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GEORGE ELIOT: ELEGIES AND EULOGIES

By Margaret Harris

The death of George Eliot on 22 December 1880 occasioned many prose obituaries and also a number of verse tributes.¹ I have located eleven of these in all, along with a twelfth poem published in her lifetime: nine poets are represented, of whom four are women and five men (assuming J. S. Dawson and 'K. G.' to be male). Together, the poems provide a sidelight on her reputation. Elegy frequently mourns dead poets and establishes poetic genealogies: while George Eliot's fame depends on her fiction rather than her poetry, her eminence in letters as well as her moral and intellectual stature are commonly praised in these poems. As a group they are studiously 'poetic', working with traditional elements of lament, praise and consolation while for the most part remaining scrupulously secular. They offer standard elegiac sentiments using a particular range of imagery (light and darkness, the seasons, the tides), in some cases drawing on arcane and inflated vocabulary. There are also of course individual differences among the poems on which I will comment presently. There is a preponderance of sonnets (eight of the twelve), with four of them presented in linked pairs. Three of the remaining poems are short – sixteen, eighteen and twenty-three lines respectively: one is longer, at seventy-three lines. The formality of the sonnet probably recommended it to these diverse poets, who deploy a number of variations mainly on the Petrarchan form (only two of them use the closure by a couplet characteristic of the Shakespearian sonnet). The revival of the sonnet in the late eighteenth century issued in new currency and status for the form in the nineteenth century because of Wordsworth's interest in and extensive practice of it. The vogue for the sonnet of sensibility in the 1780s, and in particular the influence of Charlotte Smith's immensely popular *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), may have suggested a mode of moral reflection adopted in some of the elegies for George Eliot.

A. C. Swinburne (1837-1909) is the best-known of the poets who eulogized George Eliot. His sonnet on 'The Deaths of Thomas Carlyle and George Eliot' first appeared in the *Athenaeum* on 30 April 1881 (Carlyle died 5 February 1881). Swinburne was no devotee of George Eliot, famously describing her as 'an Amazon thrown sprawling over the crupper of her spavined and spur-galled Pegasus'.² In *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* (1877), he compared her unfavorably, and at length, with Charlotte Brontë: in essence, George Eliot had intellect but lacked genius. His accusation that she had plagiarized Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Moorland Cottage* in *The Mill on the Floss* rankled with George Eliot, who as it happened admired at least some of Swinburne's poetry.³ Swinburne did allow her a dimension of superiority to '[t]he fiery-hearted Vestal of Haworth': 'No man or woman ... outside the order of poets, has ever written of children with such adorable fidelity of affection as the spiritual mother of Totty, of Eppie, and of Lillo.'⁴ In his valedictory sonnet he develops a less hostile but quite consistent attitude. After five lines on Carlyle, 'The stormy sophist', the poem moves on to 'one whose eye could smite the night in sunder' in quest of the light of loving-kindness. George Eliot's sternness in pursuit of duty and righteousness is softened by 'The light of little children, and their love'. The poem's quasi-Christian orientaton is strongest in this closing allusion to the Jesus who would '[s]uffer little children . . . to come unto me' (Matthew 19:14) to whom George Eliot appears to be analogous.

A number of the poems are dated 29 December 1880, the day of George Eliot's funeral. Of these, the first published was that by Edwin J. Milliken (1839?-1913), which appeared anonymously in *Punch* on 8 January 1881. Its inflated phraseology is quite unlike the cockney idiom that was Milliken's forte. A frequent contributor to *Punch*, he invented an archetypal cockney character, 'Arry, and is credited 'with furnishing the most exact phonetic reproduction of spoken cockney cant words and city dialect'.⁵ While the poem is a fairly straightforward lament, it reaches an effective democratic climax by reference to the unsuccessful petition by Herbert Spencer and others, that George Eliot should be buried in Westminster Abbey.⁶

