

reach of the latter's mock heroics are a version of the same thing) (68). Similarly, if more briefly, Don Gray shrewdly devotes a paragraph to comparing Eliot's yearly earnings, as she began working for the *Westminster Review*, with those of Herbert Spencer and Lewes, and Chapman, and his assistants. But such comparative criticism is rare.

The instinct to follow Eliot's lead is a sensible and unsurprising mode of preparing a companion to her writing: readers come to the book, after all, wanting to know more about Eliot and what she made of her environment, the people and institutions around her. As I've suggested, this produces a very sympathetic mode of response and, in this way, is true to Eliot's own highest ethical and artistic impulses. To ask, "But why always George!" might appear faintly ridiculous. But, as my allusion to Chapter XX of *Middlemarch* suggests, in another way, the determination to follow Eliot's lead, to see the world from within the framework she provides, is not faithful to her highest impulses, for she insisted that lives and works be understood comparatively. To understand Dorothea we must understand Causabon, seeing him not only from Dorothea's vantage. The *Cambridge Companion* succeeds so amply in its purposes that I am reluctant to present this thought as a complaint. Indeed, that would be ungrateful, for it is only my sustained engagement with essays of such intelligence, working on an author of such intelligence, that has prompted the thought – a deconstructive one, I'd venture – that this volume is least like Eliot when it most follows her.

RESPONSE

George Levine

When the editors first told me that they proposed to hold a Review Forum around the *Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, I was a little surprised. A "companion," after all, is not likely to be a ground breaking or particularly controversial sort of volume. Companions have work to do and their appeal is not to a specialised public but to whatever there may be remaining of the "common reader," which often means, for the most part, undergraduates studying literature for the first time and needing a kind of pony to help them gallop through. An editor's relation to a "companion" is always in some sense compromised by the publisher's requirements.

It's not quite the case, as Andrew Miller suggests, that "suddenly our entrance into the company of canonical authors has become richly attended." The *business* of post World War II literary study has always produced too many volumes of "companions," although the word has now been appropriated for the Cambridge series in which my George Eliot appears. Companions belong to a genre that, as Andrew McNeelie of Blackwells pointed out in an MLA session on "companions," produces about the only critical books that are likely to make money. Publishers like

them because they appeal to what, in literary study, is considered a wide audience. Editors like me like them because (shush!) they can yield enough royalties to pay for a few classy dinners at fine restaurants. Students like them because they convey a lot of information in short space. And we have to face up to the fact that teachers of literature, though they often don't want to admit it, like them because they allow for very quick boning up on subjects of interest.

No, this doesn't do entire justice either to the genre or to my feelings about it. I have always liked well-produced companions, in part because they are generically committed to being readable, but also because they don't encourage showing off and gratuitous intellectual pyrotechnics, and because they presume a reader who is not professionally committed to the subject, but merely interested – as though literature were really a pleasure and not merely a job. The ideal is that the essays in a companion – as the editors of my series emphasised in our early talks – appeal to professionals, too, but their emphasis was on the student and the lay reader, and it was nice, as I set to work, to think that someone beyond a couple of hundred colleagues I run into at conferences would be affected in some way by what I think. I know that I have not infrequently found essays in “companions” – though this must be a distinctly professional secret – that have taught me entirely new stuff about my own literary specialties.

I considered myself fortunate, then, when the Cambridge editors asked me if I would edit the George Eliot volume. I didn't hesitate, but I did ask myself immediately, “why me?” This wasn't disingenuous. I know I have something of an academic reputation, but I had never written a book exclusively about George Eliot or established myself particularly as “a George Eliot scholar.” I answered myself rather quickly with this speculation: it was “me” precisely because of the special constraints of the companion genre. They must have wanted someone who was not so specialised as to lose track of a general public's range of knowledge and interest; someone who had a decent reputation but who had not been identified with any of the most arcane critical/theoretical thinking, and yet also had not alienated practitioners or been alienated from them; someone who would value clear, jargon-free writing; and someone old-fashioned enough to begin with a felt (and largely unembarrassed) commitment to George Eliot's greatness. Finally, they surely wanted someone who had enough contacts and presence in the George Eliot community to persuade good scholars to write for the book.

