

# George Eliot

VOICE OF A CENTURY

*A Biography*

Frederick R. Karl



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# Acknowledgments

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As the first biographer of George Eliot to have access to the full range of research materials concerning her life and work, I find my debts are considerable. Above all, I want to express my gratitude to the memory of that most dauntless of Eliot scholars, Gordon Haight. In preparing the first authoritative biography of Eliot (1968) and in editing the monumental nine volumes of her letters, Professor Haight established Eliot studies on a sound basis; all future biographers, critics, and scholars are indebted to him. Without his sleuthing, his chronologies, his meticulous notes to the letters, my own biography instead of taking four years would have needed at least double that time. Starting back in the 1930s, Haight was even more heroic than we might grant; for as a later generation of English writers had emerged to displace the high Victorians, Eliot studies were more or less stagnant. Since Haight's study, the sole other biographical effort that discusses Eliot's life and work with both close attention to detail and a critical voice is Ruby Redinger's *George Eliot: The Emergent Self* (1975). Richly textured and trenchantly argued, Professor Redinger's book stops short of being a full biography; but more than Haight planned to do, she integrated the work with the life. I am indebted to her study.

In the case of my primary research, I wish to express gratitude to the major holders of Eliot materials: the Manuscript Room of the British Museum/Library, which holds all the manuscripts of Eliot's long fiction, except *Scenes of Clerical Life*. The keepers and curators there showed me the utmost courtesy and provided materials with marked efficiency; and the same is true of the Morgan Library in New York, which holds the manuscript of *Clerical Life*. I am also indebted to the curators of the Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas; the Beinecke Library at Yale University; the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library; the Princeton University Library; and the Pforzheimer. At these collections, one finds—besides Eliot letters—her notebooks, the letters of John

Chapman, the papers of Charles Bray and Charles Hennell, George Henry Lewes's diary, and proofsheets of Eliot's novels. The Bodleian Library at Oxford University was also helpful, as was the National Portrait Gallery in London with its collection of portraits of Eliot and her contemporaries. The Folger Library in Washington, D.C., warrants mention for its help, and also several offices, museums, and libraries in England: the Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery, for the Bray and Hennell Papers, and Robert Evans's diary; the Warwick Record Office, for the Newdigate Papers, including letters of Robert Evans and Isaac Evans; and the Castle Howard Archives. One of my most profound debts is to the George Eliot Fellowship, Mrs. Kathleen Adams, the Honorable Secretary; and to Mrs. Kathleen Porter, Vice-Chairman, who personally took me and my wife around to all the important Eliot sites in Warwickshire and saved me much time and difficulty. In several ways, their help has proven invaluable.

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# Introduction

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In speaking of George Eliot as the “voice of the century” in England, that is, the spirit and mind of the nineteenth century, we are making great claims for her as a writer and as a person. But perhaps more than anyone else in the period—others like Dickens, Carlyle, Arnold, and possibly Tennyson—she seems most representative, most emblematic of the ambiguities, the anguish, and divisiveness of the Victorian era. Born before railroads, when the great migrations to the cities were just beginning, when England could still look to Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley, born into a post-Napoleonic age when stability seemed assured, she lived into an era which made the early part of the century seem like another geological age. That she was an independent woman is intrinsic to her representative nature; for as a woman she became part of the spirit of change and progress for both sexes, however reluctantly she at times played that role. Her life and fiction, together, speak of the entire century. She assimilated thoroughly its humanistic and scientific ideas, she understood more than any other figure what was happening to ordinary people, and she found ways to express in her own person and her work the density, texture, and aspirations of the period. Perhaps only Dickens and Carlyle join her here, but their genius was eccentric, often wild and extreme, whereas hers was in the main balanced, stable, and cognizant of human limitations. Without losing sight of man’s (and woman’s) aberrations, she was, all in all, reasonable.