Alfred Austin (1835-1913) was personally acquainted with George Eliot and G. H. Lewes (who had published an essay of Austin's in the *Fortnightly* in 1866). Austin's description in his *Autobiography* of his first meeting with the Leweses, apparently in the 1870s, conveys the same admiration as does his 73-line blank verse elegy, 'George Eliot', which is dated 29 December 1880 though the earliest publication of it traced is in his *Soliloquies in Song* (1882). This pretentious poem makes it easy to understand the incredulity that greeted Austin's appointment as Poet Laureate in 1896. It is suffused with deep gloom hardly lifted by a late rally in aid of a pantheistic immortality – like the Swinburne poem, skirting its subject's agnosticism. Austin may have in mind the sentiments of George Eliot's best-known poem, 'O may I join the choir invisible' (if so, this is the only resonance – and a faint one at that – of her own poetry I have noted among the elegiac poems). 'George Eliot' has particular interest, though, in the physical description of her, which is utterly consistent with the many accounts of her presiding 'at home' at The Priory. Her 'twilight tresses', her sympathetic demeanour, and above all her musical voice, are singled out for comment. Two letters survive from George Eliot to Austin, showing that he was on visiting terms down to 1880.⁷

Emily Pfeiffer's pair of sonnets, 'The Lost Light. (George Eliot)', like Austin's poem dated 29 December 1880, appeared in her collection *Under the Aspens: Lyrical and Dramatic* (1882). In this volume, the ninth of her ten volumes of verse, the prolific Pfeiffer (née Davis, 1827-90) privileged lyrical modes among the range of poetic forms in which she customarily worked, which included blank-verse drama. She was especially noted for her sophisticated use of the sonnet, and had a fondness for paired sonnets (for instance, 'Kassandra' I and II, 'Klytemnestra' I and II, "'Peace to the Odalisque'" I and II – the last exemplifies her social commitment, contrasting 'the facile slave' of the harem with 'Our brave, sad working-women of the west!').⁸ Pfeiffer published also prose and mixed genre narratives, and feminist polemics with a particular focus on women's education and the condition of the working woman. Her feminism issued in an explicit consciousness of the role of the woman writer, so that it is not surprising that she should commemorate George Eliot, expressing her admiration with passion. Moreover, nineteenth-century women poets had a strong sense of professional sisterhood, which at times manifested itself in poems addressed to other poets. Two relevant examples are Elizabeth Barrett Browning's pair of sonnets, 'To George Sand: A Desire' and 'To George Sand: A Recognition' (both 1844), and Dora Greenwell's 'To Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 1851' and 'To Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 1861' (both 1867).

Pfeiffer's George Eliot sonnets, 'The Lost Light', address the dead author. The first laments the death of the novelist ('Lost queen and captain, Pallas of our band') as the patron of 'insurgent womanhood': the imagery is militant and classical. The second turns from the

question of who is now to lead the cause, to characterize the difficult example that George Eliot has provided by her intellectual and moral leadership. The poem boldly posits that part of the difficulty is that George Eliot in opening the way has laid some unproductive trails, serving in certain respects as a counter-example: whether the allusion is to one or both of her sexual transgression and her agnosticism is not clear. Though use of the archaic second person singular form of address blurs the diction and complicates the syntax of the poems, the strong rhythms characteristic of Pfeiffer's work prevail, notably in the octave of the second sonnet.

J. S. Dawson's 'George Eliot: In Memoriam. [Read January 24, 1881]' – again, a pair of sonnets – was part of a celebration of her work conducted by the Manchester Literary Club. While this event is notable for the number and scope of papers presented on aspects of George Eliot's work, ranging from 'George Eliot as Novelist' to 'George Eliot's Use of Dialect', and including a very creditable bibliography, the sentiments of Dawson's poems are hardly specific to George Eliot. K. G.'s plaintive 'A Sonnet. In Remembrance of George Eliot, who died in December 1880', published in *Temple Bar* in January 1883, is more distinctive. The octave conjectures whether George Eliot has entered the Christian heaven, then the familiar images of light and the seasons are given a nice turn in the sestet, which answers the question. Her immortality is asserted by contrasting the decaying autumn leaves with the imperishable leaves of her books.

