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Introduction

Isobel Armstrong and Carolyn Burdett

Collections of essays on great authors often call up an analogy with the *Festschrift* in their desire to honour and celebrate the depth and reach of an oeuvre. This bicentenary collection arrives in the context not only of proliferating Eliot scholarship but of an ever-increasing recognition of her polymathic status. George Eliot's multilingual skills, her avid reading in so many areas as a scholar — science, philosophy, religion, history, music, art — her unrivalled understanding of her contemporary world and culture as a journalist, and the reach of her power as poet and novelist command enormous respect. We remember that Edith Simcox was allowed to kiss her feet. Eliot's magisterial achievements do indeed conjure awe.

No one can fail to experience this awe when setting out to construct a new gathering of articles. We set about editing this collection, though, certainly to revisit earlier scholarship, to explore the acknowledged range of Eliot's interests, and to present fresh research, but also to focus on the generative energies of her work, to think through how and why it is still so fresh and exciting — exciting and surprising. Looking at the group of articles we have gathered here, we are struck by the immediacy of Eliot's writing, how its intensity so frequently makes a poetics of the realist novel.

Of course there are moments when Eliot's writing becomes poetic: to take instances from *Middlemarch* (1871–72), there are the justly famous lines about 'that element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency'; how an unbearable sensitivity to this 'would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence'.¹ (The rhythm of this sentence strikes on *beat* because it is not part of a hyphenated noun but a verb.) The lyrical moments in Dorothea's grey-green boudoir are another instance. However, the poetics we mean belong rather to her capacity to live through every moment of her prose, to create a syntax that involves the reader in an almost somatic way as we think and feel with and through her meditative writing. Consider her analysis of Casaubon's plight, the desperate insecurity of his honeymoon:

¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by Rosemary Ashton (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 194 (Chap. 20).

In Mr Casaubon's ear, Dorothea's voice gave loud emphatic iteration to those muffled suggestions of consciousness which it was possible to explain as mere fancy, the illusion of exaggerated sensitiveness: always when such suggestions are unmistakably repeated from without, they are resisted as cruel and unjust. We are angered even by the full acceptance of our humiliating confessions — how much more by hearing in hard distinct syllables from the lips of a near observer, those confused murmurs which we try to call morbid, and strive against as if they were the oncoming of numbness! And this cruel outward observer was there in the shape of a wife. (p. 200)

The worlds and minds Eliot writes of are felt as you read. This is not just a matter of the third-person plural. It is almost like being with someone who is 'working through', to use Freud's phrase, a complex issue in our presence.

It is in this sense that Eliot is our contemporary — we are *with* her as she writes despite the distance of history. And it is for this reason that the themes of the articles here come alive, whether we are thinking of Eliot as woman of letters and businesswoman in print culture (Joanne Shattock, Laurel Brake), the object of Henry James's curiosity (Rosemary Ashton), or mediating her own afterlife (Fionnuala Dillane). We vividly see her through the lens of the aesthetic, though sculpture and myth (Gail Marshall), music and affect (Delia da Sousa Correa), or what Van Gogh learned from her (Ruth Livesey). 'Late' George Eliot is particularly near to us: her epigraphs (Eirian Yem), her uneasiness with migration (Josephine McDonagh), her understanding of destructive feeling (Isobel Armstrong, Carolyn Burdett), and her prophetic reading of technologies of the future (Helen Small) bear upon the present. George Eliot belongs to her history, but without presentism we can also say that she belongs to our today. George Eliot, our contemporary — the unspoken title of these articles.