Yet in her most characteristic pose, caught by the painter Sir Frederic Burton in 1865, when Eliot was turning forty-six, we sense how complicated that balance was. Despite the elegance and even self-confidence of her pose, she was a deeply divided woman, a deeply divided thinker, and, as part of this, an artist desperately trying to hold together many disparate and even contradictory forces. What helps to make Eliot the voice of the century is that recognition, projected from herself, of the uncertainties, the destabilization, the wobbling

center in Victorian life. Added to this was her realization of the ambiguous, even precarious, role of women. In those areas which later became the prerogative of feminists, she was caught between the daring of her private life and her difficulty in putting that daring into public policy, or public statements. But far more than even this, she was deeply divided as a person, full of contradictory impulses. Profoundly religious when growing up, she moved toward a rationalism and secularity that never completely replaced her earlier Calvinism. Her humanitarian impulses, her avowed humanism, her earnestness as to individual duty and discipline were all calculated responses to a religious or spiritual life she could no longer experience; and yet the substitutes proved unsatisfactory. She wanted a Christianity with her own kind of Christ; she wanted not a church but an individual who was his or her own church; she found in reason, logic, and intelligence a replacement for a God she could no longer believe in or accept. And yet none of this was easily resolved, as we will observe in her best fiction. Like most great artists, she left a good deal open to interpretation.

Beyond these complexities which preoccupied her, the divisions in her emergence as woman and writer were profoundly psychological. What made her perhaps the first psychological novelist in English was her awareness of feelings of fear, dread, doubt, and anxiety in ordinary situations. Unlike Dickens, she wanted to discover how the individual can define himself or herself in a community or society and yet still honor what belongs to the single self. She recognized the need for authority, something she carried over from her early worship of her father, and yet she saw how authority could have crushed her at the very time she felt her powers building. She knew from her own feelings and from her extensive reading that she had to develop into herself, and yet she also knew that her duty was to obey her father and his commandments. She suffered from terrible fears of frustration and anxiety, and she felt that despite her early vision of something great, she might be hobbled from achieving anything. She sensed some mission, but she was not certain what it was until well into her thirties. Her overriding intellect gave her tools which, until she was past her twenties, her immediate life gave her no opportunity of utilizing. She felt bottled up intellectually and emotionally; a sexual life, furthermore, seemed distant, although to what extent that was a major consideration for her we cannot be sure.

She recognized the major divisions of the age because she recognized them in herself, as did Carlyle, whose depressions, ill health, and sexual anxieties all helped nourish a view of nineteenth-century England as oppressive, spiritually starved, and, inevitably, destructive. Eliot did not go so far ideologically, but she knew from her early twenties that she was different; and she knew, further, that her differences might not ever find an outlet. The splits and schisms within herself over her abilities, her course of action, and her fears of being frustrated created in her an almost lifelong sequence of illnesses, headaches, and annoying ailments which until the end had no clear physical etiology. And in this vein of alternating hard work and malaise, she had perhaps the thinnest skin of any major nineteenth-century figure. Unable to handle criticism, she made sure her companion, George Henry Lewes, screened all comments on her work, and she

conditioned her publisher, Blackwood's, to suppress anything that might not prove entirely positive.

Although her fiction attempted to show stability, reason, and responsibility, she was, personally, a series of contradictions. Her fears and anxieties, her worries that her books were useless and her efforts in vain, her inability to feel fully in control of her life, her frequent statements about illness and death all enervated her in her most professionally successful years. Yet in those ways, also, she was the voice of the century. For between her life and her work, she caught the ironies and paradoxes of that time: that compromise the Victorians made to achieve balance, alongside those destabilizing elements undermining that very world of appearances. Eliot asked the great questions of herself and crafted the literary means to respond to them. In an era of enormous and radical change, she posed, what occurs to the individual voice? What are one's responsibilities as well as one's rights? In a period of shifting moralities and dubious ethics, how can one hold on to a sense of community? In a century which lavished rewards on those who could exploit it, how does one preserve a moral and ethical sense? In a time of great cheapening of values and of urban life, how does one maintain the standards needed for a self-respecting life? In such a period, what worth can be placed on mind, on spirit, and on values when it is impossible to believe any longer in a divine being, when evolutionary ideas seem to have subverted an entire country? With God essentially gone or dead—that is, with God ceasing practically to function for a sizable part of the population—what happens to morals, community, individual action? Is a functioning society even possible now that community has been so undermined?

