul Veronese is buried, with his own paintings around, mingling their color with the light that falls on his tombstone. There is one remarkably fine painting of his here: it represents, I think, some Saints going to Martyrdom, but apart from that explanation is a composition full of vigorous, spirited figures, in which the central ones are two young men leaving some splendid dwelling, on the steps of which stands the mother, pleading and remonstrating--a marvellous figure of an old woman with a bare neck.⁵

She liked a Europa of his and described the "Apotheosis of Venice" as "a miracle of color and composition--a picture full of glory and joy of an earthly, fleshly kind, but without any touch of coarseness or vulgarity."⁶

¹Essays, p. 445.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 374, journal entry, 1860.

³Ibid., p. 277.

⁴Ibid., p. 307.

⁵Ibid., p. 374.

⁶Ibid., p. 373.

At the Accademia in Bologna she confirmed her "utter dislike" of the Bolognese or Eclectic painters,¹ who attempted to copy the best in the styles of the masters who had preceded them. Francia, though "a faithful, painstaking painter, with a religious spirit," seemed to her extremely limited.² Considering Agostino Caracci's "Last Communion of St. Jerome" "a remarkable picture, with real feeling in it--an exception among all the great pieces of canvas that hang beside it," she believed Domenichino's figure of St. Jerome to be a direct plagiarism from it.³ She disliked Guido Reni for the "petty prettiness" of his conceptions,⁴ but admired a Sebastian of his at Rome as "exceptionally beautiful among the many detestable things of his."⁵ She considered Guercino's "Entombment of Petronilla" "a stupendous piece of painting, about which one's only feeling is that it might as well have been left undone."⁶

About Italy's three greatest masters, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo, who defy classification with any particular group or school of painters, she had comparatively little to say. She liked Leonardo's "Medussa

¹Ibid., p. 369.

²Ibid., pp. 369-370.

³Ibid., p. 370.

⁴Ibid., p. 301, May 9, 1859.

⁵Ibid., p. 348, 1860.

⁶Ibid.

Head";¹ Hetty's face, after her sin, is described in Adam Bede as "the sadder for its beauty, like that wondrous Medussa-face, with the passionate, passionless lips."² She loved a "precious" collection of his drawings at the Ambrosian Library, Venice, finding among them "amazingly grotesque faces, full of humor."³ She liked a "placid, contemplative young woman, with her finger between the leaves of a book" by him which she saw at the Pitti Palace.⁴ The expressions of some of the early Raphael Madonnas provoked the facetious comment: "I have often wondered whether those early Madonnas of Raphael, with the blond faces and somewhat stupid expression, kept their placidity undisturbed when their strong-limbed, strong-willed boys got a little too old to do without clothing."⁵ His "Madonna della Sedia" at the Pitti Palace left her, "with all its beauty, impressed only by the grave gaze of the Infant."⁶ She loved, however, the "Madonna del Granduca," "which has the sweet grace and gentleness of its sisters without their sheep-like look."⁷

¹Ibid., p. 365.

²p. 279.

³Cross, op. cit., p. 377, journal entry, 1860.

⁴Ibid., pp. 365-366.

⁵The Mill on the Floss, p. 401.

⁶Cross, op. cit., p. 365, journal entry, 1860;

⁷Ibid.

Her emotional response to the great "Sistine Madonna" was so intense that the first time she saw it she could not bear to look at it for more than a moment; later she could hardly leave it:

I sat down on the sofa opposite the picture for an instant; but a sort of awe, as if I were suddenly in the presence of some glorious being, made my heart swell too much for me to remain comfortably, and we hurried out of the room. On subsequent mornings we always came, in the last minutes of our stay, to look at this sublimest picture; and while the others [Madonnas] . . . lost much of their first interest, this became harder and harder to leave.¹

She admired two of his frescoes, ranking "The School of Athens" and "The Triumph of Galatea" second only to Michelangelo's ceiling of the Sistine Chapel;² but she was disappointed in the frescoes of Cupid and Psyche at the Farnesina in Rome.³ The only Michelangelo painting she commented on, with the exception of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, "the most wonderful fresco in the world,"⁴ was his "Holy Family," which she alluded to as "ugly";⁵ she mentioned chiefly his sculpture.

Her intense love of realism in painting, as in literature, has been revealed in her comments on Italian masterpieces. It was for this "rare, precious quality of truthfulness," or realism, that she delighted in many Dutch and

¹Ibid., p. 276, 1858

²Ibid., p. 344, 1860.

³Ibid., p. 345.

⁴Ibid., p. 344.

⁵Ibid., p. 365.