My major problem (as for all “companion” editors) was to find the right contributors. They would determine the quality of the book. I knew I had to avoid asking only my contemporaries, many of whom are certainly very smart but all of whom come from a distant generation of readers, so I read around and found brilliant young scholars like Josephine McDonagh and Suzy Anger and Nancy Henry, about whom I could predict only that they would give me interesting and well-written essays. There was an obvious reason for me to ask each of the contributors, but each – it should be clear – is a scholar of absolute independence

and integrity, so that I couldn't possibly predict that the book would have what retrospectively looks like theoretical and scholarly coherence. At least each of the respondents seems to find something of that coherence in it. I am pleased but at last half way innocent of responsibility for the coherence. Obviously, since I had liked their earlier work, the contributors were likely to have ideas at least partly consonant with my own. I *am* sorry that in my searches I failed to recruit someone – and Armstrong and others rightly complain about this – to write extensively about George Eliot's poetry. I tried, really I did. But it may well be that, not having myself done a lot of work on George Eliot's poetry, I didn't push as hard as I should have done: my prejudices and limitations were obviously at work in my judgment of whom to ask. That has to be why the George Eliot companion is more uniform – and less complete – than I had expected when I gathered the writers (who still seem to me a remarkably diverse group writing from many different critical perspectives). I was lucky in persuading those who wrote for the book, as I seem to have been lucky in my respondents here.

With this sense of compromise and not so secret commitment, I was delighted then to read the very generous responses of all the contributors to the forum. They heap upon the companion praise I happily accept (though I have always my own reservations, in particular that most practical sense of compromise I've just discussed). Judith Johnston is unsparingly kind, for which I thank her; and like the others, she has very responsibly attempted to represent what each of the contributors is up to. But the respondents do express serious reservations too, sometimes perhaps with too courteous restraint. They raise important questions about George Eliot, and implicitly about the genre of the companion, and implicitly about our critical moment, and I'm pleased that their reservations give me a chance to address some of those questions.

Perhaps the overriding unease of the respondents is a reflex of one of the conditions of the genre itself. The companion genre, and the George Eliot volume certainly does not entirely escape this, is intrinsically committed to celebration and even to a touch of hagiography. Such volumes usually exist because the subjects are, as Andrew Miller notes, "canonical" (how big an audience would a book devoted to a non-canonical writer attract?). In effect, their job is to show why a great writer is great, and that assumes that the notion of greatness lurks quietly in the background of all the essays, even the insistently non-judgmental ones. One might easily find monographs devoted to exposing and deflating, but it's not likely that one would find a companion doing that work. I took the job of editing the volume first and foremost because I admired George Eliot's novels enormously, and over the course of forty and more years of reading them, and of reading critiques and biographies and interpretations, they had never palled on me. When Miller notes that the volume contains "remarkably few judgments," he has got it right – but wrong also. Because almost all of the essays (certainly mine) do imply the "companion" judgment, that whatever one thinks of this passage, this idea, this episode in the life, the prose, the

biography, the work and its details are valuable. Isobel Armstrong, too, has it exactly right when she notes that the book “refuses [. . .] a ‘carceral’ reading of her novels as the disciplinary work of creating the liberal subject,” and like Miller she points out that it tries to “provide the grounds for reading the George Eliot archive in the shape of the nineteenth-century knowledges that inform her work.” But she is also right – and cuts there to the heart of the generic problem – when she says, with the gentlest hesitation, that she is “not sure that the *Companion*’s Eliot does not require a little iconoclasm.”

Dolin and Miller both lean in the direction of Armstrong’s healthily explicit call for iconoclasm. The judgments are more than friendly enough, but also a justifiable complaint. There is something just a bit old fashioned about the book’s commitment to sympathetic coverage and to what Dolin calls the “speciousness and awkwardness” of the division of tightly interwoven subjects, like science, philosophy, religion. Still, as Miller complains, the book is, as I wanted it, and as he and Armstrong (not quite) complain, largely worked out from George Eliot’s point of view. I could not have predicted that the others would, like me, try to find that point of view, although again the pressure of the genre might lead to that ideal position. But in fact, I was hoping to steer a course somewhere between the extremes of a book that looked exactly as it might have forty years ago, and one that tendentiously argues some critical positions of the moment, and likely a position all too informed by the sorts of Foucauldian carceral readings made popular in recent years by D. A. Miller’s influential, *The Novel and the Police* (readings, I confess, that I usually find intelligent, partial, and inadequate to the richness of the text and its cultural work). Andrew Miller is right again: some of the subjects could have been formulated forty years ago, but I was confident that good contributors would provide what Tim Dolin sees as the book’s work, the perspective of the present, “our way of looking at George Eliot.” I hope that the book, while honouring the past, does give us the George Eliot of “*nos jours*” – not only a George Eliot of her time, but a George Eliot who has emerged from the pressures of cultural studies, and a range of feminist approaches, and the new historicism, and Marxist criticism and deconstruction, and who therefore cannot be the George Eliot of 1880 or even of 1960. (Miller is again right, by the way – there’s a gap in the book because it doesn’t deal directly with those few important deconstructive critiques that were making a splash twenty years ago (essays by Hillis Miller and Cynthia Chase, in particular. I regret only that Neil Hertz’s brilliant set of deconstructive essays, *George Eliot’s Pulse*, appeared too late for the *Companion*).

