

G. H. Lewes and "The Lady Novelists"

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Writing about issues outside the work supposedly under discussion was a common feature of nineteenth-century reviewing, so it is not surprising that this practice was applied to the advent of women writers. Little real thought was given to questions about the nature of women writers or of women's literature, and most comments simply reflect prevailing views on the nature of women buttressed by a certain amount of mysogyny. A rather splendid example of the nonsense that passed for critical comment in regard to women is evident in *Blackwood's* review of Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, which began with this passage:

Women ought to be good biographers. They have a talent for personal discourse and familiar narrative, although too frequently it degenerates into social nuisance.¹

Unfortunately this has happened in the book in question—and Mrs Gaskell appears as "a gossip and gad-about" to the affronted male reviewer.

G. H. Lewes was one of the few prominent nineteenth-century critics who did address himself seriously to discussing the place of women in literature. He dealt with the question in general terms and also through reviews of prominent women writers, especially Jane Austen, George Sand, Charlotte Bronte and Mrs Gaskell. Lewes's ideas on women novelists are particularly interesting in the light of his relationship with George Eliot and the immense care he devoted to her work. But what emerges from comparing his attitude towards George Eliot with his comments on other women writers is the enormous difference between his often patronizing attitude to them and his almost reverential attitude towards her. For while Lewes admired a number of women novelists, especially George Sand and Jane Austen, he never for a moment lost sight of their sex, and hence of what he considered to be their limitations. He insisted that women were entitled to "citizenship in the republic of letters", but ultimately he assigned them a very lowly rank.

In his best known article on the subject of women writers, "The Lady Novelists", Lewes discussed the question "what does

1 "Curren Bell", *Blackwood's Magazine*, XIV (1857), p. 77.

the literature of women really mean?". He began by providing an apparently broad scope for it by insisting on the close correspondence between literature and personal experience, and thus by pointing out that it was only through women writers that women's experience could gain literary expression:

While it is impossible for men to express life otherwise than as they know it—and they can only know it profoundly according to their own experience—the advent of female literature promises woman's view of life, woman's experience: in other words a new element.²

But this did not mean that women should presume to deal with any of the wide variety of experiences which they might have as individuals. Lewes went on to point out that the place of women in literature corresponded to their place in society—and, as if this was not sufficiently well known already, he explained that their domain was the home. He also made it clear that the only area of literature to which women should aspire was fiction.

Of all departments of literature, Fiction is the one to which, by nature and by circumstances, women are best adapted . . . The domestic experience which forms the bulk of woman's knowledge finds an appropriate form in novels; while the very nature of Fiction calls for the predominance of Sentiment which we have already attributed to the female mind.³

Lewes did accept the general proposition that there may be exceptional women in whose minds sentiment did not predominate and who had intellectual interests, but he did not accept that they should write about them. Like J. S. Mill, he believed that the whole field of intellectual endeavour had already been appropriated by men and any woman who attempted to enter it was "imitating men rather than developing her own capabilities".⁴ Thus the notion of female literature as expressing the experiences of women comes very soon to be a dogmatic statement, and one which confines women writers entirely to treatment of the domestic sphere.

The confinement of women to fiction is in itself something which severely limits their status since Lewes held the neo-classical idea that poetry and poetic drama were "higher" literary forms than was the novel. In accordance with this position, he believed also that really great literature had to deal with noble

2 "The Lady Novelists", *Westminster Review*, II (1852), pp. 129–40.

3 *Ibid.*

4 "The Subjection of Women" (1869) in J. S. Mill and H. Taylor, *Essays on Sex Equality* ed. A. Rossi, University of Chicago 1970, p. 204.

characters who were of high rank and involved in situations and conflicts far removed from the relatively sordid reality of everyday life. The importance of this belief is made most evident in relation to Jane Austen, whom Lewes regarded as the greatest woman novelist, with the inevitable exception of George Eliot. But while Jane Austen, by virtue of her superb dramatic presentation of character, belonged to the great dramatists, she did not choose the highest range of character, and hence limited her own standing. Her dramas were "of a homely common quality". They required genius, but "not the highest kind of genius".⁵ It was inevitable, of course, that once women were confined to dealing with domestic emotional experiences, their work would always be of this "homely common" type and they would never rank with the foremost male writers.