Flemish paintings, "which lofty-minded people despise";

I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions. I turn, without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessities of life to her;--or I turn to that village wedding, kept between four brown walls, where an awkward bridegroom opens the dance with a high-shouldered, broad-faced bride, while elderly and middle-aged friends look on, with very irregular noses and lips, and probably with quart-pots in their hands, but with an expression of unmistakable contentment and good-will.¹

She did not demand that all art portray the life of the common people; she did not rule idealism out of the realm of art, but she always cried against those who would condemn the commonplace as inappropriate for art:

Paint us an angel, if you can, with a floating robe, and a face paled by the celestial light; paint us yet oftener a Madonna, turning her mild face upward and opening her arms to welcome the divine glory; but do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house, those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world--those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs, and their clusters of onions.²

Rubens was her favorite painter. In her explanation of her admiration for him is revealed what was, to her, the

¹Adam Bede, pp. 130-131.

²Ibid., p. 131.

very essence of any great work of art, whatever its subject:
vigorous and truthful representation of life:

Rubens gives me more pleasure than any other painter, whether that is right or wrong. To be sure, I have not seen so many pictures, and pictures of so high a rank, by any other great master. . . . Rubens, more than any one else, 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 aping of passion! What a grand, glowing, forceful thing life looks in his pictures--the men such grand-bearded, grappling beings, fit to do the work of the world; the women such real mothers.¹

She loved his "Samson and Delilah"; her enthusiastic description of the figures reveals her keen appreciation of the drama and illusion of reality which only a master can convey:

Delilah, a magnificent blonde, seated in a chair, with a transparent white garment slightly covering her body, and a rich red piece of drapery round her legs, leans forward, with one hand resting on her thigh, the other, holding the cunning shears, resting on the chair--a posture which shows to perfection the full, round, living arms. She turns her head aside to look with sly triumph at Samson,--a tawny giant, his legs caught in the red drapery, shorn of his long locks, furious with the consciousness that the Philistines are upon him, and that this time he cannot shake them off. Above the group of malicious faces and grappling arms, a hand holds a flaming torch. Behind Delilah, and grasping her arm, leans forward an old woman, with hard features full of exultation.²

The sublime beauty of his "Crucifixion" at Munich haunted her:

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 261, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, April 17, 1858.

²Ibid., p. 259, journal entry, April, 1858.

Jesus alone, hanging dead on the Cross, darkness over the whole earth. One can desire nothing in this picture: the grand, sweet calm of the dead face, calm and satisfied amidst all the traces of anguish, the real livid flesh, the thorough mastery with which the whole form is rendered, and the isolation of the supreme sufferer, make a picture that haunts one like a remembrance of a friend's deathbed.¹

The color, form, and expression of "The Descent from the Cross" at Antwerp impressed her with a "sense of grandeur and beauty"; the conception of the suffering Christ in its companion piece, "The Elevation of the Cross," she considered the finest she had ever seen, though she was displeased with the rest of the picture.² She liked also his "Diana Returning from Hunting," "The Love Garden," and "The Judgment of Paris."³

At Munich she saw a painting of Jordaens, the pupil of Rubens, which delighted her; the details that remained in her memory were ones which she, always interested in the figures of a painting, would, of course, love:

'A satyr eating, while a peasant shows him that he can blow hot and cold at the same time;' the old grandmother nursing the child, the father with the key in his hand, with which he has been amusing baby, looking curiously at the satyr, the handsome wife, still more eager in her curiosity, the quiet cow, the little boy, the dog and cat--all are charmingly conceived.⁴

She admired the work of Teniers for its truthfulness and lack of sentimentality.⁵ She liked Rembrandt's self-portraits which

¹Ibid., p. 260.

²Ibid., p. 169, July 21, 1854.

³Ibid., p. 277, 1858.

⁴Ibid., p. 262.

⁵Essays, p. 158.

she saw at Dresden, but she cared for none of his other pictures there: "the Ganymede is an offence."¹ Her admiration of him, regardless of the works she disliked, however, is evident in the description of Mary Garth in Middlemarch: "Rembrandt would have painted her with pleasure, and would have made her broad features look out of the canvas with intelligent honesty."² Other Dutch painters she listed as favorites were Gerard Dow, Terburg, Mieris, and Ryckart.³

Of the Germans, she specifically mentioned Holbein, Dürer, Denner, Cornelius, Overbeck, Ainmeuller, and Kaulbach. She considered a Holbein Madonna, at the Royal Gallery, Dresden, second only to the "Sistine Madonna" in beauty: "Holbein's Madonna is very exquisite--a divinely gentle, golden-haired blonde, with eyes cast down, in an attitude of unconscious, easy grace."⁴ At the Pinacothek in Munich she found among the works of Dürer some she considered very bad and some very fine; "of the latter, a full-length figure of the Apostle Paul, with the head of Mark beside him, in a listening attitude, is the one that most remains with me."⁵ At the Belvedere Gallery, Munich, she liked two heads by Denner, "the most wonderful of all his wonderful heads that I have seen."⁶ The Cornelius frescoes at Munich seemed to

¹Cross, op. cit., p. 277, journal entry, 1858.

