

those deeply hallowed “threads of connection,” to which she longs to be true. The depth of Eliot’s insight here into social and psychic alienation not fully understood by Maggie, worked through mythologising the dead tones of photographic technology, is remarkable. But there is one thing she lets Maggie understand. In her letter to him, Maggie tells Stephen frankly that to give up sexual love is to give up something glorious. The frankness is startling when we remember the caution with which Eliot’s sexual politics are associated. George Eliot could take extraordinary risks. The tragedy of the novel is not Maggie’s renunciation and death: it is that in her *society* it is the only thing possible.

It may be that a mythic reading of George Eliot’s writings creates only yet another opposition between realism and fable, without resolving criticism’s need to think in terms of oppositions. It is possible that the increasingly rich understanding of *Daniel Deronda* in this volume may be a response to the constraints of the antithetical thinking to which the writers have found themselves attached. Here fable meets social critique, gender readings resonate with explorations of race, psychoanalytical subtlety meets a poetics of culture, myth meets modernity. Whatever these readings, Levine’s *Companion* will be indispensable to George Eliot enthusiasts.

A RE-ENACTMENT

Tim Dolin

In Cynthia Ozick’s story, “Puttermesser Paired” (1997), out-of-work feminist lawyer Ruth Puttermesser (whose roller-coaster fortunes are the subject of two previous stories) is fixated on George Eliot’s life and work, and, “at the unsatisfying age of fifty-plus” (Ozick 105), longs to meet her own soul-mate with brains – her own George Henry Lewes. At length she does: Rupert Rabeeno, a painter who executes what he calls “Re-enactments of the Masters,” exact reproductions of works in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed to be sold on postcards. Together they begin reading Eliot’s work aloud (as the Leweses themselves had done). Then, at Rupert’s suggestion, they decide to read through all the biographies:

Rupert wanted to see how they matched up, whether someone writing about George Eliot in, say, the nineteen-eighties was going to turn up the same George Eliot as someone writing in the nineteen-forties, or in the eighteen-nineties. It was like reënacting a landscape a hundred years later, he said. The same grove of trees under the same sky, but different. What altered it was whoever was looking at it. (134)

So who is the George Eliot turned up by this excellent *Cambridge Companion*? England's greatest novelist of ideas, certainly. The chapter titles in the collection (and the titles of their sub-sections) indicate the many ways in which Eliot's¹ fiction assimilated the great nineteenth-century fields, modes, and topics of intellectual inquiry: philosophy (ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics); science (empiricism, positivism, physiology, psychology); religion (evangelicalism, humanism, atheism); politics (liberalism, Tory conservatism, nationalism); and the woman question. There is, as George Levine points out in his fine introduction, "something a little artificial in dividing her knowledge and thought into compartments," but "her thought was rich and complicated enough to require such compartmentalization" (18). In fact, the *Companion* doesn't divide just her knowledge and thought into compartments: it deals separately with "George Eliot" as person and name (chapter 1), novelist (chapters 3 and 4), thinker (chapters 5-7), and participant in a variety of social and cultural contexts (chapters 8-11). There is nothing very exceptional about this: an introductory volume should present biographical information, trace the trajectory of a writer's career, and identify and analyse the chief preoccupations in the work. Yet this approach raises inevitable problems in Eliot's case. Here is a writer who requires a small army of specialists to do justice to her formidable range of intellectual powers and interests, yet whose fiction was conceived of as a form of knowledge and thought in its own right, offering something more than philosophy, theology, political economy, and history (or any synthesis of them), and in a decidedly populist cultural form: the novel as intellectual work of art. Naturally, therefore, there is a certain speciousness and awkwardness in pretending religious and philosophical questions are independent of scientific questions; or that Eliot's organicism should be discussed in relation to physiology and not Burkean conservatism or the Romantic idealism of Coleridge and Carlyle.

In any event, this unavoidable compartmentalisation does not, finally, present us with a lot of incompatible George Eliots – indeed, we are left with a strong impression of the unity of this figure, whose identity seems as measured and controlled as the narrators given license under its name. There are no dissenting voices here – I mean, the same George Eliot, more or less, is implied or described in each contribution – indicating that, as Rupert Rabeeno suggests, generations of critical readers have their own ways of looking at the landscape, of re-enacting the life and work of a "master." It may be worth asking, then, what is our way of looking at George Eliot, and what lies behind our re-enactments of her life and work?