Lewes shared the fairly widespread belief that while literature was a vocation in men, it was something that women turned to in order to assuage some sorrow, or to make up for some loss or inadequacy in their personal life. The "happy wife and mother" have no need for this kind of activity. In some cases such women were driven to engage in literary activity by "some hereditary organic tendency stronger even than the domestic".⁶ But far from realizing that this "tendency" in some women invalidates the whole notion of women turning to literature solely in order to solace sorrow, Lewes manages to describe it in such a way as to make these women, along with the others who write, appear both marginal and abnormal.

Once women are being seen in such a clear and separate category, it is only to be expected that some general characteristics will be adduced for them. But here, as elsewhere, Lewes has difficulty in making the characteristics fit all women writers. Sentiment and Observation were the two qualities that he singled out to distinguish women writers—but in fact not all women writers exhibited them. Miss Edgeworth and Miss Burney, for example, both excelled at observation, but the one was not interested in sentiment, and the other failed dismally whenever she tried to incorporate it in her novels. Jane Austen was notable for neither of these qualities. In fact the only quality that Lewes pointed to consistently when dealing with women novelists was their womanliness. Jane Austen excelled in this department. Her novels

5 "The Novels of Jane Austen", *Blackwood's Magazine*, LXXXVI (1859), p. 102.

6 "The Lady Novelists", *loc. cit.*, pp. 133-4.

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contain "the special quality of womanliness in tone and point of view: they are novels written by a woman, an Englishwoman, a gentlewoman."⁷ Mrs Gaskell's novels show a woman's delicate hand throughout. Despite her attempt to assume the identity of a man, George Sand's writings constantly exhibit the "features of a woman". The only novelist who did not fall easily into this category was Charlotte Bronte, and as we will see, Lewes chastised her severely for her lack of womanliness, while insisting at the same time that whatever merit and charm her works possessed was of a very feminine kind.

Lewes played an important role in regard to Charlotte Bronte, being one of the first critics to review *Jane Eyre* favourably, and entering into a correspondence with her on the strength of his high opinion of her first published novel. In his letters, Lewes apparently provided more detailed and specific criticisms than he included in his review, as well as discussing general literary questions and making suggestions in regard to further reading and writing. In some ways his connection with Charlotte Bronte can be seen as a dress rehearsal for the role he was to play in regard to George Eliot—although one of the things that distinguishes it from the later episode was his complete insensitivity to Charlotte Bronte's desire to remain anonymous and be read as a novelist rather than as a female novelist.

From the first appearance of *Jane Eyre*, speculation about the sex and identity of Currer Bell was carried on in the reviews of that novel. Lewes was quite certain that Currer Bell was a woman, and one who was new to the world of literature. He insisted in his review that Jane was a "creation" such as only a woman could have drawn, and similarly that Rochester was "the portrait of a man drawn by a woman". His belief that the work embodied the "actual suffering and experience" of its author reinforced his view that it was written by a woman.⁸

Charlotte Bronte was pleased with Lewes's review and with his letter which preceded it. Having checked his credentials from Smith Williams, her publisher's reader, and having read Lewes's novel *Ranthorpe* she entered into a correspondence in which many questions were dealt with, but in which she refused to reveal her identity. She found Lewes's ideas interesting and sometimes stimulating—but she was always aware of what she saw as his limitations. Lewes's influence on her and on her work

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 135–9.

8 "Recent Novels", *Fraser's Magazine*, XXXVI (1847), pp. 670–1.

has been recognized, but little attention has been paid to her very clear recognition of the incompatibility between her romantic approach and Lewes's demand that all literature be based on actual experience or to her comments concerning Lewes's inadequacies as a critic and as a writer.⁹

Although she was gratified by his review of *Jane Eyre*, she pointed out to Smith Williams that Lewes, despite his sagacity, was "not always right", and that he often attributed to her experience things which derived from her imagination. She never accepted Lewes's strictly limited idea of the role of imagination, nor could she accept that his taste, especially his high opinion of Jane Austen, was something she should try to emulate. Her opinion of Lewes's mind and of his writing was spelled out most clearly in the letter she wrote Williams after having read *Ranthorpe*. She accepted that Lewes was a sincere, energetic, talented and knowledgeable writer, but insisted that he lacked "the refining charm of delicacy, the elevating one of imagination". She formulated succinctly what she would say to Lewes, were it wise and becoming to say exactly what one thought:

You have a sound clear judgement as far as it goes, but I conceive it to be limited; your standard of talent is high, but I cannot acknowledge it to be the highest; you are deserving of all attention when you lay down the law on principles, but you are to be resisted when you dogmatise on feelings.¹⁰

She thought more highly of *Rose, Blanche and Violet* than of *Ranthorpe*, but here too she commented on the abrasive nature of Lewes's writings, on the fact that although she accepted him as a just thinker and sagacious observer, his writings always provoked her as she read, and that rather than quietly receiving his doctrines, she felt the need constantly to combat them.