²I, 97.

³Cross, op. cit., p. 277, journal entry, 1858.

⁴Ibid., p. 276.

⁵Ibid., p. 263.

⁶Ibid., p. 273.

her "stiff and hideous."¹ While in Rome in 1860, she and Lewes visited with Overbeck:

The man himself is more interesting than his pictures: a benevolent calm, and quiet conviction breathes [sic] from his person and manners. . . . Some of his cartoons pleased me: one large one of our Saviour passing from the midst of the throng, who were going to cast Him from the brow of the hill at Nazareth--one foot resting on a cloud borne up by cherubs; and some smaller round cartoons representing the Parable of the Ten Virgins, and applying it to the function of the artist.²

She liked two "admirable" interiors of Westminster Abbey by Ailmueller.³

Much of modern German art disgusted her. She could not bear its lifelessness and vague, to her, meaningless symbolism. While visiting with Kaulbach in Munich in 1858, she mourned over the misdirection of his talent:

I cannot admire much of the modern German art. It is for the most part elaborate lifelessness. Kaulbach's great compositions are huge charades; and I have seen nothing of his equal to his own 'Reineke Fuchs.' It is an unspeakable relief, after staring at one of his pictures--the 'Destruction of Jerusalem,' for example, which is a regular child's puzzle of symbolism--to sweep it all out of one's mind,--which is very easily done, for nothing grasps you in it,--and call up in your imagination a little Gerard Dow that you have seen hanging in a corner of one of the cabinets. We have been to his atelier, and he has given us a proof of his 'Irrenhaus,' a strange sketch, which he made years ago--very terrible and powerful. He is certainly a man of great faculty, but is, I imagine, carried out of his true path by the ambition to produce 'Weltgeschichtliche Bilder,' which the German critics may go into raptures about. His 'Battle of the Huns,' which is the most impressive of all his great pictures, was the first of the series. He painted it simply under the inspiration

¹Ibid., p. 262.

²Ibid., p. 346.

³Ibid., p. 267, May 20, 1858.

of the grand myth about the spirits of the dead warriors rising and carrying on the battle in the air. Straightway the German critics began to smoke furiously that vile tobacco which they call ästhetik, declared it a 'Weltgeschichtliches Bild,' and ever since Kaulbach has been concocting these pictures in which, instead of taking a single moment of reality and trusting to the infinite symbolism that belongs to all nature, he attempts to give you at one view a succession of events--each represented by some group which may mean 'Whichever you please, my little dear.'¹

She admired the French painters for their ability to portray the common people with truthfulness, an ability she felt to be lacking in English painters. While on honeymoon with Cross she wrote to Mrs. Elma Stuart (May 18, 1880):

I found many changes in the Musée du Luxembourg since I last saw the pictures there, but I made some pleasant new acquaintances among the painters of French peasant life. The French, I think, succeed better in giving the true aspect of their common people, than our painters succeed in the same genre. Whom have we to pair with Jules Breton?²

The only Spanish painter she commented on was Murillo. She liked a Madonna of his which she saw in Dresden; it "is the simple, sad mother with her child, without the least divinity in it, suggesting a dead or sick father, and imperfect nourishment in a garret. In that light it is touching."³ She was also fond of his paintings of ragged boys.⁴

¹Ibid., pp. 265-266, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, May 10, 1858.

²Letters from George Eliot to Elma Stuart, ed. Roland Stuart (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Company, Ltd., 1909), p. 149.

³Cross, op. cit., p. 277, journal entry, 1858.

⁴"The Natural History of German Life," Essays, p. 158.

She referred infrequently to English painters. Her allusion to Sir Joshua Reynolds in the description of Gwen-dolen in Daniel Deronda is reminiscent of the discussion, already quoted, of the relative merits of literary portraits and painted portraits between Ladislaw and Naumann in Middlemarch: "Sir Joshua would have been glad to take her portrait; and he would have had an easier task than the historian at least in this, that he would not have had to represent the truth of change--only to give stability to one beautiful moment."¹ She considered Gainsborough's portrait of Mrs. Sheridan and her sister one of the "gems" of the Dulwich Gallery.² The works of the landscape painters, Stanfield, Roberts, and Creswick, brought to her "a whole world of thought and bliss--'a sense of something far more deeply interfused.'"³ Her satirical allusion to Sir Thomas Lawrence in the description of Harold Transome in Felix Holt is a reiteration of her constant objection to the sentimental, the unrealistic in art: "He certainly looked like a handsome portrait by Sir Thomas Lawrence, in which that remarkable artist had happily omitted the usual excess of honeyed blandness mixed with alert intelligence, which is hardly compatible with the state of man out of paradise."⁴

To Burne-Jones, a personal friend, she wrote (March 20, 1873):

¹P. 114.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 301, journal entry, 1859.