As an older contemporary of Nietzsche—a very different writer in a different culture—Eliot asked many of the same questions he posed; and while her answers are wildly distinct from his, she became the voice of England in the nineteenth century as much as he expressed the inner, potentially explosive voice of Germany. Any new biography of Eliot must see her both as a woman and as an artist attempting to grapple with these and related questions. She moved in a large, expansive world. She was literary in the most ambitious sense, that of becoming a seer, a visionary, a voice. And yet none of it came easily to her; none of it poured out, as her books made it seem that it did. She paid heavily for her anxieties and decisions, for her “difference” from most other women of her time; and yet, withal, she found the surface stability that permitted her to nourish her creative talent and to turn her own divided, troubled self into the highest levels of achievement.

Her elopement and twenty-four-year relationship with George Henry Lewes, a man with a very messy marital arrangement, were by no means the whole story of her personal life. She had to experience the entire range of divisions common to a woman in the nineteenth century. She considered herself physically unattractive, at a time when a woman's appearance in middle- and upper-middle-class circles was deemed paramount. Her intelligence clearly set her off from the common run of women, and men, except a few like Spencer, Mill, and Carlyle. But her intelligence went further than the accumulation of book knowledge.



She experienced or intuited the cultural reshaping taking place, changes which threatened every aspect of Victorian life; and this ability was another form of her difference from others. From an early age, as she assessed the capabilities of those near her, she had begun to move to another level of awareness. And yet her circumstances persisted in disallowing any opportunity for her differences to emerge. Thus, from an early time, she lived divided, one part seemingly devoted to her conventional father and his world while the other, her own intellectual world, lay fallow. The split came in her late teens when she started to move away from all the commonalities of bourgeois life—religious, marital, and professional. She began to chart a future for herself that, at the time, she felt she could not sustain. She feared being wasted in the hinterlands of farms, farmers, and artisans—people she admired but did not wish to emulate.

The change of birth name is a way of breaking away, and yet Eliot, even as she reshaped herself, remained what she was. She never *became* George Eliot; no one referred to her as George or as Miss Eliot. George Sand, on the contrary, was George, was Madame Sand. Eliot appears so representative of her age because even with decisive change—and renaming is critical—she seemed to mirror a period which altered rapidly while it hung on to what was no longer available. She reflected such yearning, but looked backward as well as forward. When she insisted on calling herself Mrs. Lewes, while the legal Mrs. Lewes was alive and well, she signaled traditional values within a radically new kind of family situation. In her every act, she found in her own split needs and divided personality those coordinates of the era which marked her as its voice. When she found her voice, she captured a culture.

A kindred spirit, Virginia Woolf, in *Three Guineas* (1938), expressed how women were omitted from the social and political scene, omitted in fact from history and, indirectly, denied their own language. What does patriotism mean to a woman who cannot defend or serve her country? What do the country's finances signify when a woman is denied membership in the stock exchange? Women do not negotiate treaties, nor do they run the educational establishment. They do not fire weapons, control the press, run the church, or litigate in the courts. Eliot's awareness of these omissions in the public area almost a century earlier helps explain her philosophy of duty and sacrifice, her sense of discipline and social comity, her desire to locate women on higher ground where men could not exert control. In her way, she cleared a space for women, even as she vacillated on important women's issues.

We emphasize how she found in the contradictions of her own personality and needs the tensions and polarities which nourished her fiction. We can, of course, say this about any major author: that he or she discovers conflicts or contrasts and then uses fiction as a way of resolving, suppressing, or triumphing. But in Eliot's case, the situation becomes more intense inasmuch as she helped pioneer a new path for women at the same time she had to preserve a semblance of social coherence. She was pulled in several directions. In point of fact, her role as a woman made it all the more possible for her to confront these contra-

dictory impulses, since as a woman she had to deal with them in ways men could finesse or ignore.

The commitment to Lewes was not Marian Evans's only flirtation with the strict morality of her day. Almost from childhood, she began to take on qualities—emotional and psychological as well as intellectual—which would transform her from a country girl into a figure of universal renown: from a young girl deeply attached to the land, to flowers, to natural elements into a sophisticated woman who made all knowledge her domain. Her entire life from late childhood on was a process of transformation, reshaping herself, or, as an earlier biographer put it, *emerging*.