It was in the course of her correspondence with Lewes that Charlotte Bronte made her strongest protest against the assumption that she was a woman writer and that she should write accordingly.

9 For a discussion of the correspondence between Lewes and Bronte see Franklin Gary, "Charlotte Bronte and George Henry Lewes", *PMLA*, II (1936), pp. 518-41. Unfortunately only Bronte's letters survive, but while including a number of these, Gary refrains from commenting on her criticisms of Lewes.

10 Letter of 1 May 1848, in *The Brontes, Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence* eds. T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington (1932), II, pp. 208-9.

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I wish you did not think me a woman. I wish all reviewers believed 'Currer Bell' to be a man; they would be more just to him. You will, I know, keep measuring me by some standard of what you deem becoming to my sex; where I am not what you consider graceful you will condemn me . . . Come what will, I cannot, when I write, think always of myself and of what is elegant and charming in femininity; it is not on those terms, or with such ideas, I ever took pen in hand: and if it is only on such terms my writing will be tolerated, I shall pass away from the public and trouble it no more.¹¹

Lewes did not reply directly to this letter—but his review of *Shirley* elicited from Charlotte Bronte a one-line response: "I can be on my guard against my enemies, but God deliver me from my friends."¹²

So far was Lewes from understanding Charlotte Bronte's outcry against being discussed as a woman writer that he devoted the first four pages of his review to a discussion of the position of women in society and in literature—before announcing that regardless of what anyone else thought, it was a fact that Currer Bell was a woman—and the daughter of a clergyman. Lewes had discovered her identity and could not resist publishing this journalistic coup. Charlotte Bronte was both grieved and angry because,

after I had said earnestly that I wished critics would judge me as an *author*, not as a woman, you so roughly—I even thought so cruelly—handled the question of sex.¹³

And indeed Lewes's handling of the question is rough and even crude. He exhibits all the worst Victorian confusion of thought on the subject of women and the characteristic Victorian inability to make a descriptive statement about women—without an addendum about their charm. One can see how statements like the following might rouse Charlotte Bronte's anger without satisfying her comprehension:

The grand function of woman, it must always be recollected, is and ever must be, MATERNITY: and this we regard not only as her distinctive characteristic, and most endearing charm, but as a high and holy office—the prolific source, not only of the best affections and virtues of which our nature is capable, but also of the wisest thoughtfulness, and most useful habits of observation, by which that nature can be elevated and adorned.¹⁴

This serves as Lewes's explanation of the reason why women can-

11 Letter of 1 November 1849 in *The Brontes*, III, p. 31.

12 Letter dated just January, 1850 in *The Brontes*, III, p. 67.

13 Letter of 19 January 1850 in *The Brontes*, III, p. 68.

14 "Shirley", *Edinburgh Review*, XCI (1850), p. 155.

not devote themselves to intellectual pursuits in the way that men can. Similarly it explains why they cannot assume high positions in affairs of state. What, after all,

should we do with a leader of the opposition in the seventh month of her pregnancy? or a general-in-chief who at the beginning of a campaign was 'doing as well as could be expected'? or a chief justice with twins?

Lewes is "entirely disposed to admit" that women are substantially equal to men in the aggregate worth of their endowments, but insists that "equality does not imply identity", and that the mental and bodily construction of women is such as to prevent their rivalling men in most intellectual and public spheres. This extended digression is brought to a close by the comment that women have established their greatest claim to fame in literature—and that Currer Bell is a remarkable female author.