³Ibid., p. 89, George Eliot to John Sibree, January, 1848.

⁴II, 297.

It would be narrowness to suppose that an artist can only care for the impressions of those who know the methods of his art as well as feel its effects. Art works for all whom it can touch. And I want in gratitude to tell you that your work makes life larger and more beautiful to me. I mean that historical life of all the world, in which our little personal share often seems a mere standing-room from which we can look all round, and chiefly backward. Perhaps the work has a strain of special sadness in it--perhaps a deeper sense of the tremendous outer forces which urge us, than of the inner impulse towards heroic struggle and achievement; but the sadness is so inwrought with pure, elevating sensibility to all that is sweet and beautiful in the story of man and in the face of the earth, that it can no more be found fault with than the sadness of mid-day, when Pan is touchy like the rest of us.¹

She was moved by the colors of his "Circe" and "St. George," which she called "poems."²

In commenting upon a picture by Burton, she noted the mysterious power of the artist to convert the easily vulgar into the beautiful:

The subject is from a Norse legend; but that is no matter--the picture tells its story. A knight in mailed armor and surcoat has met the fair tall woman he (secretly) loves, on a turret stair. By an uncontrollable movement he has seized her arm and is kissing it. She, amazed, has dropped the flowers she held in her other hand. The subject might have been made the most vulgar thing in the world--the artist has raised it to the highest pitch of refined emotion. The kiss is on the fur-lined sleeve that covers the arm, and the face of the knight is the face of a man to whom the kiss is a sacrament.³

¹ Cross, op. cit., p. 601.

² Ibid., p. 539, journal entry, July 19, 1869.

³ Ibid., p. 451, George Eliot to Miss Sara Hennell, April 30, 1864.

In painting, as in literature, George Eliot demanded truthfulness, beauty, and, above all, true inspiration. Though she admired the skilled craftsman, she insisted that a predominance of technical skill, "unless new inspiration and invention come to guide it," ends in the degradation of art.¹

Perhaps it is significant that she had more to say about painting than about any other art, with the exception of literature. Her own writings indicate a love of visual detail. The character description in her novels is word portraiture; bits of nature are presented with the care of the landscape painter.

On Sculpture and Architecture

Since most of George Eliot's comments on sculpture and architecture occur in her account of the 1860 Italian journey, they will here be presented in the order that she gave to them; that is, they will be grouped according to the places in which she saw the art works. Sculpture and architecture are considered together because she usually regarded sculpture as a part of the building where she saw it.

Particularly impressed by the street architecture of Genoa, she felt that she could "rise to the highest point of admiration given to the Palladian style."² The palaces, arranged, unlike those of Florence, in a series, created for

¹"The Influence of Rationalism," Essays, p. 146.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 337, journal entry.

her a general impression of grandeur. She loved the Genoese Churches of the Annunziata and Santa Ambrogio for their wealth of gilding and rich pink-brown marbles.¹

She was awed at Pisa by her first glimpse of the cathedral, with the leaning campanile on one side and the baptistery on the other:

The structure of the campanile is exquisitely light and graceful--tier above tier of small circular arches, supported by delicate round pillars narrowing gradually in circumference, but very slightly, so that there is no striking difference of size between the base and the summit. The campanile is all of white marble, but the cathedral has the bands of black and white, softened in effect by the yellowing which time has given to the white. There is a family likeness among all these structures: they all have the delicate little colonnades and circular arches. But the baptistery has stronger traits of the Gothic style in the pinnacles that crown the encircling colonnade.²

Disappointed with her first sight of Rome, she felt that nothing about the great city corresponded with her preconceptions, but a visit to the Capitol and the Coliseum reassured her. Among the traces of ancient Rome which left the strongest images of themselves in her mind were the Coliseum, the Baths of Titus with the remnants of their arabesques, the grand bare arch brickwork of the Palace of the Caesars rising in huge masses on the Palatine, the Theater of Marcellus, the Temple of Minerva, the Temple of Nerva, Trajan's Forum, the Baths of Caracalla, and the exterior of the Pantheon, "if it were not marred by the

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., pp. 338-339.