¹ I confess I was somewhat distracted by the announcement up-front in this volume that the editor, or someone in an editorial role, had decided to adopt "the traditional style of never referring to [Eliot] with a separable surname, 'Eliot,' but always as 'George Eliot'" (xii). Is this really a "traditional" convention? A glance at earlier studies suggests it's far from a universal practice, and presumably neither authors nor copy-editors found it entirely natural, since more than a few slip-ups got through (in the essays by Suzy Anger, Diana Postlethwaite, and Donald Gray).

The *Cambridge Companion* begins and ends on a surprisingly downbeat note. In the opening pages, Levine frames the volume with an eloquent, trenchant vindication of the enduring value of Eliot's realism. He begins, however, by reminding us, in a way that is by now very familiar, that Eliot's writing was not always valued so. He recounts the well-known narrative of her fall into disrepute when the modernists revolted against all things Victorian in the first half of the twentieth century. His immediate rhetorical objective in this is to set up, in the second paragraph, the (still faintly circumspect) assertion that: "The case may now reasonably be made, even despite the massive energy and genius of Dickens, that George Eliot was indeed the greatest of Victorian novelists" (1). This is quite different from describing Eliot as the greatest novelist of ideas in English. Victorian greatness presents difficulties of its own: the very thing the moderns found so odious about Eliot, and led to her eclipse, was her greatness. Part of Levine's objective, therefore, and the objective of this volume, "is to help lift George Eliot" not from neglect but from "the frozen condition of literary monument, to make the resistant richness of her art more clearly visible, and to make her superb intelligence and imagination more accessible to readers" (19). We all know that Eliot is a great writer; but let's be sure where her greatness lies.

We know it because her reputation was revived by Leavis and the New Critics in the 1940s, and by the publication of Gordon Haight's edition of the letters beginning in the 1950s. But could it be that her reputation still suffers from something – the faintest something – of that same distaste the Edwardians felt? That it must be revived for each new generation of readers in need of volumes like this one to help them see past the "great Victorian" to the "great novelist"? It would appear so, if we accept the pessimistic conclusions of the final essay in the collection, Kathleen Blake's critical history of Eliot's critical reputation. Blake is alarmed at the shabby treatment Eliot has received – the high praise even now qualified by muted tones of disapproval. Here is a great writer who was once criticised for "intellectual overloading, self-consciousness, didacticism" (210), and for being, in Nietzsche's well-known phrase, a "moral fanatic" with an easy conscience who smugly took for granted the survival of Christian morality, and her continuing right to that morality. Now, her greatness is securely acknowledged – but there's still the small matter of that anti-feminism, and those unseemly reactionary politics. "I had not," Blake writes gloomily, "thought to find so much depreciation" (202). Whether it is true, as she seems to imply in her concluding quotation from the "silly Novels" essay, that Eliot's genius has, as Marian Evans once prophesied, received "the tribute of being moderately praised and severely criticised," is open to debate. Surely Eliot has been no more severely criticised than others – "good little Thomas Hardy," for example?

When we remind ourselves, repeatedly, that the modernists got it wrong about Eliot, that she wasn't the stuffy old arch-Victorian of Johnny Cross's hagiography at all, are we really chastising them for not recognising how modern she was – how

like them (and us): how un-Victorian? And when she fails to live up to our expectations of her modernity, aren't we sure to remark the lapse, "almost with regret" (Miller 178)? For let's be frank: the greatest Victorian novelist can still irk us, even more than Dickens, whose restless energy and genius dissipate even the most embarrassing, outmoded values and prejudices, leaving an impression of something much more challenging and new – something with an aesthetic vitality that allows us to forgive every platitude, every vulgarity. But in Eliot, Victorian values are in your face, and the turn of the new century has not, I would say, made us any less post-Victorian. Viewed from this side of totalitarianism, modernism, mass culture, consumer capitalism, postmodernism, feminism, postcolonialism, and so on, it almost feels like Nietzsche had a point: maybe the death of God was just an excuse for Eliot to hand over Christianity to an easy-going liberal Protestantism, unafraid of irrationality and evil, joined to a self-surveillant Nonconformist conscience, obsessed with social control and economic expansion.