The monumental 1854 decision to go off to Germany with Lewes must be viewed as the pivotal move which provided stability in Eliot's personal life at the same time that it created the conflicts which ultimately nourished her fiction; this choice of paths ultimately defined who and what she was. It did not make her "happy" in any conventional sense, but, like most choices she made, it moved her along to a world she would create in her own image. It helped to remove her from the dead end of reviewing and translating to something she had only subconsciously thought of doing—writing fiction.

In retrospect, the biographer sees a steady accumulation of creative energy, peaking perhaps in *Middlemarch*, a decade and a half later. But for the subject herself, there was no perception of the eventual success of her endeavors. Eliot took herself to the edge—as she so frequently did in other matters as well—and plunged. The resulting scandal, the proximity to a volatile figure like Lewes, a man known for his philandering and for his open marriage, the fact that the relationship was possibly short term, the chance that Eliot would be far worse off when she returned to England and was very possibly cutting herself off—all of these factors, or even some of them, could have aborted her career well before it had had an opportunity to emerge.

To an extent, Eliot deconstructed her life at each decisive point, since she moved the center of it to uncertain and ambiguous places: renouncing the religion of her father, moving up to London to carve out a career, going off with Lewes, then attempting fiction. She was opening herself up to potentialities without any assurance that what she was doing would turn out correctly for her. This very cautious young woman had become a less than cautious mature person. She chose courses she could not rationally defend, and yet rational defense became the cornerstone of her humanistic impulses, the basis of her secularism. In effect, she split herself as a further means of renewal.

Her use of the name George Eliot only three years after she started to call herself Mrs. Lewes indicates how she was redefining herself as a woman with her own language and her own story. She was not to be discouraged from her own sense of herself, even when that sense was itself full of irreconcilable elements. The use of pseudonyms, incidentally, while well known with the Brontës and Eliot herself, extended to a broad number of nineteenth-century writers; even men took to the name-change fashion, with William Sharp, for one, becoming Fiona Macleod. Among women, Pearl Craigie (she wrote the article on Eliot

for the tenth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*) became John Oliver Hobbs; Mrs. Mary St. Leger Harrison, daughter of novelist Charles Kingsley, became Lucas Halet; Violet Page became Vernon Lee; and of course, in France, Lucie Aurore Dupin Dudevant became George Sand. In each instance, the woman writer had a different motive, not solely to ease publication; but the common factor in all was to reclaim her own life, relocate it within her own space, away from direct male pressure—all of this achieved, paradoxically, by taking on a male name.

Eliot reveled in such contradictions, paradoxes, and ironies, and like many Victorian novelists she had an arsenal of literary weapons which included secrets and threats. Her focus was often on blackmail, either direct or implied. Its incidence is remarkable given this retiring woman of gentle disposition and orderly habits, inasmuch as blackmail carries with it menace, threat, a corruptible world, an underclass of creatures harboring anger, hostility, and aggression, and even murder. Outright blackmail occurs in *Silas Marner*, *Felix Holt*, and *Middlemarch*; indirect or implied blackmail is seen in *Romola*, with Baldassarre's vow to turn up murderously in Tito's life, and in *Daniel Deronda*, with Lydia Glasher's threats to Gwendolen when the latter is contemplating marriage to Grandcourt.

When we seek some reason for Eliot's fascination with what would seem inappropriate topics for her, it is insufficient to say she was a writer of her times and, therefore, someone who utilized what was at hand. The reasons are more personal. Behind the public topics was her abiding secretive self: her fear, then, of the revelation that behind George Eliot was Mary Anne Evans or Marian Lewes or Mrs. Lewes, as if the disclosure of *that* woman behind her books could frustrate her writing career at any stage. She played out her fears, and then shadowed them throughout her fiction. The gentle Eliot was full of such contradictory impulses, so that layered behind names and decisions, she could well understand the larger sense of blackmail, threat, menace. She knew something of the great disorder which lies beyond seeming order.