Papal belfries."¹ Among the ancient sculptures in Rome, she placed on a level the Apollo, the Dying Gladiator, and the Lateran Antinous: ". . . they affected me equally in different ways."² After these she delighted in the Venus of the Capitol, the Kissing Children in the same room, the Sophocles at the Lateran Museum, the Nile, the black laughing Centaur at the Capitol, the Laughing Faun in the Vatican, the Sauroktonos, or Boy with the Lizard, and the sitting statue called Menander. "The Faun of Praxiteles, and the old Faun with the infant Bacchus, I had already seen at Munich, else I should have mentioned them among my first favorites."³

St. Peter's Cathedral she considered the "supreme wonder" of Christian Rome: "The piazza, with Bernini's colonnades, and the gradual slope upward to the mighty temple, gave me always a sense of having entered some millennial new Jerusalem, where all small and shabby things were unknown."⁴ The exterior, however, irritated her because of its partial concealment of the dome. Of the smaller churches she loved Santa Maria degli Angeli, a church formed by Michelangelo by additions to the grand hall of the Baths of Diocletian; the Church of San Celments; Santa Maria Maggiore, "an exquisitely beautiful basilica, rich in marbles from a pagan temple"; and the reconstructed San Paolo fuori

¹Ibid., p. 342.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 343.

le Mura, "a wonder of wealth and beauty, with its lines of white marble columns."¹ At San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome, she saw Michelangelo's "Moses" and a statue of Christ:

The Moses did not affect me agreeably: both the attitude and the expression of the face seemed to me, in that one visit, to have an exaggeration that strained after effect without reaching it. The failure seemed to me of this kind:--Moses was an angry man trying to frighten the people by his mien, instead of being rapt by his anger, and terrible without self-consciousness. To look at the statue of Christ, after the other works of Michael Angelo at Rome, was a surprise; in this the fault seems to incline slightly to the namby-pamby.²

In Naples her first visit was to the Museo Borbonico, where she saw some memorable pieces of sculpture:

Of the famous Balbi family, found at Herculaneum, the mother, in grand drapery, wound round her head and body, is the most unforgettable--a really grand woman of fifty, with firm mouth and knitted brow, yet not unbenignant. Farther on is a Young Faun with the infant Bacchus--a different conception altogether from the fine Munich statue, but delicious for humor and geniality. Then there is the Aristides--more real and speaking and easy in attitude even than the Sophocles at Rome. Opposite is a lovely Antinous, in no mythological character, but in simple, melancholy beauty.³

Her admiration of the great Temple of Neptune at Paestum was rapturous:

It has all the requisites to make a building impressive. First, form. What perfect satisfaction and repose for the eye in the calm repetition of those columns--in the proportions of height and length, of front and sides: the right thing is found--it is not being sought after in uneasy labor of detail or exaggeration. Next, color. It is built of travertine, like the other two temples

¹Ibid., p. 344.

²Ibid., p. 345.

³Ibid., pp. 354-355.

[unnamed, but also at Paestum]; but while they have remained, for the most part, a cold gray, this Temple of Neptune has a rich, warm, pinkish brown, that seems to glow and deepen under one's eyes. Lastly, position. It stands on the rich plain, covered with long grass and flowers, in sight of the sea on one hand, and the sublime mountains on the other.¹

She was very much interested in the Cathedral, or Duomo, of Florence, with "Brunelleschi's mighty dome" and "Giotto's incomparable campanile, beautiful as a jewel."² She was delighted with the exterior of the Duomo when the "wretched" unfinished façade was quite hidden from view:

The soaring pinnacles over the doors are exquisite: so are the forms of the windows in the great semi-circle of the apsis: and on the side where Giotto's campanile is placed, especially, the white marble has taken on so rich and deep a yellow that the black bands cease to be felt as a fault. The entire view on this side, closed in by Giotto's tower, with its delicate pinkish marble, its delicate Gothic windows with twisted columns, and its tall lightness carrying the eye upward, in contrast with the mighty breadth of the dome, is a thing not to be easily forgotten.³

The interior seemed to her comparatively poor and bare, with the exception of one great beauty: the colored lanceolate windows. She admired a piece of sculpture behind the high altar, the last Michelangelo worked on, intended for his own tomb and left unfinished: "It represents Joseph of Arimathea holding the body of Jesus, with Mary, his mother, on one side, and an apparently angelic form on the other. Joseph is a striking and real figure, with a hood over the head."⁴

¹Ibid., p. 358.

²Ibid., p. 360.

³Ibid., p. 361.

⁴Ibid.

