

REVIEW FORUM

The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot, edited by George Levine. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xviii+248. ISBN 0-521-66473-X. \$47.95 (paper).

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The ubiquitous “Companion” as reference book or directory has long lost its interpersonal connections with the primary meaning of companion as an associate, if not a friend. But George Levine seems almost to restore this meaning in his introductory essay to this collection of accounts of George Eliot’s life and work. He argues powerfully for an understanding of Eliot’s realism as a kind of writing where moral and formal necessities create each other. Struggle becomes part of the novels’ form. The commitment to ordinariness, to the “contest between individual desire and moral responsibility,” brings with it the multiplot novel where people’s lives are shaped by forces of which they are unaware. Reciprocally, realism’s own “potentialities for falsification,” and “its own limitations”(recognised by Eliot as misrepresentation and conventions concealed as experience), are bound up with “the crisis of limits” in the individual life and Eliot’s refusal to idealise.

Levine is imaginatively drawn (in my view rightly) to the complexity of Eliot’s insights into the pulls of desire and responsibility, and the paradoxical “conservative-reforming impulse” of the work. Thus he refuses, as do all the essays here, a “carceral” reading of her novels as the disciplinary work of creating the liberal subject – the subject who gives up desire for a compensatory illusion of choice that forgets the restraints of the disciplinary system. This is now a quite conventional view popular since the Foucauldian readings by D.A. Miller of the nineteenth-century novel. Instead Levine has made the decision that his editorship will provide the grounds for reading the George Eliot archive in the shape of the nineteenth-century knowledges that inform her work, from anthropology to positivism. He has provided a series of essays unparalleled for their impressively succinct and sophisticated documentation of Eliot’s life, work and thought, from politics to gender, from religion to science. This *Companion* really will be a companion to those readers, for whom it is intended, across the range of beginning student and mature researcher.

Interestingly, to judge not only from the index but from the emphases of these essays *Daniel Deronda* seems to be pulling ahead of *Middlemarch* as the novel that attracts most discussion. And perhaps this indicates a tension in the volume that I

want to explore a little further. To go back to Levine's eloquent essay for a moment, which vividly realises the agonistic passions of Eliot's "ordinary" protagonists, there are occasions when the emphatic appearance of "must" is noticeable. Maggie "must learn true resignation [. . .] and can only triumph in the death that follows her attempt to rescue her brother." Gwendolen "must in the end make the accommodation [. . .] must learn." Daniel "must unlearn [. . .] must learn [. . .] must act." What are all these "musts" doing and who is behind them? George Eliot? the characters? the text? the texts George Eliot read? the reader? whose consciousness? whose unconscious? For me these "musts" dramatise an interpretative problem that all the essays raise no matter how fine and subtle they are (and their outstanding calibre is beyond question). I will call it the "Yes . . . but" problem.

This is a problem that may be intrinsic to thinking through George Eliot's oeuvre. It emerges from an attempt to balance out the conservative and innovative tendencies of the novels and the life. The conflict between tradition and innovation, or passion and duty – there are many forms of this antithesis – is resolved by demonstrating that if there is conservatism in one place, there is rebellion in another, or transgression in one place is redressed by the most painful orthodoxy in another. Sometimes the proof emerges from the fiction, sometimes from the life. These studies do not confuse fiction and fact but fold each carefully into the other. This meticulously balanced reading means that the essays are as cautious and fair about the opposing pulls of her work as George Eliot might have wished them to be, but, in honourably avoiding both Foucauldian and deconstructive readings they tend to restate the problems through the strategies of the realist novel, creating a George Eliot who is constantly blocking rebellion with restraint, restraint with rebellion, and so on. "Yes . . . but." The repressed returns sometimes as transgression, sometimes as restraint, but one always keeps the other in check.

Rosemarie Bodenheimer initiates the collection with a perceptive, deft and brilliant account of the life, charted round George Eliot's successive changes of name, from Mary Anne Evans to Mary Ann Cross. Formative were the repercussions of the first attempt at rebellion, the refusal to attend church with her father. Learning the costs of this episode of several months duration helped to create "the uneasy blend of radical social critique and conservatism that shapes her fiction" In a subtle reading of the early novels, which examines the regressive wishes and ideological sleights of hand that naturalise class and privilege, Josephine McDonagh reformulates this distinction as that between nostalgic conformist and social progressive, retrieving Eliot for a reading that recognises her understanding of social transformation into "modern forms of social organisation" via Ruskin's deprecating account of her as a cockney novelist. Alexander Welsh's way out of Eliot's resistance to "the very spirit of reform" and the implicitly feeble meliorism of the later novels is to concentrate, in an impressive reading, on the modernity of *Daniel Deronda*. Suzy Anger's rich account of Eliot and philosophy demonstrates her intellectual roots in empiricist theories of knowledge. Feuerbach, Comte, Spinoza