Her impulse to undermine or destroy, in contradistinction to the ostensible moral message of her fiction, goes to the heart of women's ambivalent role in society. In retrospect, we tend to make historical roles fit general patterns, and yet clearly there were women who did not fit into any part of the Victorian compromise on acceptable public display. Such women abounded in the upper circles of society as well as in England's intellectual life. Eliot met many of these women, although even in those instances only a few, in defiance of restrictions, really carved out something unique for themselves, as Eliot had done. Yet for most women, submission was the rule, not the exception; and it was through submission, ironically perhaps, that Eliot made her strongest statements. The women who submit most, such as Lydia Glasher and Gwendolen Harleth (to Grandcourt in *Daniel Deronda*) or Hetty Sorrel (to Arthur Donnithorne in *Adam Bede*), but, most strikingly, Dorothea Brooke (to Edward Casaubon in *Middlemarch*), have all found retribution in their destruction of the men they submit to. The conditions differ from novel to novel, but for each woman submission

*becomes the weapon by which she triumphs, even at the expense of her own well-being or life.*

The difficulty here is not primarily in assessing what Eliot accomplished, but in trying to determine what in her life led her to become such a seeker of female retribution in her fiction. Her childhood experiences appear, at least superficially, normal. She admired and respected her father, Robert Evans, although seriously disagreeing with him when she became a young woman. She had her disagreements, also, with her brother and half-brother, but these did not at the time appear traumatic, or even problematic. It is true that her plain appearance did not draw many admirers, but over the years she did encounter men who found her excellent company and, in some cases, very possibly desired intimate relationships. As we have seen, some who paid court to her were celebrated and attractive.

In any final assessment, we would be hard pressed to cite definite or particular elements in Marian's life which would lead into George Eliot's fictional attitudes toward men. There appears to be a gap—part of that divided self—between her personal experiences and her fictional attitudes. What we see, instead, is not a narrow personal side developing in her, but a social position about women generally overtaking her personal experiences and driving her toward certain conclusions. We can say that her social sense of women's roles, added to her apprehension about what occurs to women who, like her, possess plain or even unattractive looks, drew her into a radical personal position, even while she maintained in her public statements a neutral attitude about women's issues such as the franchise and divorce laws.

This still further division of self into parts was a corollary of her vision of what roles were relegated to women, and how they would respond. In this respect, Eliot became a representative woman of the nineteenth century: keenly aware of the menu offered women, aware of the restrictions on their role—legal, medical, personal, wary of any extreme action which would change it; and yet, conscious of how a woman must navigate in order to make the most of her position. Eliot's strong women never just "settle." They may offer submission, but they struggle for more, they insist on their own needs, they defer only so much as is necessary to preserve a social polity. Eliot walked a very thin line, in her own life as in her writing; and in this way she reflected not only women of that century, but life as well. For even as she defines roles for women, she also redefines them for men—this point must be emphasized; and in the process, she became one of the few writers of any age who could depict both genders. She was, in this regard, a complete social being, and in the slow working out of her own liberation, her greatest fiction reflects that social vision.

In the last two decades, we have formed very different ideas about biographical studies from what prevailed in the past. We need not promote a psychoanalytic treatise on a long-dead person, which is always problematical and subject to potential excesses; but, instead, we expect a psychological analysis of potentialities and possibilities in the person's life which we have gleaned from certain

patterns, repetitions, and perhaps obsessions which recur in the work. The dearth of workable marriages in Eliot's fiction, the large number of grown children without mothers, and the often hostile lines drawn between a child and his or her parent are all elements which must be linked to Eliot's early years and to her later development as a person and as a writer.

Well beyond the need for critical psychological analysis, there is the larger question of biographies which scant Eliot's work, especially when that work made her, along with Dickens, the preeminent novelist of the nineteenth century. What great significance does Eliot's life have if we scant the fiction? Inevitably, the question must be: How did that person write those books, and, reciprocally, how did those books get written by that person? Eliot was in several ways a great and admirable woman; yet while history is full of such women, it contains only a relatively few who wrote great books.

We must also reject the point stressed by previous biographers that Eliot "depended" on men. Instead of depending on them, she assimilated their power before moving on to the next, from Bray and Brabant to Chapman and Herbert Spencer, and finally to Lewes. Accordingly, her relationship to each man was a form of absorption into herself of their place in the masculine world denied to her directly. And from that, she could gather her forces, then move on: not dependent on them, but rather like the warrior who consumes his adversary's flesh in order to ingest his strength. As a corollary, the very first biography of Eliot, by the poet Mathilde Blind, in 1883, as part of the "Famous Writers" series, does not emphasize her dependence. Blind, who says she relied on information from Eliot's brother, Isaac, as well as on the Brays and other friends, stresses inner conflict accompanied by her transcendence of problems. Perhaps surprisingly, given her closeness in time to the subject, she is acute in seizing on Eliot's ability to resolve profound internal struggles through personal decisions.