But Borges’ “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” is perhaps the ultimate comment on the project. There is no rewriting the past. And yet one has deep responsibilities to the past, responsibilities that I hoped the *Companion* would fulfil. Suzy Anger’s strong collection of essays (“companion” also?) on the subject, *Knowing the Past*, raises the important questions and points in directions I personally would take, toward a recognition that “if we straightaway move to

discount a part of their thought, then we will inevitably find simply a confirmation of present views" (18). I take Andrew Miller's questions about the book's acquiescence in George Eliot's way of seeing very seriously, and his last point yet more strongly: "the determination to follow Eliot's lead, to see the world from within the framework she provides, is not faithful to her highest impulses, for she insisted that lives and works be understood comparatively." Strategically, I thought I was honouring George Eliot precisely by refusing to take myself as the measure of her work and thought, trying to be not me; but this is a problematic move, problematic in the ways George Eliot's own efforts to get beyond the "Why Always Dorothea" position was problematic.

Of course, there is no being "not me," in at least some very important senses of that project. Armstrong notes quietly how the book tries to take the shape of the "nineteenth century knowledges that inform" George Eliot's work. And she probes tellingly my own essay's tendency to fall back on the word "must" – as in "Gwendolen 'must learn,'" etc. Where does that "must" come from? As I wrote it, surely, I was thinking it came from George Eliot; but Armstrong's critique brilliantly forces recognition that it comes distinctly from me, the author of the essay, who has taken a line of interpretation as authoritative and attempts to throw himself into the George Eliot he purports to represent. I am, minimally, participating in those conditions myself, if not creating them. It is not simply representation, it is endorsement; and since, as George Eliot notes elsewhere, "interpretations are illimitable," my quietly representative "must" may well fail to honour, as Miller says, George Eliot's own views even as it attempts to do so.

It's a tricky business, this effort to honour the past. It allows all sorts of devious, even if well intentioned impositions on the past of present views. In the end, I would have to argue, one can only try, and be grateful when someone else catches you out in potential contradictions. Writing with Anger's sort of commitment to knowing the past, one is always in danger of being seduced by it, and deceived by the ways in which we can, Borges like, impose ourselves on it. George Eliot may indeed be me here, but in being me, isn't. And yet all the respondents honour this companion for so richly documenting the materials of George Eliot's thought and narrative methods. Nobody seems not to want to use these materials. Is it fair to ask how those materials can inspire confidence if at the same time, that as we believe in them, we are submitting to the forceful pressure of our own projections?

Why always George Eliot? I am hoping that the essays do not fail to be "comparative" (Miller points to the comparative quality of Welsh's essay, though as a singular instance). Josephine McDonagh's essay concludes reading Ruskin's negative assessment as a means to better understand what George Eliot was up to; Suzy Anger makes George Eliot's thought comprehensible by seeing her in the context of a strong continental tradition of hermeneutics; Diana Postlethwaite sets George Eliot's thought within a broad Victorian scientific context; Barry Qualls sets

her in the context of a long tradition of religious typology; Nancy Henry establishes a strong political context. All of these, of course, might be said to be from George Eliot's "point of view," but all of them introduce elements against which George Eliot had to struggle, counterviews, complications. George Eliot is the subject here, and these contextualisations, offered to be sure from the perspective of what it was George Eliot was trying to do, aspire to something short of Menard's project, but something quite George Eliot like – that is, to see her not strictly from our own perspective, but to preserve her difference even as we try to make her accessible.

In the end, then, recognising the dizzying possibilities of reflexiveness in the efforts of objective registration of the other – here, George Eliot – the critique I take most to heart is Armstrong's, that the book could do with a little more iconoclasm. In the sense that the very contextualising of George Eliot's thought lets her off the hook, in the sense that the volume's concern with the "Yes...but" nature of George Eliot's realism in effect makes "yes...but" the nature of its own critical strategies – in that sense, I think the book could indeed have been strengthened. That would have entailed fighting against the limits of the genre itself, but the George Eliot described in the volume was herself, at her best, a writer pushing against generic constraints. So most fully to honour George Eliot would be to get beyond hagiography (which she herself allowed in Alexander Main's *Wise Witty and Tender Sayings of George Eliot*).