This unattractive personage might, for convenience, be called "the respectable George Eliot": "George Eliot the woman," in Levine's words, "susceptible to the conventions and comforts of respectability." Her alter ego is "the rebellious George Eliot," who is – need I say it? – the great artist who "built her art from a refusal of such conventions, in resistance to the very kind of moral complacency and didacticism of which she has often [. . .] been accused" (2). The series of oppositions at work here – woman/writer, respectability/rebellion, moral complacency/artistic resistance – seems at first to be valorised by an essentially modernist (and masculinist) idea of the radicalism of art – that relatively autonomous sphere where "progressive" means avant-gardist not socialist, and where the political opinions and social views of the author are bracketed off. But it is not that simple. Firstly, Levine's "George Eliot the woman" is not a person at all, really, but a kind of figurehead for an obsolete past: everything the writer, who remains vividly present to our concerns, is not. In this respect "George Eliot" is something akin to that uncannily resilient "spiritual existence" Marian Evans Lewes imagined herself taking on as her "bodily existence" was decaying (or so she felt) in the 1870s (Eliot 143). The wise, witty, and tender sayings of this George Eliot, the sibyl of the Sunday gatherings at the Priory, might have sustained those at her feet (although not, refreshingly, the embittered Eliza Lynn Linton, who, in spiteful memoir, described her as "so consciously "George Eliot" – so interpenetrated head and heel, inside and out, with the sense of her importance as the great novelist and profound thinker of her generation" (Linton and Harraden 99). But they can give us no sense "of the full range of George Eliot's knowledge and thought, and the nature of her complicated and difficult life" (*Companion* 18).

Respectability is also another word for political and social conservatism, and the paradox of Eliot's respectability and rebelliousness is closely related to the paradox of her "conservative-reforming intellect" ("Amos Barton"). Basil Willey argued in 1949 that Eliot's whole life united "advancing intellect and backward-

yearning affections” – her head took her in one direction and her heart in another – and ever since we have struggled, as we welcomed her back into the canon, with a sense of uneasiness about political opinions and social views that seem out of step with someone otherwise so progressive, so “deeply critical of the structures of society” (18). Those opinions and views may be safely attributed to “George Eliot the woman,” perhaps, or, more usually, consigned to her characters: Nancy Henry, in an otherwise incisive chapter, insists at one point that George Eliot’s politics cannot be safely extrapolated from her characters, since “her aim as an artist was to make a character’s political opinions consistent with his psychology and behaviour” (154); and a page or two later that “George Eliot was hesitant to express, except under cover of a distinctive character, strong political views” (157). But the paradox does not go away, and in fact it becomes the defining characteristic of the George Eliot re-enacted in this volume – the George Eliot of our generation.

No one has done more to open up this paradox than Rosemarie Bodenheimer, whose wonderful chapter here reprises and extends the work of her *Real Life of Mary Ann Evans* (Bodenheimer). As Bodenheimer shows, there is no effective way of keeping the respectable and rebellious George Eliots apart: for Mary Ann Evans, her father’s dutiful daughter, refused to go to church with him one Sunday in January 1842; and in 1854, Marian Evans, a bluestocking from the midlands, scandalised even London freethinkers when she decided to live openly with a married man and call herself Mrs Lewes. But were these rebellious acts? Bodenheimer argues that the “pattern of behaviour and response” established during the “holy war” between Mary Ann and her father was “to characterize George Eliot’s conflict-filled moments of decision in later life, and to create the uneasy blend of radical social critique and conservatism that shapes her fiction” (23). This was, perhaps, the moment in which Eliot learned that the rationalism by which she was so energised carried other implications: the challenge to established views was also a challenge to the social status quo – an appeal for political and social change. Lest her father should suspect that she had turned Unitarian, that she was motivated by an unseemly spirit of rebellion against his respectability (Bray was considered “a leader of mobs” who would introduce her “to Chartists and Radicals” (*Letters* 1.157), or that she had sunk into the moral laxity of free-thought, she wrote to him: “I am really sincere [. . .] my only desire is to walk in that path of rectitude which however rugged is the only path to peace,” insisting, however, that “the prospect of contempt and rejection shall not make me swerve from my determination so much as a hair’s breadth until I feel that I *ought* to do so” (*Letters* 1.129). In letters to others she reiterates this redoubled determination to act as she must according to a sense of duty, revealing that already, at the first moment of her religious crisis, she had found a way of moving beyond Christianity to the position of moral seriousness she would continue to hold all her life. But she had not found a way of reconciling her newfound rationalism with her deep love for her father and family.