After this lengthy discussion, Lewes began his very unfavourable review of *Shirley*. Many of his comments were entirely justified. He pointed to the lack of unity in the novel, to the poor characterization and to the lack of development in plot. His neo-classical taste was offended by the element of caricature and idiosyncrasy in the three curates, by the lack of nobility in either of the heroes and by the "wilful improbability" with which the novel abounded. He was critical also of the clumsy contrivances used to enable us to find out about Robert Moore's proposal to Shirley and about Louis' long standing love for her. But over and above these specific criticisms, he took Charlotte Bronte severely to task for writing an "unwomanly" book. This complaint of unwomanliness is now levelled also against *Jane Eyre*. Lewes reiterated the comment he had made earlier about the originality and fascination of *Jane Eyre*, but added a new criticism: "a more masculine book, in the sense of vigour, was never written. Indeed that vigour amounts almost to coarseness—and is certainly the very antipode to lady-like." His evaluation of this quality is made clear in the next sentence: "this same over-masculine vigour is even more prominent in *Shirley*, and does not increase the pleasantness of the book" (p. 158). Currer Bell is chastised as if she were a tomboy misbehaving in public: she must learn to control her "tumultuous energies" and to "sacrifice her Yorkshire roughness to the demands of good taste" (p. 160). Almost every comment Lewes made had some allusion to Currer Bell as a woman writer. The scene describing the attack on the Mill contains details which betray "a feminine and

inexperienced hand". This whole episode points to Currer Bell's "poverty of invention", and we remember that women novelists excel at Sentiment and Observation, while men excel at Humour and Invention. Currer Bell has characteristically feminine weaknesses and strengths. The book contains a number of pleasing womanly touches. The portrayal of even the most unsatisfactory characters contain "little touches which at once betray . . . the exquisite workmanship of a woman's lighter pencil" (p. 163).

Shirley is certainly not Charlotte Brontë's best novel. It is also the one in which she provided her most extended outcry against the situation of women and the limits imposed on them. The fate of "old maids", the situation of girls whose home life is unsatisfying, but who are unable to leave home in search of work, the way in which women are treated and evaluated by men are all issues dealt with at some length. Lewes did not take issue with Charlotte Brontë directly on these points—although his general literary views were such as to make him regard the expression of unorthodox ideas as a demerit in a literary work. But he did express strong disapproval of the way in which characters in the novel, especially Shirley and Caroline, expressed or embodied Charlotte Brontë's feminist ideas. Thus Lewes says nothing about the nature of the relationship between Shirley and her guardian, but insists that in her attempt to free herself from him Shirley "uses language which passes all permission" (p. 161), and that this episode detracts from the pleasantness of the book. But one cannot help feeling that Lewes was reacting to Charlotte Brontë's feminism, because of the way in which he italicized terms like "lady" and "feminine" and because of the way he resorted to sarcasm in dealing with some of the issues she raised. In the course of the novel Charlotte Brontë had commented on the way male writers failed in their delineations of female characters because of the misapprehensions under which men labour in regard to women. Lewes's response was:

possibly so. But we suspect that female artists are by no means exempt from mistakes quite as egregious when THEY delineate their sex; may we venture to say, that Mrs Pryor and Caroline Helstone are as untrue to the universal laws of our common nature as if they had been drawn by the clumsy hand of a male. (p. 164)

But Lewes had earlier commented himself on the fact that so outstanding and lifelike a female character as Jane Eyre could only have been created by a woman. Moreover when he went on to detail his criticisms of Caroline Helstone he said little about

our "common nature" and much about how Caroline's behaviour did not accord "with anything we have ever seen, heard, or read, about the sex". He concluded the review by applying to Charlotte Bronte a comment made earlier by Schiller about Madame de Staël:

This person wants everything that is graceful in a woman; and nevertheless, the faults of her book are altogether womanly faults. She steps out of her sex—without elevating herself above it. (p. 173)

It is extraordinary, in the light of Charlotte Bronte's letter which preceded this review, that Lewes did not realize how galling all of this would be to her. But he was never able to understand her reaction to his review. After her brief response, she wrote him a long letter explaining that she had no objections to the severity of his criticism, indeed she thought he had given her quite as much praise—or even more—than she deserved. What she objected to was the way in which he had dealt with the question of sex. She added a comment about him which was perceptive, but scarcely likely to be acceptable to him:

I will not bear malice against you . . . I know your nature is not a bad or unkind one, though you would often jar terribly on some feelings with whose recoil and quiver you could not possibly sympathise. I imagine you are both enthusiastic and implacable, as you are at once sagacious and careless; you know much and discover much, but you are in such a hurry to tell it all you never give yourself time to think how your recklessness may affect others; and, what is more, if you knew how it did affect them, you would not much care.¹⁵