I can do better at explaining the position the book tends to take than at breaking out of it. In attempting to wrestle free from a long context of early modernist critique of George Eliot's moralism and conventionality, and Nietzschean contempt, and out of our contemporary efforts to subvert *her* subversions, I emphasised in my introductory essays, and other contributors in their ways did similarly, the aspects of her art and moral positioning that were "innovative," as opposed to those that were conservative. As I suggested right at the start, the hagiographical impulse of the companion genre has a lot to do with the way any given companion is constructed. In the opening pages – a point that Tim Dolin jumps on – I make the tentative claim that George Eliot is perhaps the greatest of Victorian novelists. Well, to be honest, that's the way I have always experienced it, yet I probably wouldn't have said it in an essay written for professional scholars and critics. And of course, I was and am aware that the claim is generally if not personally extravagant. Dolin is willing to concede that George Eliot is the greatest Victorian novelist of ideas, but, he says, "let's be frank: the greatest Victorian novelist can still irk us." And it's clear that he prefers Dickens, and for good reason, because Dickens' "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." I wrote my introduction and edited the book with a strong consciousness that Dolin's way of thinking about it here has been the dominant one.

Most of us probably have at some point or other in reading George Eliot felt the exasperation that comes with the “but,” the conservative falling back, as when Romola first returns to Tito under the moral pressures of Savanorola’s persuasion. Damn it, one wants to say, this is just too much. And there is a Casaubonian pettiness one finds occasionally in her art – no one more aware of this than George Eliot herself – and often in her letters and notes. And yes, it is hard these days not to feel Armstrong’s justified disgust at the way George Eliot’s “principled refusal of alliance with feminists seems cowardly, even mean, when one considers how difficult it was to be a feminist in nineteenth-century British culture.” And yes, one can feel “gasps as well as tears” at some of the most intense of moments in George Eliot’s novels.

This “companion” has chosen to emphasise George Eliot’s superb and strenuous intelligence, her rebellions and scandal and risk-taking, and in doing so, writing in the context of the moment, a balance that has seemed to go the other way – that privileges the Dionysiac, the contempt for liberal balance, the joys of instability, William Jamesian feeling over Enlightenment rationality, and overt political action. Thus, it probably has not been quite adequate to the moments that might produce the gasp, to the evidences of George Eliot’s meanness, not only in relation to her contemporary feminism but even in the smallness of her gift to Girton College – fifty pounds, I think it was – or in her brief abandonment of the Blackwoods, who had so patiently and thoughtfully nurtured her and her early work. In the end it seems to me that the rich innovativeness of George Eliot’s art, and the moral toughness of her imagination were worth emphasising, and I am still very glad that the contributors, to whom I did not talk about any of these matters, for the most part saw it that way as well. If the book has perhaps learned too well the “yes...but” lessons of George Eliot’s realism, it is very hard for me even now not to think of those lessons as still valuable.

There is much more that the book might have done – more poetry, to be sure, and certainly more attention to the ways in which, even in narrative experiment, George Eliot struggled toward some kinds of integration of myth and realism. There might have been much more about the costs of the “yes...but” strategy, and more yet, self-reflexively, about the ways in which it is so difficult to think one’s way into George Eliot and honour her without also betraying her best, most innovative and creative and least waffling self.

While we can now all comfortably and amusedly acquiesce in Borges’ stunning serio/comic affirmation of the impossibility of reproducing the past, it is important to understand that recognition of that impossibility, which seemed so liberating as it came upon us all through the last half of the twentieth century, so much an opening for subversive critiques and disturbance of conventions, can also be an invitation to the complacency of imposing our own inescapable imaginations on others and, precisely, losing their difference. “Yes...but.” I remain pleased, in fact, that on the whole the George Eliot companion attempts to imagine her

difference, to register her point of view (which is not our own, not even entirely mine), and to learn from it, and I am all the more pleased that these generous and thought-provoking respondents see the book's values through all of its limitations. Seeking to know the past means precisely risking the difference that the best criticism can foreground and analyse, the difference between our way of seeing the world and organising it, and the subject's (in this case, George Eliot's) way. Or ways.