Of the other churches in Florence she liked Santa Maria Novella, a remarkable exception, with its elaborate facing of black and white marble, to the general exterior ugliness of Florentine churches. The "splendid" chapel in San Lorenzo, containing the tombs of the Medici, seemed to her "ugly and heavy with all its precious marbles; and the world-famous statues of Michelangelo on the tombs in another chapel--the Notte, the Giorno, and the Crepuscolo--remained as affected and exaggerated in the original as in copies and casts."¹ She loved San Michele, "with its statues in niches, and its elaborate Gothic windows, designed by the genius of Orcagna":

The great wonder of the interior is the shrine of white marble made to receive the miracle-working image which first caused the consecration of this mundane building, originally a corn-market. Surely this shrine is the most wonderful of all Orcagna's productions: for the beauty of the reliefs he deserves to be placed along with Nicolo Pisano, and for the exquisite Gothic design of the whole he is a compeer of Giotto.²

For beautiful external architecture in Florence, she felt that one must look to the old palaces of the fifteenth century. The Palazzo Strozzi, built by Cronaca, she believed one of the finest, "perfect in its massiveness, with its iron cressets and rings, as if it had been built only last year."³ She spoke of the Pitti Palace as "a wonderful union of

¹Ibid., p. 362.

²Ibid., p. 364.

³Ibid., p. 361.

cyclopean massiveness with stately regularity."¹ Next to the Pitti Palace she placed the Palazzo Riccardi, for its size and splendor. She considered the Palazzo Vecchio grander still, in another style, "with its unique cortile, where the pillars are embossed with arabesque and floral tracery, making a contrast in elaborate ornament with the large simplicity of the exterior building."²

Orcagna's Loggia dei Lanzi, with its somber, dirty color, disappointed her at first glance; but its beauty, despite its statuary, grew upon her with longer contemplation:

The pillars and groins are very graceful and chaste in ornamentation. Among the statues that are placed under it there is not one I could admire, unless it were the dead body of Ajax with the Greek soldier supporting it. Cellini's Perseus is fantastic.³

At Bologna she spent most of her time visiting the churches. San Petronio impressed her with "the melancholy distinction of an exquisite Gothic façade, which is carried up only a little way above the arches of the doorways: the sculptures on these arches are of wonderful beauty."⁴ She described the interior as "lofty, airy, simply Gothic."⁵ At the Church of San Domenico she was chiefly interested in "the tomb of the said saint by the ever-to-be-honored Nicolo Pisano":

On this tomb stands a lovely angel by Machael Angelo. It is small in size, holding a small candlestick, and is a work of his youth: it shows clearly enough how the

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 362.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 370

⁵Ibid.

feeling for grace and beauty was strong in him, only not strong enough¹ to wrestle with his love of the grandiose and powerful.

The first place she sought in Venice was the Piazza di San Marco where the Palace of the Doges is located:

I am glad to find Ruskin calling the Palace of the Doges one of the two most perfect buildings in the world: its only defects, to my feeling, are the feebleness or triviality of the frieze or cornice, and the want of length in the Gothic windows with which the upper wall is pierced. This spot is a focus of architectural wonders: but the palace is the crown of them all.²

The interior of St. Mark's Cathedral, in Venice, she felt to be full of interest, but not of beauty: ". . . it is dark and heavy, and ill-suited to the Catholic worship, for the massive piers that obstruct the view everywhere shut out the sight of ceremony and procession."³

In sculpture, as in painting, George Eliot loved vigorous, lifelike figures. She criticized even the greatest of Italian sculptors, Michelangelo, for his exaggeration of the real. In architecture she looked for unity of construction, grace, and inspiring beauty, particularly favoring the Gothic style.⁴ She apparently believed that truly great architecture should be prophetically symbolic, "telling that human life must somehow and sometime shape itself into accord with that pure, aspiring beauty."⁵

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 372.

³Ibid., p. 373.

⁴Many of the Victorians favored the Gothic style of architecture; they felt its expressiveness and saw in its forms an outlet for the feeling of their own age. John Ruskin was largely responsible for the popularity of the style called Victorian Gothic in England in the later nineteenth century and for the attitude that architecture should present symbols effective through association and sentimental identification. See David M. Robb and J. J. Garrison, Art in the Western World (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), pp. 280-282.

⁵Romola, pp. 947-948.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THE AESTHETICS OF GEORGE ELIOT

"Art," the mature George Eliot insisted, "is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our control with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot."¹ It was on this credo that she built her theory of artistic morality or aesthetic teaching.