In addition, a good deal of new material has surfaced, not the least the powerful and troubling letters to Herbert Spencer. With the release of these letters by the Trustees of the British Museum, we observe a far more complicated woman than we receive in most previous biographies. We can now chart her strangely plaintive relationship with that bizarre but highly intelligent man, one of the founders of the discipline of sociology. We may cringe at Eliot's pleas for his love or even his friendship, but that note does not necessarily diminish her. It humanizes her and prepares us for her major decision to go off with Lewes and to find in him a personal shield behind which she could write her fiction.

Other new material includes a fuller sense of Eliot's role as the shadow editor of the quarterly *Westminster Review*, and the possibility of a more realistic view of that prestigious journal and the people involved in it. The surfacing of the letters of George Combe, the phrenologist with connections to Eliot, Chapman, and the *Review*, reveals a viper's nest of rumors, infidelities, philandering, and related matters. In her own long letters to Combe, Eliot opened up her ideas at the very time we want to know more about her, when she was indeed emerging from Mary Anne Evans, or Marian, to become George Eliot. This background material is supplemented by the availability of Eliot notebooks located at various

sources. While these notebooks do not appreciably alter our view of the main lines of her life, they do fill us with awe at what she knew. Her intellect was all-consuming, as we see not only in her novels but in these notebooks.

Furthermore, we now possess more diverse ways of observing her role as a strong woman and, in the eyes of her gossipy contemporaries, as an "avenging angel" devastating bourgeois Victorian values. Although Eliot's devotion to women's issues could be vacillating and hedged with qualifications, her relationship to several female leaders needs to be redefined. Previous biographers have scanted her associations with Barbara Bodichon and Edith Simcox, among others. The point cannot be that Eliot failed to resolve thorny feminist issues, or that she attempted to maintain a low personal profile after going to live with Lewes. The point is not even that she fell short in her commitment to the issues—women's rights in divorce and marriage, female education, the franchise, career and professional opportunities—but, rather, that she devoted much of her writing life to an attempt to work through the multifold dilemmas of young women (and the confusion of young men) in a mainly patriarchal society. Her fiction gave her greater freedom than did her life, and surely highlighted the very split in her personal and public life.

But alongside the gender war and its various battlefields, Eliot is significant to us now because she had a functional view of society or community which encouraged individuality at the same time that it enforced moral commitment. Neither gender was exempt. She was working along the lines of the later German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies and his distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. The first is a society based on inherited values, on custom and tradition, on historically proven solutions or compromises. Such a society is town or village oriented, anti-urban, certainly anti-industrialization. The second type of society, what Tönnies called *Gesellschaft*, is founded on individualism, a society in which its members lack cohesion with each other since their sole bond is to their own self-interest. Reason, which is individualist, prevails here, whereas in *Gemeinschaft*, there is the precedence of community values. Without sharing Tönnies's romanticism and ethnic view of the "Folk," with its potential for racial cleansing and religious hatred, Eliot outlined a moral and ethical value system distinctly connected to a balance between the individual and the community. While she might not have recognized present-day America—so far has it leaned toward *Gesellschaft*—her efforts to find social linkage for the individual still have considerable cogency. Her morality is rarely too constrained, her ethics only infrequently too vindictive for us to ignore her plea for the individual's social role. This was, very possibly, the great subject of the nineteenth century, in the major fiction writers as well as in Carlyle, Ruskin, Tennyson, Mill, Arnold, and others.

We now take for granted the high literary quality of Eliot's fiction, but several earlier commentators dismissed her (David Cecil) or found her work more like treatises than fictions (William Ernest Henley) or mocked her elaborate apparatuses (Edmund Gosse). Her reputation after her death in 1880 declined precipitously, exacerbated by critics who have themselves disappeared into literary

history. Yet once her work was, as it were, rediscovered, we find that the newer forms of criticism catch some of her strategies, uncover other levels of disclosure, and seek in her responses to social ostracism an entire array of countering weapons. Reading Eliot now, we can assume, is far more intense than it was even for her most sympathetic contemporaries. Even Henry James, who maintained a problematic relationship to her work, tended to slight elements which did not fit his pattern of fiction. Now in our eclecticism, we can glory in her wide range and not restrict her to any one tradition, not even to F. R. Leavis's "great tradition" of the English novel.

