



BLACKWELL CRITICAL BIOGRAPHIES

The Life of George Eliot

NANCY HENRY

WILEY Blackwell

The Life of George Eliot

A Critical Biography

Nancy Henry



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For Graham Handley

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List of Abbreviations

<i>AB</i>	<i>Adam Bede</i>
Ashton, <i>GE</i>	Rosemary Ashton, <i>George Eliot: A Life</i>
Ashton, <i>GHL</i>	Rosemary Ashton, <i>G. H. Lewes: A Life</i>
Bodenheimer, <i>Real Life</i>	Rosemarie Bodenheimer, <i>The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans</i>
Collins, <i>Interviews</i>	K. K. Collins, <i>George Eliot: Interviews and Recollections</i>
Cross, <i>Life</i>	John Walter Cross, <i>George Eliot's Life</i> , 3 vols.
<i>DD</i>	<i>Daniel Deronda</i>
<i>FH</i>	<i>Felix Holt</i>
<i>GEL</i>	<i>The George Eliot Letters</i> , vols. 1–9, ed. Gordon S. Haight
<i>GEJ</i>	<i>The Journals of George Eliot</i> , eds. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston
<i>GHLJ</i>	George Henry Lewes Journals
<i>GHLL</i>	<i>Letters of George Henry Lewes</i>
Haight, <i>Biography</i>	Gordon S. Haight, <i>George Eliot: A Biography</i>
<i>Impressions</i>	<i>Impressions of Theophrastus Such</i>
<i>The Mill</i>	<i>The Mill on the Floss</i>
<i>Poetry</i>	<i>The Complete Shorter Poetry of George Eliot</i> , 2 vols., eds. A. G. van den Broek and William Baker.
<i>Scenes</i>	<i>Scenes of Clerical Life</i>
<i>SM</i>	<i>Silas Marner</i>

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The History of a Writer

George Eliot and Biographies

She believed that her husband was one of those men whose memoirs should be written when they died.

(*Middlemarch* 326; ch. 36)

Toward the end of her life, George Eliot wrote: “The best history of a writer is contained in his writings – these are his chief actions.” In the same 1879 letter to Mrs Thomas Adolphus Trollope, she further and more emphatically declared that biographies “generally are a disease of English literature” (GEL 7:230). These assertions were prompted by the death in 1878 of her companion of twenty-four years, George Henry Lewes, himself a writer of biographies including *The Life and Works of Goethe* (1855). She declined to write her autobiography, or to cooperate with would-be biographers of herself or Lewes. She did not want details of her personal life to affect evaluations of her writing or to overshadow her own and Lewes’s posthumous reputations. The care of those reputations was centrally important to her in a way that is consistent with questions about history and individual lives that her novels raise. All of her novels implicitly ask how the past influences the present, and how the present, as she put it in the Finale to *Middlemarch* (1871–2), “prepares” the future: “we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas . . .” (785; Finale). But George Eliot was not an insignificant person. She was someone whose memoirs would be written. As far as she could, she wanted to prepare the conditions of how she would be remembered after her death.

Eliot’s preoccupation with the writings that survive the writer is evident from her first published fiction, “Poetry and Prose from the Notebook of an Eccentric” (1846–7).

Borrowing a convention used by Sir Walter Scott and others, she introduces a narrator who has decided to publish the notebooks of his recently deceased friend Macarthy. In her last book, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), her narrator Theophrastus introduces his character sketches by imagining that he will leave his manuscripts to a friend, whom he asks "to use his judgment in insuring me against posthumous mistake" (13; ch. 1). She had originally thought of titling that work "Characters and Characteristics by Theophrastus Such, edited by George Eliot" (GEL 7:119). In between Macarthy and Theophrastus, Latimer in her short story, "The Lifted Veil" (1859), writes the story of his life as he approaches what he preternaturally knows will be the moment of his death. Edward Casaubon in *Middlemarch* asks his wife Dorothea to labor on with his "Key to All Mythologies," and Eliot herself completed and published the last two volumes of Lewes's *Problems of Life and Mind* (1879) after his death. With the combination of hindsight and foresight characteristic of her fictional narrators, she was deeply interested in the "history of a writer" – whether looking back to the origins of the writing, as in her journal entry, "How I Came to Write Fiction" (1857) – or looking forward to the inevitability of posterity's judgment in an age when biographies were popular enough to merit being called a disease of literature. Her condemnation of biographies seems to have been a reflex of her anxiety about the representation of her own history as it would be written and live on – along with her published writings – after her death. As it happened (or as she designed), her widower John Walter Cross was the first to "edit" her papers, including her letters and journals, to produce his *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals* (1885).