Undeniably, this episode was “deeply formative,” as Bodenheimer suggests, but not because it set a pattern of unconventional behaviour – her steely resolve to “have her way,” as Alexander Welsh puts it (57), without consulting anyone. Rather, her confrontation with her father, and partial capitulation to his demand that she not destroy his reputation, brought vividly, painfully home to her that characteristic problem of modernity which she was to make peculiarly her own – what Raymond Williams called the “co-existence of persistence and change” in *The Country and the City* (Williams). This was no benign co-existence, she learned then, but a “dramatic collision” – as terrible and fateful as the tragic collisions in Greek drama. Josephine McDonagh, whose splendid essay on the early novels fulfils the collection’s brief to provide accessible introductions and offer original insights, points out the significance of Eliot’s essay, “The Antigone and its Moral,” to *The Mill on the Floss*, and in particular the clash of “two principles, both having their validity, [. . .] at war with each other” (*Essays* 244). That significance might surely be extended to Eliot’s work as a whole, under which lies the always potentially tragic confrontation between hard facts and powerful feelings.

The later scandalous liaison with Lewes brought its own degree of suffering, but it can scarcely be compared. It was risked within a very different context: Marian Evans was an independent adult moving in metropolitan circles of free-thought and in the sophisticated cosmopolitan Europe of advanced culture, secure in the love of Lewes: *empowered*. Mary Ann Evans had been twenty-one years old and wholly dependent upon her father, a man who had worked his way to a position of respectability in a small provincial community. How hard must it have been for her to write: “I could not without vile hypocrisy and a miserable truckling to the smile of the world [. . .] profess to join in worship which I wholly disapprove” (*Letters* 1.125)? The fact that she *did* truckle to the smile of the world – did obediently go back to church for the sake of appearances – is sometimes overlooked. But what else that was in her power ought she rather to have done, as the narrator remarks of Dorothea at the end of *Middlemarch*?

And how, later, could she not have lived openly with Lewes? To have acted a deception, as she had in Coventry, was by then impossible to her. But her impulse in this, as in the holy war, was not to *rebel* against conventional society – although, I do not mean to imply either that she craved the approval of respectable society, as is often assumed. She was horrified to think that her actions might be misconstrued, but not because she cared for what the world, or the world’s wife, thought. She took it upon herself to live out, in the defiant isolation of her exile, a new kind of respectability – an open avowal of honesty and decency of conduct, in which her behaviour, unconventional and bringing upon her the stigma of conventional people, was elevated to a higher duty. It was authenticated, as Levine and others here suggest, by a supreme “truth to feeling.” Unfortunately, that could look all too much like having your way and hanging the consequences. From this problem comes Eliot’s great theme – what Levine calls the “representative” question of her realism

(14) – not that of the shifting relation between passion and duty (*The Mill on the Floss*, book 7, chapter 2), but the question “where the duty of obedience ends, and the duty of resistance begins” (*Romola*, chapter 55). Obedience and resistance do not carry quite the same connotations as respectability and rebellion, and the insinuation of that Eliotean keyword, duty, into both sides of the equation reminds us just how Victorian both Eliots were – how “the *duty* of resistance” might not altogether satisfy our idea of a rebellious writer. George Eliot did indeed create her art out of “a cluster of rebellions, particularly against the reigning social, moral, and aesthetic conventions” (2), but they were not the rebellions of a rebellious person – a Maggie Tulliver.

I don’t mean to suggest by all this that we should be asking, Dorothea-like, whether Eliot’s fiction is our event only – whether anyone else, holding values different from our own, might also be present; simply that we are disadvantaged in not being able to see the landscape as the Victorians saw it. Eliot’s attitudes appear to us as opposing, and apparently irreconcilable, points of view: is she feminist or anti-feminist (Kate Flint’s contribution insightfully analyses the “number of ways one might seek to understand [Eliot’s] reluctance, or inability, to deliver up unequivocally feminist messages” [161])? is she socially progressive or reactionary? Like Ruth Pattermessenger and Rupert Rabeeno, we are copyists painstakingly recreating George Eliot from the evidence we have before us, but she is, and must be, more than an antiquarian’s trophy – a great Victorian under glass. Nevertheless we should be sure what it is we are looking at – this landscape a hundred and something years later.

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In her fiction George Eliot understood and utilised the idea of a companion more than, perhaps, most other Victorian writers. Her dry, ironic narrator’s voice,