In broad cultural terms, we have tended to reembrace the major Victorians: their largeness, their density, their textured social sense. The so-called old-fashioned novel has suddenly seemed attractive amidst contemporary minimalism, loss of character and story line, and innovation. Since several recent efforts at nineteenth-century realism have proven little more than pastiches or bouts of nostalgia, we are moved to return to the real thing. We seek that older sense of coherence, cohesiveness, and deliberation. We can even tolerate moral fervor. We have, accordingly, made the previous era into a historical pattern that seems less threatening than ours, more soothing. Much of this is obviously a misreading of Victoria's era, whose smoothness and stability were only superficial; but, nevertheless, in hindsight, and contrasted with our own century, it appears more conducive to civilized existence.

In this embrace of the previous century, however, there is a necessary caution: we must not misread Eliot culturally. Her work is full of the incoherence that any period contains. She was fully aware of rage, anger, and hostility; she recognized how the individual and society pull against each other and often appear inimical to the needs of the other. Nevertheless, despite these destructive forces playing through her work and, as we shall see, through herself, Eliot was able to quiet rage, calm anger, and play down hostility. This she did without recourse to traditional forms of belief. She remained a secular humanist once she broke with Anglicanism and rejected Methodism. She offered no institutional resolutions, only her own form of fallible humanism. What makes her so engaging in these terms is her skill in finding some leverage even when human behavior becomes uncivil, when it borders on anarchy, and when society itself seems threatened. She does not dismiss these elements; she identifies them and finds ways of containing them. We may in the long run reject her ideas, even her tentative resolutions of profound individual and societal problems, but within her fictional means she sought closure on a society's worst dilemmas.

Eliot was an essential part of that condition critics have labeled the feminization of the nineteenth century. By this we mean that through her female protagonists she insisted on the sensibility of women as part of larger cultural values, however much her individual women settled, ultimately, for traditional roles. Her women have a sensibility which impacts on social and community values and resonates in the lives of the men who encounter such women. The latter rebel against being conventional players and they insist on perception, duty, and discipline, which put to shame male ego, profligacy, and a God-given right

to power. In this context, the men must reexamine and in some instances transcend themselves. Along with Mrs. Gaskell, the Brontës, later Thomas Hardy, and several others, Eliot insisted on making gender issues the crucible for self-examination.

Her struggle to assert her will was an uphill battle against mid- and later-Victorian evolutionary and medical thought about women and their capabilities. Among several others, Darwin and Spencer undermined women's hopes for more rapid social, political, and educational advancement. Yet in some strange chemistry, Eliot's frequent bouts of depression—which one contemporary medical writer, Sir James Crichton-Browne, attributed to lack of motherhood—gave her not only strength but insight into “another land.” The depressed woman has glimpsed a different territory, or as Julia Kristeva writes, “the magnificent land of Death, of which no one could ever deprive her.” In effect, anguish and melancholy give the sufferer a unique weapon, and in Eliot's case as a writer, it was a reinforcement of her need to transform herself.

In what is perhaps her best-known poem, “O May I Join the Choir Invisible,” written at the height of her fictional powers, she voiced in a few lines her sense of the transformational self. Her secular humanism called for the highest level of behavior, or anarchy would reign. That “choir invisible” is the transformed self, the reshaped individual, the best that is known to man, or woman. “O may I join the choir invisible / Of those immortal dead who live again / In minds made better by their presence. . . .” To become part of that choir invisible, one must reach for the better self, really for a self one might never have known to exist. “May I reach / That purest heaven, be to other souls / The cup of strength in some great agony.” The language is traditional religious terminology, but the thought is purely secular, asking the ever-present Eliot question: How can we overcome our failings without calling on some Great Being which we can no longer believe in? And if we try to achieve ourselves in some greater way, how can we prevent ourselves from becoming destructive selves in that desire for achievement? In that quest to overcome ourselves and yet become what we are, we find ourselves having become part of that “invisible choir.” This was not advice, but a caution. Eliot expected her life and work to make as great demands on us as they had on her.



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