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Review of George Eliot and Schiller: Intertextuality and Cross-Cultural Discourse, Dutch Readings of George Eliot

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Deborah Guth, *George Eliot and Schiller: Intertextuality and Cross-Cultural Discourse* (Ashgate, 2003). pp. 189. ISBN 0 7546 0639 2.

Diederik L. van Werven, *Dutch Readings of George Eliot 1856-1885* (University of Utrecht, 2001). pp. 191. ISBN 90 76912 15 7.

In their very different ways these two studies contribute significantly to our understanding of George Eliot's place in the wider context of European literary culture. Diederik van Werven examines the nineteenth-century reception of her novels in the Netherlands, thus filling in what is, for most of the English-speaking world, a blank space in the map of her contemporary reputation; while Deborah Guth reads her work through the lens provided by the well-known but relatively neglected Schiller, who was the first German writer to arouse her enthusiasm, but who was later supplanted, both in her own life and in subsequent critical commentary, by his contemporary Goethe.

Van Werven's survey of Dutch reviews makes clear George Eliot's popularity in the Netherlands during her lifetime, with *Adam Bede*, the original Dutch translation of which went through ten editions, proving her most successful work. The reasons for her popularity seem to lie in the way that the ethical concerns of her fiction were particularly congenial to the Dutch Protestant sensibility; and many of those who wrote about her were indeed, as van Werven points out, Protestant ministers of the church. The three figures that are his principal focus, Allard Pierson, Johannes van Vloten, and Conrad Busken Huet, also shared a common intellectual heritage with the novelist, and two of them left the church in the 1860s for reasons that were similar to hers twenty years earlier. Van Werven briefly traces the intellectual development of these three men, summarizes what they wrote about George Eliot, and discusses the importance to them of the thinkers that they had read and she had translated: Strauss, Feuerbach, Spinoza, and Vinet. George Eliot is not always kept in the foreground in all this, and some of the connections that are made between the reviewers and the reviewed seem a little strained. For instance, Van Vloten's interest in Spinoza is not shown to inform his own reading of *Felix Holt*, but is used, rather, as a cue for van Werven's view that Esther's development can be understood as an advance through Spinoza's different kinds of knowledge as set out in the *Ethics*; and the chapter concludes with the disarming question of whether van Vloten himself ever made the connection between Spinoza and George Eliot.

Looking at George Eliot from this Dutch perspective can be suggestive, and it leads van Werven to make an interesting claim for the importance of Alexandre-Rodolphe Vinet, the French-Swiss theologian and literary critic whose *Mémoire en faveur de la liberté des cultes* she is known to have begun to translate in 1842. Vinet is certainly an interesting link between George Eliot and Allard Pierson in particular, but the claim that he played a significant part in her intellectual development remains speculative. Vinet's ideas were no doubt appealing to her in the aftermath of her 'Holy War' – he advocated freedom of religious practice and insisted on individual conscience rather than theological dogma as man's true moral guide – but he was writing from within the faith that she was abandoning when she offered to translate him for the Reverend Francis Watts, and her interest appears to have been short-lived. Van Werven claims that 'Vinet may well have inspired George Eliot's sympathy, her most highly praised trait' (p. 121), but the case for his formative effect on her thinking is not conclusively made and remains only a suggestion.

Where van Werven roams across the Dutch context in which George Eliot was first read, Deborah Guth presents a more sustained engagement with the novels in her well-informed, fluently argued and illuminating intertextual reading of George Eliot and Schiller. Guth avoids the pitfall of claiming influence on the basis of similarity and uses the parallels she perceives judiciously to throw light on George Eliot's fiction, with a discriminating awareness of the important distinctions to be drawn between the two writers even when they are dealing with similar material. Indeed, in her theoretical introduction, which draws on Bakhtin and Iser in particular, she rejects the master-disciple model that informs traditional studies of influence in favour of an approach which explores the wider network of interrelations implied in the concept of intertextuality. Tracing the play of similarity amid dissimilarity between the two writers – finding, for instance, revealing connections between Wilhelm Tell and Adam Bede, and Wallenstein and Savonarola – Guth puts forward the general argument that the interaction of idealism and realism in Schiller's plays throws light on the nature of George Eliot's own art, on the central struggle in her fiction between the two apparently irreconcilable ideological discourses of empirical realism and moral idealism. That struggle is particularly prominent in the novels' endings, where George Eliot steers her high-minded, idealistic protagonists like Dorothea Brooke away from a Schillerian tragic climax towards a more modest form of self-realization; and it is the tension between the idealizing discourse of moral heroism and a more sober realistic vision that Guth sees as contributing to the often anti-climactic nature of the endings. Instead of achieving a reconciliation between the two discourses in which the distinct nature of each is preserved, the George Eliot ending typically collapses the idealizing into the real in an aesthetically unsatisfactory anti-climax. This is persuasive enough in general, theoretical terms – and it provides grounds for reading Tom and Maggie's final embrace as figuring 'unity-as-death' and hence as a warning against fusion – but it does not always stand up to close textual scrutiny. Although Guth cites the responses of some of *Middlemarch's* first readers in support of her view of the ending as anti-climax, her claim that the Finale of that novel is marked by its 'flat narrative tone' and 'stoically commonplace style that keeps emotional intensity at bay' (p. 134), is hard to reconcile with the eloquent and moving tribute to the value of hidden lives with which the final paragraph famously closes.

Guth ranges quite widely across George Eliot's fiction, though focuses primarily on *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Romola*, *Middlemarch*, and *Felix Holt*. Rather surprisingly, *Daniel Deronda* does not receive the extended attention one might have expected, given its explicit references to Schiller, its concern with the lives of actresses, and its celebrated juxtaposition of idealizing and realistic discourses. On the German side the study draws mainly on Schiller's drama and on his aesthetic writings, which are used to clarify the relationship between idealism and realism and the aesthetic function of sympathy in George Eliot's fiction. But it also touches on his poetry, in particular his poem about a woman who murders her child, which, in that it discriminates between the doer and the deed, is brought helpfully to bear on the case of Hetty Sorrel. There are many such intriguing local insights and illuminating comparisons in this interesting work, which succeeds in restoring Schiller to the ranks of those writers who, like Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Rousseau, Scott and Goethe, were objects of George Eliot's early enthusiasm and remained a forceful presence in her creative life.

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