and the theories of language George Eliot read receive wonderfully exact explication. Anger's "Yes . . . but" comes from her understanding that despite the potential philosophical openness in Eliot's thought, she is "consistently on the side of self-sacrifice." In another illuminating discussion of science Diana Postlethwaite locates oppositions between "natural history" and structure through Farebrother and Lydgate, pursuing the opposing themes of random or open-ended observation and system through Lewes, Darwin and Comte. Her resolution of empiricism and emotion, where in *Middlemarch* thought becomes feeling and feeling reflection "wrought back to the solidity of sense," each redressing the other, is another strategy of retrieval. Both Nancy Henry and Kate Flint write virtuosically of, respectively, Eliot's politics and her reading of gender. For the first time there is a cool, exact analysis of her phases of thought on these troubled themes. These are wonderfully clarifying essays. Henry points to the satiric critique of *Theophrastus Such* to redress the conservatism of Felix Holt's anti-democratic address to working men. Flint acknowledges her gender conservatism while demonstrating that her "masculine" positioning and voice actually enabled, paradoxically, a feminist project to emerge in her work. It empowered and made convincing compensatory correctives to dominant male culture with alternative stories and hidden possibilities for women, particularly in *Daniel Deronda*.

An exception to these complex, hydraulic accounts of Eliot, where one flow counteracts another, is Barry Qualls's account of Eliot and religion. He sees her as a mythographer, a fable-maker, a poetic typologist. Her rationalism is not so much balanced by poetics as absorbed into a new form of writing. He does not seem to be worried by an economics of rebellion and conservatism.

Whenever I work on Eliot I shall turn to this *Companion* and so will everybody else. But I am not sure that the *Companion's* Eliot does not require a little iconoclasm at the same time as an even greater sense of her astonishing achievement as a writer of lyric myths and fables. For a moment it is worth experimenting with upsetting the balanced economies so thoughtfully offered here. For instance, I am not sure that I feel at all comfortable with the "Silly Novels" essay. Sometimes Eliot's principled refusal of alliance with feminists seems cowardly, even mean, when one considers how difficult it was to be a feminist in nineteenth-century British culture. (She still wanted the privileges of being a kind of man.) On the other hand, turning to a dreamwork novel such as *The Mill on the Floss*, an aspect of the novel recognised by Josephine McDonagh, is to read a text that provokes gasps as well as tears. The novel begins and ends with two myths of representation, one archaic, one modern. The flushed tints of the "organic" landscape painting of the first chapter, with which the narrator is explicitly complicit, give way to the monotones of the modern photograph when, at the end of the novel, Maggie navigates through exactly the same landscape in the flood. The topographical signs hidden beneath the water like the semiotics of a developing photograph make the past strange, even though she tracks her way through the associative connections,

those deeply hallowed “threads of connection,” to which she longs to be true. The depth of Eliot’s insight here into social and psychic alienation not fully understood by Maggie, worked through mythologising the dead tones of photographic technology, is remarkable. But there is one thing she lets Maggie understand. In her letter to him, Maggie tells Stephen frankly that to give up sexual love is to give up something glorious. The frankness is startling when we remember the caution with which Eliot’s sexual politics are associated. George Eliot could take extraordinary risks. The tragedy of the novel is not Maggie’s renunciation and death: it is that in her *society* it is the only thing possible.

It may be that a mythic reading of George Eliot’s writings creates only yet another opposition between realism and fable, without resolving criticism’s need to think in terms of oppositions. It is possible that the increasingly rich understanding of *Daniel Deronda* in this volume may be a response to the constraints of the antithetical thinking to which the writers have found themselves attached. Here fable meets social critique, gender readings resonate with explorations of race, psychoanalytical subtlety meets a poetics of culture, myth meets modernity. Whatever these readings, Levine’s *Companion* will be indispensable to George Eliot enthusiasts.

A RE-ENACTMENT

Tim Dolin

In Cynthia Ozick’s story, “Puttermesser Paired” (1997), out-of-work feminist lawyer Ruth Puttermesser (whose roller-coaster fortunes are the subject of two previous stories) is fixated on George Eliot’s life and work, and, “at the unsatisfying age of fifty-plus” (Ozick 105), longs to meet her own soul-mate with brains – her own George Henry Lewes. At length she does: Rupert Rabeeno, a painter who executes what he calls “Re-enactments of the Masters,” exact reproductions of works in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed to be sold on postcards. Together they begin reading Eliot’s work aloud (as the Leweses themselves had done). Then, at Rupert’s suggestion, they decide to read through all the biographies:

Rupert wanted to see how they matched up, whether someone writing about George Eliot in, say, the nineteen-eighties was going to turn up the same George Eliot as someone writing in the nineteen-forties, or in the eighteen-nineties. It was like reënacting a landscape a hundred years later, he said. The same grove of trees under the same sky, but different. What altered it was whoever was looking at it. (134)