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Impressions of Theophrastus Such

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Rosemary Ashton

George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*,
edited by Nancy Henry, Pickering Women's Classics
(Chatto & Pickering, 1994), pp. xli + 187

George Eliot, *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, edited by
D.J. Enright (Everyman Paperbacks, 1995), pp. xxviii + 176

George Eliot's last published work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), has hitherto not been much read or attended to by readers, critics, or even scholars. Now two editions have appeared almost simultaneously, both annotated and furnished with readable introductions. While welcoming the revival of the book in this form, I have to confess to not having had my mind much changed about its merits by the skilful introductions of Nancy Henry and D.J. Enright.

The work still seems to me to be chiefly interesting for the extra light it occasionally throws on George Eliot's character representation in the novels, on her views on literature and social and political history, and on her own early life. Compared to the novels, however, and – more tellingly – compared to her wonderful critical essays of the 1850s, *Theophrastus Such* is tendentious, often laboured, and sometimes downright tedious.

One reads it for its moments of wit and for the fair-mindedness that Enright notes while allowing that this sometimes entails a slowing up and loading down of the writing, a lack of 'immediate edge'. Enright suggests that the book's ponderousness is an inevitable concomitant of its comprehensiveness and even-handedness. With a writer other than George Eliot this might have been a sufficient explanation. But since she manages in her novels to be – most of the time – both comprehensive, expansive, tolerant and sharp, witty, progressive, the question which arises is: why not here?

The answer to the question must have something to do with George Eliot's state of mind when writing, as well as with the question of genre and the suitability of her genius to the kind of book she here attempts. It has often been noticed that she is at her best when she has a large canvas on which to paint; her plots need to be allowed to evolve over reading, as well as represented, time. Her characters require space to interact in complex, progressive ways. The shorter works, both her first fictional attempt, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, and the two stories, or novellas, she wrote, *The Lifted Veil* and *Brother Jacob* (written in 1859 and 1860 respectively, but not published until 1878), are less accomplished altogether. They share a heaviness, a sententiousness, with *Theophrastus Such*, and they lack the extraordinary 'felt life' that Henry James, and later Leavis, found so characteristic of the novels.

It is perhaps not surprising that this is the case with *Theophrastus Such*, an experiment in the art of writing perfected by the Greek philosopher Theophrastus, namely that of the

'character', or sketch illustrative of certain types of human nature. Consisting of eighteen short essays or chapters, the work addresses types such as the disillusioned scholar (somewhat like Mr Casaubon) in 'How We Encourage Research', the 'old-young coxcomb' in 'So Young!', the 'Too Deferential Man', the 'Too Ready Writer', and, more generally, those who are vain, egotistical, and self-deluded in various aspects of their lives. The best of these essays read like sketches for the novels; what they lack is the drama, the interaction of characters one with another, at which George Eliot is so good in her fictional writing.

Thus the too-deferential man – a type George Eliot probably met all too often when at the height of her fame, and one who was likely to be in frequent attendance at her regular conversational gatherings at the Priory – embarrasses others by seeming to grant their most trivial statements great gravity. But he is not to be accused of absolute hypocrisy, says the author; rather he is acting 'in unreflecting obedience to custom and routine'. His mind 'is furnished as hotels are, with everything for occasional and transient use'. He is a promising sketch, but since he belongs in a set of essays and is there to illustrate a particular human trait, the ratio of moralizing to representation is high, much higher, of course, than would be the case in a novel, where he would come into contact with other characters and would carry a more or less complex plot function.

Likewise, the youthful prodigy in 'So Young!' is a wittily observed phenomenon, one who becomes so accustomed to thinking himself 'surprisingly young' for his high achievements that he never changes this 'inwrought sense' in spite of the evidence of 'the superficial reckoning of his years and the merely optical phenomena of the looking-glass'. In a nice touch, George Eliot has him take a wife 'considerably older than himself', so as not to disturb the 'natural order' of things by which he must always be the youngest person of his acquaintance. But in the end, as Enright concedes, the essay becomes a little top-heavy, rather laboured in its liveliness. There is not scope to develop his relationship with his older wife, one which one would like to have seen evolve in a work of fiction.

