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Review of George Eliot: Selected Critical Writings

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Ashton, Rosemary, "Review of George Eliot: Selected Critical Writings" (1992). *The George Eliot Review*. 194.
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Timothy Hands

George Eliot: Selected Critical Writings, edited by Rosemary Ashton
(Oxford University Press: World's Classics, 1992)

Walter Houghton made duality, and especially opposites, the keystone of his analysis of the Victorian frame of mind. Eliot's mind fits happily into that dualistic frame. Was she George or Marian (or any variation of the latter)? Was she the contriver of the novels or was it her husband? Was she hypochondriac or valetudinarian, diffident or arrogant, prominent or retiring, imposing or horse-faced? The identity remains fascinatingly protean.

If deciding whether Eliot was novelist or poet is less difficult than a similar decision with regard to Hardy, the common reader (and more particularly the paperback purchaser) has been at a considerable disadvantage in assessing how to appraise Eliot not just as novelist but as what she most assuredly and more completely was, an all round person of letters. Rosemary Ashton's new edition for World's Classics helpfully joins A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren's Penguin anthology in at last giving wider access to Eliot's criticism.

As the introduction to, and organization of, Ashton's edition makes clear, Eliot's critical writing shares many of the concerns of her creative oeuvre, and of course springs from it. As Eliot recounts in 'How I came to write Fiction', helpfully reproduced here, 'Amos Barton' could not be begun until 'my article on Silly Novels and my review of Contemporary Literature for the Westminster' had been finished. Eliot's critical scrutinies helped to formulate desiderata for her own artistic endeavour, as the trenchant criticism of Geraldine Jewsbury's *Constance Herbert* suggests:

'Nothing they renounce for the sake of a higher principle, will prove to have been worth the keeping.' The italics are ours, and we use them to indicate what we think false in Miss Jewsbury's model In ... this we can see neither the true doctrine of renunciation, nor a true representation of the realities of life; and we are sorry that a writer of Miss Jewsbury's insight and sincerity should have produced three volumes for the sake of teaching such copy-book morality.

Here clearly was a mind tenaciously attached to artistic standards, and well prepared to bring a critical and ironic perspective to all, both factual and fictional, with which it came in contact. Rosemary Ashton helpfully provides, in notes and introduction, many concrete examples of links between the critical and creative careers. Thus the assertion of the Introduction that, from her first to last book, Eliot demonstrated the

drama of human lives in Feuerbachian terms is helpfully supported by the inclusion of an extract from the translation of *The Essence of Christianity*, just as the Notes point out what Chapter 80 of *Middlemarch* probably owes to Eliot's translation of Spinoza.

Concerning the critical writings themselves, what most impresses is the range. There is the cool and ineluctable logic of the Strauss translation, and the balanced assessment of 'A Word for the Germans', right through to the early emotionalism of a letter to Bray, and the insouciant, almost in places GCSE style confessions of the essay on Wagner operas, with its plot summaries and almost ingenuous confession: 'With all my inability at present to enjoy his music as I have enjoyed that of Mozart, or Beethoven, or Mendelssohn, these two operas left in me a real desire to hear them again.' More startling than this range of styles, however, is the formidable range of knowledge constantly being brought into play. 'We should hardly know whether to choose the Wednesday dinner at Madame Geoffrin's, with d'Alembert, Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse, Grimm, and the rest, or the graver society which, thirty years later, gathered round Condorcet and his lovely wife', the author opines without any fear of being thought unusual. With religion, philosophy, literature, art and music, Eliot seems equally at home, and the judgements are constantly as provocative and revealing (e.g., in assessing Browning's *Men and Women* and Tennyson's *Maud*) as the style is erudite and taut.

'M. Cousin has selected many documents previously unedited; and though he often leaves us something to desire in the arrangement of his materials, this volume of his on Madame de Sablé is very acceptable to us, for she interests us quite enough to carry us through more than three hundred pages of rather scattered narrative.' Eliot's praise of Victor Cousin, with its pejorative part excluded, could reasonably be applied to this first-rate anthology. Rosemary Ashton offers an introduction which is a model of clarity for readers new to Eliot as well as a welcome re-introduction for those already accustomed to the essays as well as the novels. Competitively priced and scrupulously edited, this is a volume that most readers will want to put straight on their shelves. It provides essential evidence for its editor's thesis that Eliot, 'generally agreed to be the most intellectual of Victorian novelists,... was first the most intellectual of Victorian critics.'