Four of the poems are by American women. Julia Dorr (1825-1913) wrote a great deal of poetry, fiction and non-fiction (mainly travel narratives). While her early novels depicting regional American life are now thought to be her most effective and distinctive work, in her own estimation and that of her contemporaries it was in poetry that she excelled. She maintained that she excluded from her poetry any expression that could not be read by children, a principle which may in large measure explain the judgement now that she wrote orthodox sentimental verse. None the less, 'George Eliot' is a confronting sonnet, in which Dorr boldly alludes to 'that one stain whereof she stands confessed', calling on men to 'be silent' and withhold judgement as the snow falling on her grave effects a form of purification, while women are asked more actively to shrive her by their tears. Lines 11-13, with their sensuous imagery of blooming roses, imply that it is the immorality of George Eliot's liaison with Lewes rather than her agnosticism that is in question, especially since these roses have thorns that caused pain even at the height of the summer. There is a tacit invocation of Christ's crown of thorns that prepares for the conclusion that she reposes in a merciful God who knows the extent of her suffering.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (later Ward, 1844-1911) was an American novelist and poet who corresponded with George Eliot after introducing herself through a letter in praise of *Middlemarch*, and with whom George Eliot expressed some affinity. For a start, she was forthcoming with biographical information in response to questions put to her by Phelps while preparing lectures first delivered at Boston University in 1876.⁹ She not only read Phelps's novel *The Story of Avis* (1877), but loaned it to Edith Simcox.¹⁰ Phelps was a friend of Harriet Beecher Stowe with whom George Eliot also opened up in correspondence as she was less inclined to do with correspondents closer to home. The younger woman shared with George Eliot a preference for dogs as pets, and at one time expressed her admiration by naming her dog Daniel Deronda.¹¹ In another curious echo, at the age of forty-four in 1888, Phelps married

Herbert Dickinson Ward (1861-1932), 17 years her junior. They collaborated on several works, but were not really compatible, especially since Ward did not share her feminist principles.

The first of Phelps's poems, 'George Eliot. Her Jury', was published anonymously in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for May 1881 (the same issue carried Charles Kegan Paul's long illustrated obituary article, which was much syndicated). In proposing that since George Eliot's work is immortal, so must the author be, the poem makes specific reference to characters in novels from the early *Adam Bede* (Dinah Morris), through Savonarola in *Romola*, to Dorothea in *Middlemarch*.

A second poem, 'George Eliot. (Note: the last book which she read was Thomas à Kempis's Imitation of Christ.)' was published in Phelps's *Songs of the Silent World and Other Poems* (1885). This poem declares Phelps's Christian belief less equivocally, in the claim that an all-loving Christ will raise the departed soul despite her agnosticism, a claim connected to the note about George Eliot's reading Thomas à Kempis. George Eliot's identification with *De Imitatione Christi* is well-known, especially because of the comfort Maggie Tulliver draws from the work (*The Mill on the Floss*, iv. 3); and her references to it are documented almost to her dying day. Edith Simcox records a meeting with her idol on 6 January 1880, when 'She offered to show me her favourite passage in the "Imitation." It is one I have hung upon often – in "magnum valde magnum" ["no cost too high" or "no price too great"] when there is no solace in heaven and earth still to abide in faithfulness to the spirit of love.'¹² Further, a correspondent of the *Daily News* noted that 'whatever her religious opinions, the "Imitation of Christ" was one of her favourite books, found by the writer lying on her table by her empty chair after her death'.¹³

Constance Fenimore Woolson (1840-94) travelled extensively in America before removing to Europe in 1879, where among others she met Henry James with whom she developed a deep and enduring relationship (he wrote approvingly of her fiction in *Partial Portraits*, 1888). She knew George Eliot's work by the 1870s, and held it in high regard, acknowledging her along with Turgenev as a significant influence in developing her own style of literary realism. Her declarations that "'Geo. Eliot," "Geo. Sand," and Charles Reade are my favorite living novelists', and *The Mill on the Floss* 'the favorite of my mature years',¹⁴ are reinforced in her sonnet 'To George Eliot', which appeared in *The New Century for Women*, a newspaper published by the Women's Centennial Committee at the International Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. The poem compares George Eliot's works with Michaelangelo's sculptures, associating her with a massive and enduring male tradition in the making of art, as well as with the delicacy of a more limited and transient female tradition, figured in the rose.

It is clear that George Eliot was a significant element in Woolson's intellectual currency, and a topic of conversation in the circles in which she moved. Her admiration and internalization of George Eliot's work was one thing: she was more critical of her behaviour in life. In a letter apparently written after the publication of J. W. Cross's *George Eliot's Life* in 1885, she swelled the chorus of those who complained that George Eliot could hardly have failed to succeed given that 'she was surrounded by the most devoted, personal, worshipping affection.'¹⁵ Woolson had the grace to add, 'True, she earned the money for two, and she worked very hard.'¹⁶ Conventionally enough, she read *Romola* as part of her curriculum in Florence. Less conventional resonances were set up when in December 1893, living in Venice

and subject to one of her periodic phases of depression, she wrote of the Alps: 'I should like to turn into a peak when I die ... George Eliot wrote: "O may I join the Choir Invisible," etc., but I should rather join the mountains, and be an object of beauty and have nothing to do with the eternal sorrow and despair of poor human beings.'¹⁷ Shortly after, she contracted influenza which was succeeded by typhoid fever: on 24 January 1894, in a bizarre reminiscence of John Cross's misadventure in 1880, she jumped from her bedroom window into the street below. Her gondolier found her, but she never regained consciousness and died within a few hours.