Lewes could not accept the frankness of the criticism in this letter, and when he subsequently sent it to Mrs Gaskell for inclusion in her *Life of Charlotte Bronte* he commented on her "unreasonable anger" at a review which was "dictated by real admiration and friendship" and on the cavalier tone of her letter to him.¹⁶

Yet while Lewes did not understand Charlotte Bronte's position, the combined effect of her letters and her published works did make him reconsider his position as a critic, and the merits of his excessive criticism of her. When *Villette* was published in 1853, Lewes wrote an immediate review of it for the *Leader* and then a lengthier one, combining it with Mrs Gaskell's *Ruth*, for the *Westminster Review*. In the review in the *Leader*, Lewes referred to the fact that he had previously subjected Charlotte

15 Letter of 19 January 1850 in *The Brontes*, III, p. 68.

16 Mrs Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Bronte*, Everyman's Library (1973 reprint), p. 293.

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Bronte's work to minute and cavilling criticism and that he now thought such an approach on his part had been mistaken.¹⁷ But it is interesting to note that having made this concession, Lewes withdrew from providing any criticism of Charlotte Bronte. In regard to *Villette*, he contented himself with saying that it was not a novel in the ordinary sense of the word, but rather an unforgettable book, filled with interesting matter for discourse and containing great passages of prose poetry. But he provided no explanation as to why it was not a novel, nor did he give any kind of detailed analysis of the work.

Charlotte Bronte clearly remained outside the framework Lewes expected of women novelists. It is worth looking at his ideas on another woman who rejected this framework, George Sand, before turning to his ideas on Jane Austen and Mrs Gaskell who fitted in with it.

In the mid nineteenth century, George Sand was much discussed and much criticized in England. The criticism was based primarily on her personal life, but was extended also to her novels which were thought of as immoral. Lewes was an enthusiastic reader of George Sand and he wrote a number of articles defending her against charges of immorality and pointing to the merits of her work. He insisted that her personal life was not the concern of anyone else, and that it had no place in discussions of her novels. At the same time he was frankly admiring of her range of passion and of experience and he felt that it provided her with invaluable material for literature.¹⁸ The crucial moral question for Lewes was whether or not George Sand included in her novels characters or situations which were immoral or ideas on marriage and society generally which were not accepted by the bulk of her readers. Lewes was in a rather difficult situation here and he did not have a very clear-cut solution to it. As has been said, his general views on literature were such as to make him believe that unusual or atypical incidents and ideas ought not to be included in artistic works. Art, in his view, dealt with "the broad principles of human nature, not with idiosyncracies".¹⁹ When George Sand included in her novels those of her views on "religious, moral, and political subjects which are at variance with those generally received", she "in-

17 "Currer Bell's New Novel", *The Leader*, 2 February 1853, p. 163.

18 "Balzac and George Sand", *Foreign Quarterly Review*, XXXIII (1844), p. 267.

19 "Shirley", *loc. cit.*, p. 160.

jured" her works.²⁰ But Lewes was very ambivalent about George Sand's social and political ideas, some of which strongly appealed to him, and he was not in fact prepared to insist that they should be excluded from her literary works. Rather he argued that she was very sincere in her own beliefs—and that she must be free to use her literary works to discuss them.

She was bound to utter what she thought the truth, and to utter it in her own way. It is absurd to contend that novels are not the place for such ideas. The artist must use his art as his medium—as the journalist would use the journal, as the politician would use the pamphlet. (pp. 266–7)

But while she was bound to do this, she was nonetheless making her works less acceptable to him as a critic. Moreover having made this claim for her, Lewes changed tack somewhat and argued that the ideas in most of her novels were generally acceptable and that she did not attack accepted institutions and values in them. In her personal life she was strongly opposed to marriage—but in her novels she attacked only some glaring abuses of marriage and not the whole institution. She did not, as Balzac did, treat adultery lightly and she certainly was not an advocate of free love. Moreover, contrary to popular belief, she held "very sane, sober" opinions on the question of the emancipation of women—and Lewes quoted at length from the *Lettres à Marcie* in which George Sand had put forward views on the different functions of men and women which were not dissimilar from his own (pp. 267–71, 274–5).

