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Review of George Eliot: The Last Victorian & The Journals of George Eliot

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**Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian,*
(Fourth Estate; London, 1998). £20. ISBN 1 85207 420 6
Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (eds), *The Journals of George Eliot.*
(CUP, 1998). £55. ISBN 0 521 57412 9**

Kathryn Hughes has written a most readable biography, breezy, relaxed, clear narrative, just right for the reader of literary biography who isn't deeply interested in literature. The story of Mary Ann and Marian Evans, Marian Evans Lewes, George Eliot and Mrs Cross is as fascinating as the plot of the novels, and bears re-telling, but I'm doubtful about the appeal of this new book to scholars and students, whose needs for information about George Eliot's life are served by the existing biographies, and who may be misled by the sketchy criticism. It is not as if Kathryn Hughes fills the big gap which exists between a much-analysed art and a much-discussed life.

The title suggests the relative superficiality of her treatment: many critics have discussed George Eliot's so-called Victorian authoritarian and enclosed realism, and her anticipations of modernism in artistic self-consciousness, narrative experiment, shifts of discourse and open endings, but Hughes doesn't join such discussion, plunging in with a claim for the artist as the most acute chronicler of the Victorian age. She was an acute chronicler, but scarcely the only contender: to stay within fiction, there's a case to be made for Thackeray and Dickens, to name but two. And George Eliot was much more than a chronicler.

Other much-discussed subjects, like the choice of unexceptional heroines, are mentioned as troubling feminist critics, but the argument is barely touched, not developed or discussed in relation to all the other artists to whom it applies, Jane Austen, for instance, who also preferred the historical norm to autobiography when writing the woman's lot. Critical comment is all too cursorily allusive, but to say this may suggest that the idea in the title and the generalizations participate in a conversation with other scholars, as they don't.

The biographer tells the novels' stories briskly and racy, and observes their depositories of life experience, making familiar comment on sources or inspirations for the characters in *Scenes of Clerical life*, Adam, Dinah, the Tullivers, Lydgate, Casaubon, Klesmer, Mordecai etc., but in the end unsurprisingly accepts George Eliot's insistence that her reconstructive imagination created character and story. Incidentally, to use a life source for a novel is not plagiarism, as Hughes calls it at least twice: George Eliot wanted to dissociate herself from the charge of simple life-imitation, to claim her art for fiction not autobiography.

Hughes's account of the development of thinking and feeling, the moral and psychological life-changes and crises inseparable from family life and personal relations, is good. She tackles the characters in this story with insight and detachment, with the exception of George Henry Lewes whom she often describes in the prejudiced terms of contemporaries who disliked him – Charles Norton or Elizabeth Gaskell, say – calling him 'a little man', giving few details of his science, his great Goethe biography and his influential literary criticism, but acquainted with Anna Kitchel's excellent neglected study and taking him seriously as thinker and ideal partner in an excellent final summing-up of the famous couple's intellectual, social and sexual relationship.

She does not use the old story of George Eliot's dependence. She is calmly critical as she chronicles George Eliot's relationship with her friends and her publishers. But she does not always resist the temptation to get into her characters' heads, as if they were characters in a novel, speculating for instance about Marian Evans's possible insecurities in the early days of the relationship with Lewes, Lewes's imagining of their future, and their attitudes to Lewes's sons, Charles, Thornton and Bertie. As with the portrait of Lewes, this bit of the family narrative seems erratic. She reports Lewes's comments on 'Mutter's' love for Thornton, but says flatly that she never liked him and unpleasantly speculates that the story of poor repulsive and parasitic 'Brother Jacob' may derive from her foster-mother's burden. She knows that the rumour about Marian finding evidence of Lewes's infidelity after his death derives from the *mauvaise langue* Oscar Browning but her repetition of it and gratuitous exoneration of Lewes from serious infidelity compounds the scandal. She is tentative in discussing the Cross wedding journey. (By the way, she doesn't include in her list of likely causes of impotence – if Cross was impotent – the functional impotence caused by an inactive sexlife, which George Eliot probably imagined for Casaubon.) But she is too confident when discussing other fascinating unanswerable questions like the nature of Marian Evans's sexual experience before her relationship with Lewes.

The relaxed and irreverent attitude is often refreshing, with no trace of solemn Victorian and, post-Victorian Eliot-worship, though the slapdash style can be uningratiating. 'Mr Glfil's Love-Story' 'does not work. The plot is melodramatic – the climax has Caterina plucking a dagger from the gallery wall before rushing out ... to stab the philandering Wybrow'. (Yes, but there's more than plot?) *Romola* is 'a duff novel'. (There is debate about its failure or success.) George Eliot is said to stage a performance of the angel in the house while the same handy phrase describes what she didn't want women to be. Hughes may sound more flippant and crude than she is because she doesn't slow down to consider properly why or how George Eliot is a great novelist. Perhaps she hasn't digested her intellectual materials as thoroughly as the biographical ones. She knows George Eliot is praised for psychological sophistication, but her example from *Adam Bede* is not the wonderfully interiorized self-colloquy of Arthur or Hetty Sorrel's energetic narrow fantasy, in first person or free indirect style, or Lisbeth Bede's dramatized faithful querulous memory and affections, but Mrs Poyser, quoted in Parliament, a splendid far from simple character, but less surprising and original than other figures, not a prime example of her author's innovative subtlety.