Naturally these verse tributes contain less quantitatively either of fact or evaluation than the more numerous and extensive prose obituaries. Still, they provide an illuminating spectrum of appraisal of George Eliot's life and work. These poems praise George Eliot for her achievements, and for her example especially but not only to women. There is personal reminiscence (Austin), topical comment (Milliken), and surprisingly little reluctance to acknowledge and overlook Eliot's departures from social norms (Pfeiffer, Dorr). Those poems first published in a journal are likely to have been more widely read than those that were not, but none of them appears to be in dialogue with another, just as there do not appear to be particular affiliations among the poets. That so diverse a group of poets should compose poems about George Eliot is in itself notable: there may well be more poems to be retrieved to expand the small anthology assembled here.

THE POEMS

Algernon Charles Swinburne

Text: *The Athenaeum*. 30 April 1881. 591.

THE DEATHS OF THOMAS CARLYLE AND GEORGE ELIOT.

TWO souls diverse out of our human sight
Pass, followed one with love and each with
wonder:
The stormy sophist with his mouth of thunder,
Clothed with loud words and mantled with the
might
Of darkness and magnificence of night;
And one whose eye could smite the night in
sunder,
Searching if light or no light were thereunder,
And found in love of loving-kindness light.
Duty divine and Thought with eyes of fire
Still following Righteousness with deep desire
Shone sole and stern before her and above,
Sure stars and sole to steer by; but more sweet
Shone lower the loveliest lamp for earthly feet,
The light of little children, and their love.

[Edwin J. Milliken]

Text: *Punch*. 8 January 1881. 12.

“George Eliot.”

(HIGHGATE CEMETERY, DECEMBER 29, 1880.)

LARGE woman soul, sure of unfading bays,
It little boots o'er thy too early tomb
To puff our little breaths of passing praise –
Dead in the deepest of Midwinter's gloom,
Ere thine own Autumn's mellow fruitage failed!
We mourn a Larger Light, eclipsed too soon
By the all-darkening Shadow; we who hailed
Its rise, its rounding to the plenilune
Of finished force and chastened grace, lament
The passing of a Power. Thou perchance
Bearest it all unstained, as still unspent,
To spheres unclogged by earthy circumstance.
So be it! Not among the tricky mimes
Who glitter out a glowworm's hour and fade,
Fame sets this large-orbed glory of our times,
Who, whilst good store of lesser lights are laid
In our King's Sepulchre, makes royal ground
Of that green Northern Graveyard's simplest mound.

Alfred Austin

Text: *Soliloquies in Song*. London: Macmillan. 1882. 100-103.

GEORGE ELIOT.

DEAD! Is she dead?
And all that light extinguished!
Mend your words,
Those gropings of the blind along plain paths
Where all the Heavens are shining! Know you not,
Though the Eternal Luminary dips
Below our cramped horizon, leaving here
Only a train of glory, he but goes
To dawn on other and neglected worlds,
Benighted of his presence! So with her,
Whose round imagination, like the sun,

Drew the sad mists of the low-lying earth
Up to her own great altitude, and there
Made them in smiling tears evaporate.
Announce the sun's self dead, and o'er him roll
An epitaph of darkness; – then aver
She too has set for ever.

Think it thus,
If for sweet comfort's sake. What we call death
Is but another sentinel despatched
To relieve life, weary of being on guard,
Whose active service is not ended here,
But after intermission is renewed
In other fields of duty. This to her
Was an uncertain promise, since it seems,
Unto the eye of seriousness, unreal,
That, like a child, death should but play with life,
Blowing it out, to blow it in again.
This contradiction over, now she stands
Certain of all uncertainty, and dwells
Where death the sophist puzzles life no more,
But with disdainful silence or clear proof
Confuted is for ever.