There were still problems: George Sand was independent herself and tended sometimes to make her female characters pursue "a line of conduct laid down for themselves, rather than that laid down for them by society", and this, in Lewes's view, could be regarded as immoral in tendency, as could some of her scenes of passion which "border too closely on reality" (pp. 266, 271). Lewes did not end up with a clear position on George Sand and her ideas. Indeed he sometimes tried to negate her ideas completely by arguing that they were neither original nor intelligible—and that they were only the echo of the philosophy of some man. But what does emerge from his articles on George Sand is that he took her very seriously as a writer, and as an artist. He thought some of her writing was the most beautiful in the French language and that her better works were deserving of very considerable care and attention. She was a writer—whom

20 "Balzac and George Sand", *loc. cit.*, p. 266.

he considered in relation to both male and female writers.²¹ By moving outside the conventional female sphere, she had asserted her right to more than the limited praise he offered to female writers and Lewes certainly recognized this right.

Charlotte Bronte, as we have seen, was chastised by Lewes for challenging his ideas on the nature and sphere of women writers. George Sand was not directly chastised—she was after all an established writer long before Lewes had ever written a critical article. But it is worth noting the kind of respect Lewes accorded those women who did pose a challenge as compared with the way he treated Jane Austen and Mrs Gaskell, the women writers who remained easily within the framework he set up. Acceptance of his framework enabled him to trivialize the works he discussed and to become unbearably sentimental over authoresses.

Lewes reviewed *Ruth* alongside *Villette* and the contrast in his approach to the two books and to their writers is most interesting. Mrs Gaskell, apart from a brief attempt at being anonymous, had no objection to being known as a woman writer. She did not share Charlotte Bronte's views about the intolerable nature of the restrictions imposed on women writers. She described these views in her biography of Charlotte Bronte, but made them appear very much as the personal and even idiosyncratic beliefs of her friend.²² For her own part, Mrs Gaskell objected to the laws pertaining to the property of married women in England—laws which meant that any earnings from her novels were the property of her husband and not her own—and she signed petitions seeking to have these laws changed, but she made few other complaints about the position and status of women in her society.²³ When she discussed the question of seduction—and then betrayal and desertion in *Ruth*, along with the sufferings of young girls in this situation, she was writing a plea for tolerance and compassion rather than any kind of attack on the double standard of sexual morality. She was a concerned and motherly woman, writing on behalf of girls who had no mothers to protect them. Charlotte Bronte was distressed by the melodramatic end-

21 He discussed George Sand amongst the other "Lady Novelists", but this article on Balzac and George Sand is the only detailed comparison of a male with a female writer that he ever published.

22 *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, pp. 283-4.

23 See Aina Rubenius, "The Woman Question in Mrs Gaskell's *Life and Works*", *Essays and Studies on English Language and Literature*, V (1950).

ing of the story, and unable to see why Ruth had to die in order to gain earthly forgiveness and acceptance. But Lewes, who praised the novel very warmly, maintained that "the concluding scenes are so simple and unexaggerated, that they haunt the reader like a reality."²⁴

Lewes's ideas on *Ruth* are particularly interesting in view of his own situation in 1852 when it was published, and his general view on sexual morality. At this time, his personal life was somewhat irregular, and he claimed that he had very little sympathy with a number of prevailing beliefs and ideas on morality. His wife was having a protracted affair with another man and Lewes not only accepted this, but recognized the children from the union as his own. This situation caused him considerable distress, although he too had much sexual freedom. His experiences were such as to make him impatient with much that was written on the subject of illicit love. He maintained that he could not accept terms like "guilt", "crime" and "sin" as part of the language in which such subjects were discussed. He was also unable to accept some assumptions about the fate of illegitimate children, including Mrs Gaskell's statement that the illegitimate child "must go forth branded into the world, with his hand against every man's, and every man's against him" (p. 485).

But having made these comments in the review itself, Lewes then discussed the novel in terms which are extraordinary because of their profoundly moral and even religious tone. He saw Mrs Gaskell as performing a necessary moral function through this novel and one that only a woman could perform. *Ruth* is a novel that satisfies "the highest moral sense". It is a sermon of the wisest kind, although its teaching is unostentatious. Lewes's interpretation of the moral and the reasons he gives for his admiration show an outlook which is considerably more conservative than that by which he was living himself. He commends the way Mrs Gaskell dealt with this question because in her book there was

no confusing of right with wrong; no tampering with perilous sympathies, no attempt to make a new line of action such as the world's morality would refuse to warrant, but a clear insight into the nature of temptation, and wise words of exhortation to those who have fallen—showing them, that no matter what shame may have gathered around them, they may still redeem themselves if they will only rise and do honestly the work that still lies before them to be done, and that in every position, however dark or degraded, there is always a certain right course which if followed, will lead them once more into the light. (p. 476)

24 "*Ruth and Villette*", *Westminster Review*, n.s. III (1853), p. 483.