She always indignantly repudiated the doctrine that aesthetic and ethical excellence have no relationship. Here let her own words suffice to define the affinity which she perceived between the two and to point out her keen differentiation between didacticism and aesthetic teaching arising from genius:

On its theoretic and perceptive side, morality touches science; on its emotional side, art. Now, the products of art are great in proportion as they result from that immediate prompting of innate power which we call Genius, and not from labored obedience to a theory or rule; and the presence of genius or innate prompting is directly opposed to the perpetual consciousness of a rule. The action of the faculty is imperious, and excludes the reflection why it should act. In the same way, in proportion as morality is emotional, i.e., has affinity with art, it will exhibit itself in direct, sympathetic feeling and action, and not as the recognition of a rule. Love does not say, 'I ought to love,'--it loves. Pity does not say, 'It is right to be pitiful,'--it pities. Justice does not say, 'I am bound to be just,'--it feels justly. It is only where moral emotion is comparatively

¹"The Natural History of German Life," Essays, p. 161.

weak that the contemplation of a rule or theory habitually mingles with its action; and in accordance with this, we think experience, both in literature and life, has shown that the minds which are preeminently didactic--which insist on a lesson, and despise everything that will not convey a moral--are deficient in sympathetic emotion.¹

My function is that of the aesthetic, 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.²

Briefly and simply, George Eliot's ethical measure of an art work was its power to arouse sympathy for noble qualities. "It is for art to present images of a lovelier order than the actual, gently winning the affections, and so determining the taste."³ By "lovelier order than the actual" she did not, however, mean exaggeration; her first criterion of art was truthfulness. She believed that the moral quality of the artist himself determines the morality of the art he produces:

Don't you agree with me that much superfluous stuff is written on all sides about purpose in art? A nasty mind makes nasty art, whether for art or any other sake; and a meagre mind will bring forth what is meagre. And some effect in determining other minds there must be, according to the degree of nobleness or meanness in the selection made by the artist's soul.⁴

Whether or not art really does exert any ethical influence is, of course, a debatable question; the answer depends on the character of its contemplator. Great literature, music, painting, sculpture, or architecture always aroused in George

¹Ibid., p. 55, "Worldliness and Other-Worldliness."

²Cross, op. cit., p. 672, George Eliot to Mrs. Peter Taylor, July 18, 1878.

³"Authorship," Essays, p. 233.

⁴Cross, op. cit., p. 601, George Eliot to Edward Burne-Jones, March 20, 1873.

Eliot a feeling that she must somehow make her life more beautiful. She could never divorce art from life.

Because she believed that art should enlarge men's sympathies and render them "better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring human creatures,"¹ she loved the essentially human, the real in art. In fiction her interest always centered on the characters; in painting and sculpture, on the expressions and attitudes of the figures; if they were unrealistic, she was unmoved. Of poetry she demanded genuine, human emotion. Commonplace characters, figures, and images, invested with a universal significance and beauty, she loved best. The artist should not tickle our fancies with the exaggerated, the exotic, the sentimentalized, the peculiar; he should enlarge our understanding of life as it is and arouse our sympathies for people who exist. "The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies"²

In this world there are so many of these common coarse people, who have no picturesque sentimental wretchedness! It is so needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy, and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes. Therefore, let Art always remind us of them; therefore, let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things--men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them.³

¹Ibid., p. 306, George Eliot to Charles Bray, July 5, 1859.

²"The Natural History of German Life," Essays, p. 160.

³Adam Bede, pp. 131-132.

When Scott takes us into Luckie Mucklebackit's cottage, or tells the story of "The Two Drovers;" when Wordsworth sings to us the reverie of 'Poor Susan;' when Kingsley shows us Alton Locke gazing yearningly over the gate which leads from the highway into the first wood he ever saw; when Hornung paints a group of chimney-sweepers,--more is done towards linking the higher classes with the lower, towards obliterating the vulgarity of exclusiveness, than by hundreds of sermons and philosophical dissertations.¹

"All her life she was a seeker after truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," one admiring critic says of George Eliot.² She demanded it not only in her life but also in art, her own and that of others. Though her use of the term "artistic truth" frequently denotes realism, in the essay "False Testimonials," in a fine discussion of imagination, she gives to it a broader significance. Deploring "florid inaccuracy or helpless exaggeration" in art, "which is really something commoner than the correct simplicity often depreciated as prosaic,"³ she resents the confusion of imagination with facile, extravagant fabrication:

High imagination is often assigned or claimed as if it were a ready activity in fabricating extravagances such as are presented by fevered dreams, or as if its possessors were in that state of inability to give credible testimony which would warrant their exclusion from the class of acceptable witnesses in a court of justice; so that a creative genius might fairly be subjected to the disability which some laws have stamped on dicers, slaves, and other classes whose position was held perverting to their sense of social responsibility.⁴

¹"The Natural History of German Life," Essays, pp. 160-161.