I will be drawing on Eliot's own views about telling life stories because her novels, essays, poetry, and letters provide insights into the possibilities for constructing such narratives with a self-consciousness associated with later, post-modernist assumptions about the fluid boundaries between fact and fiction. Her insights are particularly relevant for a biography that seeks to explore connections between the author's life and writings. In a section on "Story-Telling" in her posthumously published "Leaves from a Notebook" (1884) she writes:

The only stories life presents to us in an orderly way are those of our autobiography, or the career of our companions from our childhood upwards, or perhaps of our own children. But it is a great art to make a connected strictly relevant narrative of such careers as we can recount from the beginning. (*Poetry* 2:203)

She made this statement about the art of ordering narratives in the 1870s when she was experimenting with narrative structure – first in *Middlemarch* and then more radically in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) – and it has implications for the biographer as well as the novelist. She chose to narrate the "careers" of her characters in *Daniel Deronda* out of sequence, questioning the notion that beginnings are inevitable, and

intentionally altering the established bildungsroman formula epitomized in the first chapter of *David Copperfield* (1849–50), “I am Born.” In contrast, the first chapter of *Daniel Deronda* begins with an epigraph (written by Eliot): “Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning.” The story proceeds *in medias res* before flashing back to illustrative anecdotes from the childhoods of its major characters, Daniel Deronda and Gwendolen Harleth. The form of story-telling in her last novel initiated a transformation in narrative that would be adopted and developed by Henry James, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and others.

A biography may seem to have a natural beginning – the birth of its subject – but how we choose to select and relate the sequence of events that follows, especially with the benefit of hindsight and an abundance of factual material pre-ordered by past biographies, must be determined by narrative interest. In her novel of Renaissance Florence, *Romola* (1862–3), the narrator observes, “as in the tree that bears a myriad of blossoms, each single bud with its fruit is dependent on the primary circulation of the sap, so the fortunes of Tito and Romola were dependent on certain grand political and social conditions which made an epoch in the history of Italy” (21; ch. 2). The goal of biography is to provide the most accurate account possible of the author’s history, including not only a chronology of what she wrote but the circumstances and events that are contexts for those writings.

Biographical facts about the author may not be discoverable in fiction, but the author’s “character” is there to be read. Eliot was intensely aware of the sense in which “the history of a writer is contained in his writings.” In committing his words to paper and publishing them, the writer reveals himself and his life in intimate if not always ordered ways. This is why her most self-conscious reflections on the relationship between life and writing in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* take the form of chapters entitled “Looking Inward,” and more temporally, “Looking Backward.” Theophrastus takes the example of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) when observing that “half our impressions of his character come not from what he means to convey, but from what he unconsciously enables us to discern” (5; ch. 1), and applying this observation to himself. The biographer of a writer must look backward to the historical record and inward to the character or persona of the author that is “contained,” as Eliot said, in her writings. Through such a reconstruction of the author using the historical record and the writings, we have at least as good a chance of knowing Mary Anne Evans/Marian Lewes/George Eliot/Mary Ann Cross today as those who knew her only in childhood, or those who knew her only as admiring visitors at her Sunday afternoons at the Priory.¹

It is tempting to take Eliot’s criticism of biographies as a “disease” of English literature – made after she had become one of England’s most famous novelists and therefore the object of biographical speculation and invasive inquiries – as her definitive opinion on the subject. Her views about biographies, however, were not always so negative. In 1839, after reading J. G. Lockhart’s *Memoirs of the Life of*

Sir Walter Scott (1837–8), she commented to her friend Maria Lewis: “All biography is interesting and instructive” (GEL 1:24). Her first major publication was the translation of a work that is an interrogation of biographical sources, David Strauss’s *Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1846). She was devoted to the truth exposed in the biblical scholar’s account, but she lamented the harsh light of historical inquiry that seemed to spoil the poetry in the life of Jesus. The story of a life (miracles and all) is more satisfying than the dissection of that story. At the beginning of her authorial career, Eliot defended Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) against the objections of her publisher, John Blackwood, who referred to it disdainfully as “this bookmaking out of the remains of the dead. . .” (GEL 2:323). She told Blackwood that while some might find what she called “the life of Currer Bell” in bad taste and “making money out of the dead,” she and Lewes found it “admirable – cried over it – and felt the better for it” (GEL 2:330).