The fact that in *Ruth's* case, it was necessary to risk—and sacrifice—her life in order to gain the light does not bother Lewes. We see here why it was so important for him to insist that despite the tenor of her personal life, George Sand did not advocate anything which was questionable from the point of view of accepted morality in her novels. Moreover it is rapidly made clear that despite Lewes's own personal rejection of terms like "sin" in conjunction with sexual matters, his aesthetic and literary beliefs meant that as long as this was the way in which illicit sexual relationships were seen by the majority of society, then these were the appropriate terms for dealing with it in literature.

From the very start of the review, Mrs Gaskell's womanliness is an important issue. She is dealing with a delicate subject and "she approaches it like a woman, a truly delicate minded woman; with a delicacy that is strong in truth, not influenced by conventions" (p. 476). What is most interesting is Lewes's suggestion that Mrs Gaskell has done more than just write a novel, however moving: she has, as it were, extended the powers women have to bring about the redemption and rehabilitation of other women into fiction. Again and again in the course of the review, Lewes stated his belief that "it is only women who can help women, and it is only women who can really raise those who have fallen; not indeed by countenancing them, but by appealing to their self-respect." Lewes argued that one of the morals of the story is that women can only be rehabilitated by other women,

who, pure and noble in their own lives, can speak with authority, and tell them that in this world no action is final; and that, to set the seal of despair and reprobation upon an individual during any one point in his career, is to blot out the inner life by which we live. (p. 476)

But this is not really the moral pointed to by Mrs Gaskell in her novel. In her story, it is a clergyman who first offers Ruth support, and then he and his sister who care for her and her son and help her to build a new life. In fact Lewes has incorporated Mrs Gaskell herself into the moral he draws from the novel. It is she, rather than one of her female characters, who is the woman offering other women hope and encouragement, by the very act of writing this novel. His language is less obscure than that of Ruskin, but he is expressing here the belief later put forward by Ruskin in *Sesame and Lilies*, for secure women to rescue the flowers that have fallen by the wayside.

In his discussion of *Ruth*, Lewes was carried away by the beautiful moral put forward by Mrs Gaskell. He commended the

realism of her characterization and of her plot and referred to it as a "beautiful novel". But while he praises Mrs Gaskell warmly and unequivocally, he feels for her art nothing of the respect, even awe, which is evident in his comments on *Villette*. The difference between the comments on the beauty and the morality of *Ruth* and his general comments on *Villette* are very striking. There is nothing gentle, womanly or diminutive about *Villette*, rather,

It is a work of astonishing power and passion. From its pages there issues an influence of truth as healthful as a mountain breeze. Contempt of conventions in all things, in style, in thought, even in the art of story-telling, here visibly springs from the independent originality of a strong mind nurtured in solitude. (p. 485)

It appears to be the case that challenging Lewes's ideas on the nature of women writers is the precondition for gaining his respect. The importance of doing this is made even more clear in regard to Jane Austen. Lewes regarded Jane Austen as one of the greatest of novelists. But his comments on her involve a continuous belittling of her talent and of her novels. As we have seen, he regarded one of the pre-eminent charms of Jane Austen's novels as the fact that they were filled with "womanliness in tone and point of view". The implications of this are extensive. We have already seen Lewes's insistence that the smallness of scope of Jane Austen's novels limits their claim to greatness—although the scope of her novels is precisely that which he himself regarded as the appropriate one for women novelists. But it is interesting to see what other things Lewes finds particularly commendable about Jane Austen. First comes the loveliness of her female characters (Elizabeth Bennet is, of all fictional characters, the one he would most like to marry), the thoroughness of her knowledge of the human heart; the extent of her sympathy with everyday life and with ordinary people. The thoroughness of her understanding of human character is vital:

Her conversations would be tiresome but for this; and her personages, the fellows to whom may be met in the streets [*sic*] or drank tea with at half an hour's notice, would excite no interest; but in Miss Austen's hands we see into their hearts and hopes, their motives, their struggles within themselves; and a sympathy is induced which, if extended to every day life and the world at large, would make the reader a more amiable person; and we must think it that reader's own fault who does not close her pages with more charity in his heart towards unpretending, if prosing worth.²⁵

25 "The Novels of Jane Austen", *Blackwood's Magazine*, LXXXVI (1859), p. 103.