Yet our loss
By others' gain is mended not, and we
Sit in the darkness that her light hath left.
Comfort our grief with symbols as we will,
Her empty throne stares stony in our face,
And with a dumb relentlessness proclaims
That she has gone for ever, for ever gone,
Returning not. ... How plain I see her now,
The twilight tresses, deepening into night,
The brow a benediction, and the eyes
Seat where compassion never set, and like
That firm, fixed star, which altereth not its place
While all the planets round it sink and swim,
Shone with a steady guidance. O, and a voice
Matched with whose modulations softest notes
Of dulcimer by daintiest fingers stroked,
Or zephyrs wafted over summer seas,
On summer shores subsiding, sounded harsh.
Listening whereto, steeled obduracy felt
The need to kneel, necessity to weep,
And craving to be comforted; a shrine
Of music and of incense and of flowers,

Where hearts, at length self-challenged, were content
Still to be sad and sinful, so they might
Feel that exonerating pity steal
In subtle absolution on their guilt.

Dead? Never dead!

That this, man's insignificant domain,
Which is not boundary of space, should be
The boundary of life, revolts the mind,
Even when bounded. Into soaring space
Soar, spacious spirit! unembarrassed now
By earthly boundaries, and circle up
Into the Heaven of Heavens, and take thy place
Where the Eternal Morning broadens out
To recognise thy coming. Realm on Realm
Of changeless revolution round thee roll,
Thou moving with them, and among the stars
Shine thou a star long looked for; or, unbuoyed
Beyond the constellations of our ken,
Traverse the infinite azure with thy heart,
And with love's light elucidate the Spheres;
While we, below, this meek libation pour,
Mingled of honey and hyssop, on thy grave!

December 29, 1880.

Emily Pfeiffer

Text: Appendix to *Sonnets & Songs (1880)* By Emily Pfeiffer. A Facsimile Reproduction With an Introduction by Cody Fife and Terence Allan Hoagwood. Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1998. The appendix contains a facsimile of sonnets in *Sonnets*. Revised and Enlarged Edition (n.d.) that did not appear in *Sonnets & Songs (1880)*.

THE LOST LIGHT.

(George Eliot.)

I.

I NEVER touched thy royal hand, dead queen,
But from afar have looked upon thy face,
Which, calm with conquest, carried still the
trace
Of many a hard-fought battle that had been.
Since thou hast done with life, its toil and teen,
Its pains and gains, and that no further grace

Can come to us of thee, a poorer place
Shows the lorn world, – a dimlier lighted scene.

Lost queen and captain, Pallas of our band,
Who late upon the height of glory stood,
Guarding from scorn – the ægis in thy hand –
The banner of insurgent womanhood;
Who of our cause may take the high command?
Who make with shining front our victory
good?

II.

Great student of the schools, who grew to be
The greater teacher, having wandered wide
In lonely strength of purity and pride
Through pathless sands, unfruitful as the sea.
Now warning words – and one clear act of thee,
Bold pioneer who shouldst have been our guide –
Affirm the track which Wisdom must abide;—
For man is bond, the beast alone is free.
So hast thou sought a larger good, so won
Thy way to higher law, that by thy grave
We, thanking thee for lavish gifts, for none
May owe thee more than that in quest so
brave –
True to a light our onward feet must shun –
Thou gavest nobler strength our strength to
save.

December 29, 1880

J. S. Dawson

Text: *Papers of the Manchester Literary Club*. Vol. 7. Manchester: The Club, 1880-81. 136-37.

GEORGE ELIOT: IN MEMORIAM.

[Read January 24, 1881]

I.

FAREWELL great heart, that liest now so still,
That beat for me, for all of human mould;
How starts the world to hear the tidings tolled
By time's deep horologe with solemn thrill:
For each one feels in thine his own life chill,

His warmest hopes, his cherished aims turn cold,
Till fond remembrance brings thy words of old
And fills us with thy purpose and thy will:
For these were god-like, joyous, gentle, strong:
And breathed o'er sorrow a perpetual spring,
And o'er the clangour of loud creeds a song –
Undying music – ever echoing
From soul to soul, from age to age along –
Eternal concord, borne on heaven-white wing.

II.

How rolls the great and everlasting deep;
Its mighty pulses throb in every land;
Along each alien shore, each hostile strand,
Its affluent waters bountifully sweep:
So thy warm heart, with many a joyous leap,
Beat through the world. Who could thy power withstand?
High thoughts that stir us like a stern command –
Hot tears which to behold is but to weep.
Thou glorious fragment, type of all in one,
Through earth's forms mirroring our joys and woes;
Or girt with reason's light as with a sun
Dispelling, mistlike, our immortal throes; –
Toiler in thought's vast fields, thy work is done –
The universal Soul expands and grows.