Perhaps it is in the nature of the genre that this should be so. But even allowing this, this particular work seems to be excessively cynical, even negative. There is much more of the 'laughing the laugh of the initiated' that Theophrastus himself describes in 'How We Encourage Research' than there is of the generous, sharing irony of the narrator of the novels. Nancy Henry allows this in her detailed introduction, suggesting that the work has a number of private jokes and learned puns which raise the question of who George Eliot thought her readership might be. The modern reader will welcome Nancy Henry's explanatory notes on names and allusions – her edition is much more heavily annotated than Enright's – but will agree with her that 'it is difficult to know what community, outside of herself, George Lewes, and a few classicist friends, George Eliot is testing'.

As for George Eliot's state of mind when writing *Theophrastus*, we know only that she was worrying about both her own and Lewes's poor health during 1878. As it happens, his last act as agent and secretary to his partner was to send the first part of the manuscript of

Theophrastus to her publisher Blackwood. He died only a few days later. Blackwood was, as usual, polite about the early chapters. When Lewes died, he naturally encouraged the distraught and desponding George Eliot. She, bereaved of her best encourager and critic, faltered in her confidence in the work, declaring herself in March 1879 (nearly four months after Lewes's death) 'dissatisfied' with it, and even proposing to 'suppress it in this original form, and regenerate it whenever – if ever – I recover the power to do so'. Blackwood persuaded her to go ahead with publication; the book sold respectably and was received respectfully by the critics, though the writer in the *Athenaeum* not unreasonably disliked her 'unsympathy with her own puppets'.

When *Blackwood's Magazine* advertised the work as forthcoming, it was given the wrong title, with *The* before *Impressions*, and to this George Eliot objected in a letter of May 1879. Many critics have perpetuated the mistake (including the present writer), as Nancy Henry points out; indeed, Enright's edition does so. But more interesting, perhaps, than the title is the fact, not noted by either editor, that George Eliot at one point suggested to Blackwood that the work might bear on the title-page the words not 'By George Eliot' but 'Edited by George Eliot' (letter of 22 March 1879).

This formulation, which was not adopted, points, I think, to a possible influence on George Eliot of Carlyle's method in his odd miscellaneous part-fictional, part-philosophical, part-playful *Sartor Resartus* (1836), which made such an impression on George Eliot (among others) when she read it as a young woman. Carlyle distances himself from the rhapsodic Professor Teufelsdröckh by framing his sententiae with the commentary of the sceptical editor. George Eliot may have thought she could distance herself from the sibylline tendency of *Theophrastus* in the same way.

The reference to Carlyle, if I am right in my surmise, may also help us to see why *Theophrastus* has been the least popular of George Eliot's works. This last work, in combination with John Cross's sober biography with its picture of George Eliot's piety and moralizing to the exclusion of her wit and energy and rebelliousness, helped to render her unattractive to the generation which came after. Hence the discrediting of her novels in the 1890s and 1900s as heavy and lacking in humour. Carlyle, too, suffered a tremendous reverse in fortune and influence at the same period. Carlyle, and the George Eliot of the last years, were simply not speaking to readers' tastes any more.

Nevertheless, there are things to be said for *Theophrastus Such*. *Theophrastus* himself may be a curmudgeon (does he share some characteristics with Herbert Spencer, perhaps?), but he gives glimpses of his author in the early chapters, where he surely speaks for her about the need for scepticism but the dangers of taking scepticism to such extremes that it paralyses the sceptic himself: 'I must still come under the common fatality of mankind and share the liability to be absurd without knowing that I am absurd.' And: 'What sort of hornpipe am I dancing now?' ('Looking Inward').

In 'Looking Backward', *Theophrastus* writes, as George Eliot herself might, about

belonging to the 'Nation of London', of having 'learned to care for foreign countries, for literatures foreign and ancient, for the life of Continental towns dozing round old cathedrals', yet of cherishing still her 'childish loves – the memory of that warm little nest where my affections were fledged' in the 'fat central England' of her beloved Midlands.

No work from the pen of George Eliot lacks interest and value. It is to the credit of both modern editors that they do not claim that *Theophrastus Such* is a great work. Enright's is an altogether lighter work of editing, with a brief sketch of an introduction, relatively few notes, and a useful chronology of George Eliot's life and times. Henry's is much more thoroughly researched; she unearths many difficult allusions in the text; and her introduction, though perhaps tempted to see an organic unity in a form that does not really require such unity and an evolution of Theophrastus's own 'character' which is not visible to this reader, is nonetheless clear, informative, an honest work of scholarship.