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## Review of George Eliot's Intellectual Life

Avrom Fleishman

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**Avrom Fleishman, *George Eliot's Intellectual Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. xi + 296. ISBN 978 0 5211 1746 4. £55 (US \$90)**

Avrom Fleishman's study of George Eliot as a Victorian intellectual comes late in a distinguished career of scholarly publication that stretches over more than forty years. The book primarily concerns itself with some large questions: What were Eliot's central ideas and how were they modified over the course of her development? How did they overlap or differ from those of her contemporaries? In working out his answers, Fleishman creates an admiring and admirable account of 'a mighty mind' (2) interested in others' theoretical systems but always independent of them, forging its own deeply ethical and ultimately tragic versions of humanism, empiricism, and progressive historicism. The account has its polemical side; Fleishman aims to rescue this Victorian thinker from the readings of poststructuralist scholars who find in Eliot a modern sense of epistemological uncertainty, from those who read Eliot through the lenses of one ideological position (Comte, Spencer, Feuerbach, etc), and from those who understand Eliot as a nostalgic political conservative.

Fleishman's ability to extract and summarize the essential points of a social theory in clear and trenchant terms is the most valuable contribution of his book. He often reads for us what George Eliot read, and then suggests both what she learned from it and what she dismissed. Thus we get pocket sketches of the arguments in works by Hennell, Spinoza, Strauss, Mackay, Mill, Comte, and Riehl, followed by careful discriminations of their thinking from the ideas of Eliot herself. The result is that she emerges as a sceptical and original social thinker, rather than a mind that absorbs the influences of others. Some surprises ensue: Eliot's thought is more closely aligned with the balance of ideas in John Stuart Mill than with any other contemporary. Comte's sense of necessary historical development gets quite a sardonic critique from Fleishman, who effectively distances both Eliot and Mill from its teleology. Spencer fares somewhat better, but would have been vivid to Eliot, Fleishman suggests, largely in his organicist view of society and his interest in sympathy. (George Henry Lewes, 'that overachieving polymath' (76), gets very limited press in this book, as do the natural sciences in general).

The young Mary Ann Evans also comes through in somewhat unexpected ways: Fleishman finds no evidence of extreme evangelical belief in his probe of her adolescent letters; it was personal asceticism rather than the theology of atonement and justification by faith that moved her. As for the famous loss of faith at twenty-one, Fleishman is quite convincing when he claims that 'the most remarkable aspect of the process was its serenity' (24); what there was of crisis was familial, not a matter of intellectual uncertainty or religious despair. His procedure here and elsewhere is to extract quotations that represent her intellectual position and summarize their import; what's missing is a sense of particular context that Eliot herself would have insisted on. Both the emotional valence and the rhetorical shaping of ideas for a particular correspondent are largely overlooked.

At the same time, Fleishman is expert in formulating nuanced general descriptions of Eliot's central positions. On her theory of knowledge: 'The mind is capable of learning pragmatic and scientific truths with assurance, though within its cognitive limitations, with specific qualifications for their processing, and without access to ultimate reality' (7). On what Eliot

shared with Mill: 'an estimation of the desirability and the possibilities of human development – despite all the cultural and natural impediments to its full realization – through the application of informed and sympathetic reflection. For Eliot, despite her developing sense of human limitation and of the inescapable consequences of egoistic choices – her tragic sense of life – was in the ranks of Victorian progressives, of whom Mill was the avatar' (56). On Eliot's dynamic version of historicism: 'The one constant in her vision of the past is a sense of interaction, not only of individuals among themselves and of groups within their social structures, not only between material and ideational forces, but between the individual and his social environment' (118). On her tragic sense of life, Fleishman notes Eliot's shift from the German idea of opposing but equally valid ideals (expressed in Eliot's 1856 essay 'Antigone and Its Moral') to the tragic nature of political life in *Romola*, in which 'the purity and simplicity of high ideals [are] juxtaposed with the stern demands of reality' (128). There seems to be only one aspect of Eliot's mental life that causes overt discomfort to Fleishman: her derogatory (if apparently sympathetic) view of the working class. Thus, his treatment of George Eliot's essay on Riehl, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856) is among the more agonistic passages in the book.

The treatments of George Eliot's non-fictional prose – both the early journalism and the later satires of intellectual life in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* – are clear, fair and useful. When it comes to talking about novels, however, the results are mixed, and rather idiosyncratic. Fleishman deserves credit for not reading the novels 'through' the ideas; yet he sometimes reverts to the exercise of categorizing modes and genres. The early fiction is discussed through a distinction between 'realism' and 'naturalism'; it only eventually emerges that naturalism stands for set-piece passages of sociological observation, while realism refers to the blending of character and story with social observation. The chapter on *Middlemarch* argues for its organic form, as a realization of the ideals set out in Eliot's 'Notes on Form in Art' (1868); it is in the realm of novelistic form, Fleishman suggests, that Eliot transmutes the scientific notions of Lewes and Spencer on the relation of organism and medium. On *Felix Holt* there is little news to report beyond the assertion that Eliot was uninterested in politics – an odd claim, given the close and extended attention given to Florentine politics in the discussion of *Romola*. In fact, Fleishman is primarily interested in the novels and parts of novels that other readers find abstract, difficult or tedious, and he is very good at elucidating them. The chapter on *Romola* – 'a political-historical novel of the highest order' (129) – is the best of those devoted to fiction: here Fleishman carefully delineates each of the political parties in Eliot's Florence, and argues that Tito's moral decline is closely tied to that environment of constantly shifting alliances. He also gives substantial and discriminating attention to the complex portrait of Savonarola.

Along similar lines, the chapter on *Daniel Deronda* is centered on the 'transmission' of culture from Mordecai to Daniel. Fleishman is intent here on giving the lie to critical contentions about George Eliot's latent anti-Semitism and incipient nationalism: he lauds her courage in portraying realized Jewish characters, and defines Mordecai's mission as a version of George Eliot's own secular humanism: 'He is, then, closer to being the spokesman of a religion of humanity, Jewish division, than he is to being either a representation of age-old Jewish anticipations of a messianic restoration or a predecessor of the political Zionism that emerged later in the century' (204). Despite the wishes of this argument, the chapter is troubled in

various ways. Fleishman begins by taking on, yet again, F. R. Leavis's division of the novel into Jewish and English halves, insisting that they are necessary to one another. Then the English half is almost dismissed, though it is given some heft through its philosophical modelling along the lines of Arnold's critique of Philistines and Barbarians in *Culture and Anarchy*, and 'redeemed' by the alternative offered by Jewish humanism (194). By the end of the chapter, however, Fleishman writes off the connection between English decadence and Jewish culture, and Daniel goes off to what is now described as 'proto-Zionist activity' (216) in preparation for Jewish immigration to Palestine.

One of Fleishman's recurrent themes remains to be noted: his interest in the figure of the outsider. Early on he defines George Eliot's class, after the abandonment of her 'yeoman' Tory roots, as that of the outsider (6). Outsiders in the fiction seems to come in two flavours, though Fleishman himself does not point the distinction: there are those like Tito or Bulstrode whose moral fibre is loosened by their move into an alien culture, and there are the 'willing outsiders' like Dorothea or Daniel who learn through difficult experience to disentangle themselves from cultural standards within and without, achieving the heroism of 'moral freedom' (249). How this happens involves a tortuous learning process 'inseparable from an empiricist ethical position' (250). Like his version of Eliot, Fleishman is willing to rest his case on that tenuous balancing point between tragic determinants and the hope of independent moral learning in the exceptional individual.

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