K. G.

Text: *Temple Bar* 67 (January 1883): 123.

A Sonnet.

IN REMEMBRANCE OF GEORGE ELIOT,
WHO DIED IN DECEMBER, 1880.

In the stern month that strips the forest bough,
Turning the leafy world to shadow-land,
Our thoughts are borne to one whose gentle hand
Waved its farewell in such grey time as now,
Whose path through Death's dim twilight valley lay.
Did lights from the Great City meet her eyes?
Heard she Heaven's voices – sweetest melodies?
We only know – "George Eliot died that day."

She left earth's gifts, but ah! she took our hearts;
Do we not love thee? Queen of Fiction's page;
Mother of noble souls; clear-visioned sage;
Friend of true lovers whom misfortune parts.
No wintry winds can hasten to their fall
Thy leaves, which lie upon our hearts' south wall.

K. G.

Julia Caroline Ripley Dorr

Text: *Poems*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892. 5.

GEORGE ELIOT

Pass on, O world, and leave her to her rest!
Brothers, be silent while the drifting snow
Weaves its white pall above her, lying low
With empty hands crossed idly on her breast.
O sisters, let her sleep! while unrepressed
Your pitying tears fall silently and slow,
Washing her spotless, in their crystal flow,
Of that one stain whereof she stands confessed.
Are we so pure that we should scoff at her,
Or mock her now, low lying in her tomb?
God knows how sharp the thorn her roses wore,
Even what time their petals were astir
In the warm sunshine, odorous with perfume.
Leave her to Him who weighed the cross she
bore!

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (Ward)

Text: *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 62 (May 1881): 927. Titled simply 'Her Jury', this poem is reprinted (with 'shining' substituted for 'marble' in l. 13) in *Songs of the Silent World* (1885), following 'George Eliot': see next poem.

GEORGE ELIOT.

HER JURY.

A LILY rooted in a sacred soil,
Arrayed with those who neither spin nor toil;

Dinah, the preacher, through the purple air,
Forever in her gentle evening prayer
Shall plead for Her – what ear too deaf to hear? –
“As if she spoke to some one very near.”

And he of storied Florence, whose great heart
Broke for its human error; wrapped apart,
And scorching in the swift, prophetic flame
Of passion for late holiness, and shame
Than untried glory grander, gladder, higher –
Deathless, for Her, he “testifies by fire.”

A statue fair and firm on marble feet,
Womanhood’s woman, Dorothea, sweet
As strength, and strong as tenderness, to make
A “struggle with the dark” for white light’s sake,
Immortal stands, unanswered speaks. Shall they,
Of Her great hand the moulded, breathing clay,
Her fit, select, and proud survivors be? –
Possess the life eternal, and not *She*?

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (Ward)

Text: *Songs of the Silent World and Other Poems*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1885. 131-32.

GEORGE ELIOT.

*[Note: The last book which she read was
Thomas à Kempis’s Imitation of Christ.]*

At evening once, the lowly men who loved
Our Master were found desolate, and grieved
For Him whose eyes had been the glory of
Their lives. He, silent, followed them, and joined
Himself unto their sorrow; with the voice
Of love that liveth past the end, and yearns
Like empty arms across the sepulchre,
Did comfort them. They heard, and knew Him not.

At eventide, O Lord, one trod for us
The solitary way of a great Soul;
Whereof the peril, pain, and debt, alone
He knows, who marked the road.

We watched and held
Her in our arms of prayer. We wept, and said:
Our sister hath a heavy hurt. We bow,
And cry: The crown is buried with the Queen.

At twilight, as she, groping, sought for rest,
What solemn footfall echoed down the dark?
What tenderness that would not let her go?
And patience that Love only knoweth, paced
Silent, beside her, to the last, faint step?
What scarred Hand gently caught her as she sank?
Thou being with her, though she knew Thee not.

Constance Fenimore Woolson

Text: Clare Benedict, ed. *Five Generations – 1785-1923. Being scattered chapters from the history of the Cooper, Pomeroy, Woolson and Benedict families, with extracts from their letters and journals, as well as articles and poems by Constance Fenimore Woolson. 3 pt. Ellis: London, [1931.] Pt. 2. 427.* [Reproduced from the American Poetry Full Text Database, Copyright © 1996 Chadwyck-Healey Ltd.]