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This comment, made by the Archbishop of Dublin, and quoted by Lewes in support of his own views, indicates a most curious approach to Jane Austen. Lewes, like many of his contemporaries, failed to recognize anything like irony in the writings of Jane Austen.²⁶ Hence he did not see that she had any ideas, or made any comments on her characters and situations. Indeed, as far as he was concerned, her comments were "commonplace, and even prosing". Having commended the niceness and the womanliness of Jane Austen, Lewes was quite unable to see anything more critical or incisive in her work. His praise of her art boils down to an admiration for her construction and for her characterization, especially for her dramatic presentation of character. But in so far as she exemplifies the virtues of a woman novelist it is not possible for him to see in her anything much beyond what he has seen in Mrs Gaskell. Jane Austen's style, unlike Charlotte Bronte's or George Sand's, had nothing to commend it:

Her pages have no sudden illuminations. There are neither epigrams nor aphorisms, neither subtle analyses nor eloquent descriptions. She is without grace or felicity of expression; she has neither fervid nor philosophic comment. Her charm lies solely in the art of representing life and character, and that is exquisite.²⁷

Jane Austen emerges as a writer like Mrs Gaskell, more impressive, but without the latter's social conscience.

In his article on Jane Austen, the last he wrote on women novelists, Lewes withdrew all his earlier praise of Charlotte Bronte. He had, before writing this article, re-read *Jane Eyre* and found that it had lost all charm for him. He insisted that Charlotte Bronte's work contained characteristics, and sketches, rather than fully drawn characters. He totally rejected her view of Jane Austen and was scathing about her insistence on the imperious nature of the imagination; some people might, he said, choose to have this faculty stimulated at the expense of all others, but there was no place for this kind of preference in art. Jane Austen, with all her limitations, was being set up as the highest peak a female writer had reached. But Lewes also made his only published reference to George Eliot in this article. The reference involved a comparison of her with Jane Austen and also provided an opportunity for Lewes to quote the passage from "Amos Bar-

26 See B. C. Southam (ed.), *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968.

27 "The Novels of Jane Austen", *loc. cit.*, p. 109.

ton" dealing with George Eliot's ideas on the range of emotion and experience to be found in commonplace characters and commonplace situations. Mr George Eliot seemed to Lewes

inferior to Miss Austen in the art of telling a story, and generally in what we have called the 'economy of art'; but equal in truthfulness and dramatic ventriloquism, and humour, and greatly superior in culture, reach of mind, and depth of emotional sensibility. (p. 104)

What emerges from this comment is that George Eliot exhibits both male and female characteristics as a writer. To Jane Austen's merits were added the range of intellectual interests and of experience which Lewes had previously denied to women as well as the "depth of emotional sensibility" which, despite Jane Austen's lack of it, other women possessed. Lewes was moving right away from any kind of sympathy with the romanticism of Charlotte Bronte to the espousal of a kind of realism evident in both George Eliot and Jane Austen. At the same time he was, even while praising Jane Austen, limiting drastically the claims of the greatest of earlier female novelists. In effect, he seems to have been clearing the ground for the establishment of a new and totally distinctive woman writer—but one whom he did not in any way require to work within the impossible confines he had set up as appropriate for other "lady novelists".²⁸

George Eliot did not apparently find Lewes's approach objectionable. In her article, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists", she compared the complete lack of critical attention given to the silly lady novelists with that which was given to Charlotte Bronte and Mrs Gaskell. These and other serious women writers were, rightly she insisted, treated in quite as cavalier a fashion as male writers. It is more than a little ironic that one who was soon to become so intolerably sensitive to criticism of her own work should commend the harsh treatment of other women writers. But it is certainly no more ironic than it is to see Lewes who had argued that the writing of fiction was the counterpart to a woman's domestic experience taking over the domestic organization to free George Eliot for the writing of her novels.

28 Cf. Patricia Thomson, *George Sand and the Victorians* 1977, pp. 152-60.