It's hard for a scholar of my generation to be sympathetic. Hughes dismisses Leavis and the post-Leavis analytic critics of the late fifties and sixties as a choir inaudible – putting some in her bibliography, but using nothing except the image of the web: 'Leavis's attempt to rehabilitate Eliot led to her being buried even deeper' and 'By the 1970s a new generation of critics had arrived to do battle with Leavis's phallic pretensions.... Eliot did not suit this new intellectual mood'. Victorian solemnity is relevant after all, as when George Eliot generously imagines the transmission of forestry or roadbuilding or night-school teaching or piano-playing, applauding the history, continuity and fellowship of work. Even an aesthetic teacher like George Eliot doesn't always educate her critics.

By a fine contrast, the complex writer's life is revealed in the intricate narratives reproduced

in *The Journals of George Eliot*, meticulously edited by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston, a great contribution to scholarship. As the editors say, the journals have been extracted and reformed by biographers, such as John Cross and Gordon Haight. Later biographers have not been impersonal either, and though this book is as close as we get to George Eliot's personal narrative it is contextualized by our knowledge of correspondence, biography and criticism, and the editorial apparatus. The narratives are plural, not contradictory but free from the monologic nature of memoir and – here – from chronological order. The editors decided not to fuse the narratives but to arrange them sequentially within genre. There are diaries of the lovers' first trip, to Weimar and Berlin in winter and early spring of 1854-5, one describing their domestication in England up to 1861, and three stretching from 1861 to George Eliot's death in 1880. Then we go back to four separate *Recollections*, rewritings of Weimar and Berlin diaries for publication, and diaries of an 1856 trip to Ilfracombe, and another to the Scillies and Jersey in 1857. Next is the well-known account of George Eliot's 'Making' as novelist, followed by a diary of Germany from 1858, Italian dairies of 1860 and 1864, and a diary of a holiday in Normandy and Brittany in 1865. About a quarter of the whole is published for the first time.

The editors let the autobiographies layer different versions of events, scenes and emotions, immediate or distanced, informal or formal, private or public, private but revised to be made public, long description or curt jotting, lyric quotation and silence. They revise, repeat, and overlap, in variations made by personal or professional purpose.

The professional and public dominate, in conventional and self-conscious chronicles of art, landscape and manners, but passions stir the private records, like the intimate joy and fun of the first German journey and the later companionable rockpool naturalizing in Devon; and the pain of loss and solitude after Lewes died, not effusive or prolonged, taking common forms of silence, agonized flurries like the repeated 'my darling', and striking displacements in quoted elegy, from Chaucer, Heine, Walton, William Browne, Goethe, often from 'In Memoriam' and at the end of 1879, five months before the marriage to Cross is 'decided', Emily Brontë's 'Remembrance'. This literary dialogue of bereavement continues old habits of companionable reading and the novels' responsive mottoes and allusion.

The editors aren't motivated like an inhibited widower meeting a trust and his own needs or a biographer ruled by a theme, but they might, as they say, have constructed a different text, sequentializing and interpolating, instead of one sympathetic to the taste for permutation, dislocation and absence. But it is not unbiased. They say there's minimal apparatus but there are long introductions, synopsis and commentary, and some observation affecting the object observed. Coleridge, Hopkins and Woolf created original vivid journal styles, but George Eliot's imaginative languages were fully evolved only in forms of fiction: there are fascinating differences between journal and novel, as well as cross-overs of power or weakness. Her style's made in non-fiction too, but this can't be cursorily remarked and the critique is too brief but also too long. The editors find 'fine natural descriptions' (274) in the Scillies journal, which indeed shows a rare expressive reaching out to the phenomenal world without George Eliot's 'journalising' characteristics of bland adjective, effusion and conscious aestheticizing. But the editors' brief praise isn't always self-evident. Embarrassed readers can't pass over a

playful arch anecdote about a ‘piggie’ when the editors praise its splendid control (259); and ‘wonderful snatches of observation’ – ‘the old woman in the flowermarket, the workmen in blue blouses’ (382) – turn out to be: ‘an old woman came up to give her sympathy as we stood admiring the church’ and ‘A group of workmen in blue blouses of all shades, looked picturesque at a corner of the avenue of poplars on our way’. A scene in the Alps introduced as ‘crossing a boundary from the mundane into experience of heightened sensibility and romantic dream (she sleeps and wakes several times before dawn)’ (331), though preceded by the sublime — or the word ‘sublime’, and as the editors say, personified Nature ‘in her private home’, reads to me more like a night-traveller’s ordinary experience of interrupted sleep: ‘Once closely packed in our sledge, congratulating ourselves that we were no more squeezed than in our diligence, I gave myself up to as many naps as chose to take possession of me, and actually slept without very considerable interruption until we were at the summit of the mighty pass’ (336) . Editors’ perks – after such labour, why not such relief? Why not a full critical introduction, for which there’s scholarly precedent, instead of scant judgements marginalized in a remarkable book for which biographers, critics and readers must be grateful and by which they should be enlightened.

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[Kathryn Hughes was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for the best biography of 1999.]