Some Victorians viewed biography as “making money out of the dead” because biographies were so prevalent and popular, read even by those who did not wish to become the subject of biographies themselves. Eliot specified that it was “the system of *contemporary* biography” that she disliked and that had “perverted” the form. As far as she was concerned, “my works and the order in which they appeared is what the part of the public which cares about me may most usefully know” (GEL 6:67–8). In his *Eminent Victorians* (1918), credited with initiating modern biography, Lytton Strachey referred disparagingly to the Victorian form: “Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead – who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design” (6).² But if the two-volume memorial seemed a static, moribund object by the time Strachey was writing, it is important to remember that debates about the nature of biography, and (in the case of authors’ biographies) its relationship to literary criticism, were very much alive in the Victorian period.³ In 1841, when Lewes was contemplating a biography of Percy Bysshe Shelley and had published an article on the poet in the *Westminster Review*, J. S. Mill wrote to him with criticism of the piece that is prescient of future debates up to the present:

I think you should have begun by determining whether you were writing for those who required a *vindication* of Shelley or for those who wanted a *criticism* of his poems or for those who wanted a biographic Carlylian analysis of him as a *man*. I doubt if it is possible to combine all these things but I am sure at all events that the unity necessary in an essay of any kind as a work of art requires at least that one of these should be the predominant purpose & the others only incidental to it. (qtd. in Kitchel 28)

Mill expresses the now-familiar view that the work of the critic and the biographer are separate and cannot be successfully combined. Thomas Carlyle’s biographies defined the great man theory of history rather than the kind of literary criticism that

Lewes wanted to put into his biographies. It was a view that Lewes, who never wrote the biography of Shelley, nonetheless ignored in his *Life and Works of Goethe*.

A critical biography of George Eliot in the twenty-first century has the opportunity to reflect on the contradictory attitudes toward biography from the nineteenth century to the present, using them to ask broad historical and critical questions. In particular, what is the relationship between an author's lived experience and the imaginative literature that she produced? This question has been asked and answered in many ways over the past two centuries as literary biography emerged simultaneously with realist novels, which often took their form from the shape of fictional characters' lives, so that the two genres seem to influence and inform each other. The problem of which, if any, historical context is helpful – even essential – to interpreting works of literature has divided later critics and authors, who seem as conflicted as their Victorian predecessors about the importance of biography in relation to literary criticism.⁴

Twentieth-century trends in literary criticism tended to deny the relevance of the author's life to the understanding of literary texts. New Criticism was a dominant interpretive methodology, separating and privileging the Arnoldian Victorian strain of criticism of “the thing itself” from the more popular strain of Victorian biography. It further derived from Modernist assumptions articulated by T. S. Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) and honed by professional critics within the academy into the 1960s. William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954) and Cleanth Brooks in *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947) explicitly disavowed connections between the author's life and his writing while seeking to judge the quality of a work according to a set of formal criteria.⁵

This impulse to appreciation was challenged and virtually eliminated by various forms of politicized literary studies in the 1970s to 1980s.⁶ In its various manifestations in the 1970s and 1980s, post-structuralist theory also reacted against New Criticism's elevation of the work of art to argue that all writing constituted a “discourse,” which must be read as part of a broader “intertext” – a nightmare scenario for the New Critics. Yet, post-structuralism shared with New Criticism the isolation of the text from its biographical contexts. The polemical positions of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault perpetuated the anti-biographical bias that had been ingrained by New Criticism.⁷ Biographies of authors or literary lives continued to be popular, but biographical criticism did not have a place in the theoretical approaches to literary texts that dominated the 1980s and 1990s. The exclusion of biography, first from formalism and then from densely theoretical discourse analysis, perpetuated an opposition that Eliot identified when she wrote to the American historian George Bancroft in 1874 about her objection to the “system of *contemporary* biography,” complaining that “the mass of the public will read any quantity of trivial details about a writer with whose works they are very imperfectly, if at all, acquainted” (GEL 6:67).