²Paterson, op. cit., p. 13.

³Essays, p. 365.

⁴Ibid., p. 363.

Fabrication, or illusion, is the very opposite of fine imagination, "which is always based on a keen vision, a keen consciousness of what is, and carries the store of definite knowledge as material for the construction of its inward visions."¹ For example she names Dante, "who is at once the most precise and homely in his reproduction of actual objects, and the most soaringly at large in his imaginative combinations."² But even if imagination is to be identified with illusion, there is "the same sort of difference between the imperial wealth of illusion which is informed by industrious observation, and the trumpery stage-property illusion which depends on the ill-defined impressions gathered by capricious inclination, as there is between a good and a bad picture of the Last Judgment":

In both these the subject is a combination never actually witnessed, and in the good picture the general combination may be of surpassing boldness; but on examination it is seen that the separate elements have been closely studied from real objects. And even where we find the charm of ideal elevation with wrong drawing and fantastic color, the charm is dependent on the selective sensibility of the painter to certain real delicacies of form which confer the expression he longed to render; for apart from this basis of an effect perceived in common, there could be no conveyance of aesthetic meaning by the painter to the beholder. In this sense it is as true to say of Fra Angelico's Coronation of the Virgin, that it has a strain of reality, as to say so of a portrait by Rembrandt, which also has its strain of ideal elevation to Rembrandt's virile selective sensibility.³

¹Ibid., pp. 364-365.

²Ibid., p. 365.

³Ibid.

She stresses her point with reiteration:

. . . . powerful imagination is not false outward vision, but intense inward representation, and a creative energy constantly fed by susceptibility to the veriest minutiae of experience, which it reproduces in new and fresh wholes,--not the habitual confusion of provable fact with the fictions of fancy and transient inclination, but a breadth of incidental fact, with far-reaching memories and stored residues of passion, bringing into new light the less obvious relations of human existence. The illusion to which it is liable is not that of habitually taking duck-ponds for lilled pools, but of being more or less transiently and in varying degrees so absorbed in ideal vision as to lose the consciousness of surrounding objects or occurrences; and when that rapt condition is past, the sane genius discriminates clearly between what has been given in this parenthetical state of excitement, and what he has known, and may count on, in the ordinary world of experience.

Certainly the seer may happen to be rather mad; his powers may have been used up, like Don Quixote's in their visionary or theoretic constructions, so that the reports of commonsense fail to affect him, or the continuous strain of excitement may have robbed his mind of its elasticity. It is hard for our frail mortality to carry the burden of greatness with steady gait and full alacrity of perception. But he is the strongest seer who can support the stress of creative energy, and yet keep that sanity of expectation which consists in distinguishing, as Dante does, between the cose che son vere outside the individual mind, and the non falsi errori¹, which are the revelations of true imaginative power.

George Eliot has been criticized as having had the soul of the moralist rather than that of the artist. Some of her comments are perhaps weighted with an insistence on the morality of art; but one must remember that many great Victorians were obsessed with the problem of the relationship of the ethical and the aesthetic, and she was of her age. Certainly to insist that the beautiful be synonymous with the good and the true, to insist that art inspire man with

¹Ibid., pp. 365-367.

the desire for a better life is not to deny aesthetic delight. Purely aesthetic pleasure is evident in many of George Eliot's comments upon the arts. Always sensitive to beauty, she was capable of being moved by the "rushing mighty wind" of an artist's inspiration whose theories and views of morality she violently opposed.

Always she exalted the life of the artist. When Gwendolen in Daniel Deronda tells Klesmer that she supposes she will become an artist if she can do nothing better, he angrily replies:

'Do nothing better?' said Klesmer, a little fired. 'No, my dear Miss Harleth, you could do nothing better--neither man nor woman could do anything better--if you could do what was best or good of its kind. I am not decrying the life of the true artist. I am exalting it. I say, it is out of the reach of any but choice organizations--natures framed to love perfection and to labor for it; ready, like all true lovers, to endure, to wait, to say, I am not yet worthy, but she--Art, my mistress--is worthy, and I will live to merit her. An honorable life? Yes. But the honor comes from the inward vocation and hard-won achievement: there is no honor in donning the life as a livery.'

It is satisfying to realize, as one quickly does in reading George Eliot's novels, that the chief principles by which she judged the art of others--those of morality, universality, truth, and inspiration--most definitely guided her own literary genius. What she once remarked about a volume of Mendelssohn's letters may be said about her own writings: they give one a sense of communion with an "eminently pure, refined nature" coupled with "the most rigorous conscience in art."²

¹p. 461.

²Cross, op. cit., p. 550, George Eliot to Mrs. Robert Lytton, July 8, 1870.

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