O wondrous woman! shaping with thy pen
As Michael Angelo did shape from stone,
Colossal forms of clear-cut outline, when
We dwell upon thy pages, not alone
The beauty of thy rose, we see, as finely traced
As roses drawn by other woman-hands
Who spend their lives in shaping them but faced
We find ourselves with giant's work that stands
Above us as a mountain lifts its brow,
Grand, unapproachable, yet clear in view
To lowliest eyes that upward look. Oh, how
Hast thou shed radiance as thy finger drew
Its shapes! A myriad women light have seen
And courage taken, because thou hast been.

Notes

- 1 This essay was prompted by the reprinting of the elegiac poem by Edwin J. Milliken in *The George Eliot Review*, 32 (2001), 68 (repeated here). See my 'Obituaries of George Eliot' in *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, ed. John Rignall (Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 292-3, which makes brief reference to some poems honouring George Eliot. I gratefully acknowledge Amanda Collins's ingenious

persistence in tracking down the poems discussed, and John Grigg's invaluable assistance in checking texts in the British Library. I am also grateful for the support of an Australian Research Council Small Grant in 1998 for work on George Eliot's reputation.

In addition, George Eliot was the dedicatee of Emma Lazarus's volume, *Songs of a Semite* (1882).

- 2 Quoted in Dorothea Barrett, 'The politics of Sado-Masochism: Swinburne and George Eliot,' in *The Whole Music of Passion: New Essays on Swinburne* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1993), p. 107. Barrett discerns startling yet compelling sado-masochistic affinities in the writings of the two authors which are not in evidence in Swinburne's poem.
- 3 Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 525.
- 4 A. C. Swinburne, *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1877), pp. 48-9.
- 5 John Sutherland, *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction* (Harlow: Longman, 1988), p. 435.
- 6 Haight, pp. 548-9.
- 7 *The Letters of George Henry Lewes*, ed. William Baker, 3 vols. (University of Victoria, B.C.: English Literary Studies Monograph Series, 1995-9), iii, 126, 144.
- 8 I have drawn on *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* (London: Batsford, 1990), ed. Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy, for information about Pfeiffer and the other women poets discussed; also, in this case, on *Emily Pfeiffer, 'Sonnets and Songs' (1880)*, ed. Cody Fife and Terence Allan Hoagwood (Delmar, N.Y.: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1998), and Kathleen Hickok, 'Why is this Woman Still Missing? Emily Pfeiffer, Victorian Poet', in *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1999), ed. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain, pp. 373-89. The poems of Pfeiffer mentioned, and also the paired sonnets by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Dora Greenwell referred to in my discussion, are included in *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets*, ed. Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow with Cath Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, 1996).
- 9 See especially *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. G. S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954-78), vi, 163-4. Phelps published George Eliot's letters to her as 'Last Words from George Eliot' in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (March 1882), 568-71, and the correspondence has been reconstructed in George V. Griffiths, 'An Epistolary Friendship: The Letters of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps to George Eliot', *Legacy*, 18.1 (2001), 94-100. There is a comprehensive discussion of Phelps's career in the relevant chapter of Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), pp. 167-92.

- 10 *George Eliot Letters*, vi, 417-8 and ix, 202; see also *A Monument to the Memory of George Eliot: Edith J. Simcox's Autobiography of a Shirtmaker*, ed. Constance M. Fulmer and Margaret E. Barfield (New York and London: Garland, 1998), p. 6.
- 11 Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Chapters from a Life* (1896; Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1897), p. 197.
- 12 *A Monument to the Memory of George Eliot*, pp. 111-2.
- 13 *Daily News*, date unknown [late 1880], repr. in *Graphic* 580 (8 January 1881), p. 27.
- 14 Rayburn S. Moore, *Constance Fenimore Woolson* (New York: Twayne, 1963), pp. 117-8. A useful more recent account is Caroline Gebhard's entry on Woolson in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry. The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Eric L. Haralson (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), pp. 503-8.
- 15 *Constance Fenimore Woolson*, ed. Clare Benedict ([1930]; London: Ellis, [rev. edn. 1932]), p. 27.
- 16 *Woolson*, ed. Benedict, p. 27.
- 17 *Woolson*, ed. Benedict, p. 411.