



***The Transferred Life of George Eliot: The Biography of a Novelist,***

By Philip Davis

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In closing this rich and detailed study of George Eliot's life and works, author Philip Davis recalls first reading *Middlemarch* over forty-five years earlier. He remembers, he says, "thinking as never before on completing a book: now I am going to be lonely again, back out in life without the help of a George Eliot behind me" (391). This monograph is evidently the outcome of what happened over the ensuing decades, as Davis continued to engage with Eliot's fiction. He worked out how the novelist might be a lasting presence in his own life, and why that could happen, and indeed had happened, for others as well.

The notion of the "transferred life" of the title is crucial. Its two main referents are the process through which "George Eliot" emerged from "Marian Evans" by constantly drawing on the inchoate raw material of the original woman's life, and then the ways in which the literary results could be "transferred" to readers so as to benefit their own lives. Marian Evans was always present in the fiction, as George Eliot implied when – on being asked who the model for *Middlemarch*'s pedant Mr Casaubon was – she "pointed to her own heart" (325).

The first chapters of Davis's book chart the life of Marian Evans before she began writing fiction, emphasising the personal experiences and intellectual influences – including their overlapping, notably in her unrequited love for Herbert Spencer and her eventual long-time partnership with George Henry Lewes. The following chapters deal with the fiction itself, highlighting how key interludes bear witness both to the novelist's experience and to her struggles with it. In so doing, these latter chapters register the complexity of human life as Eliot rendered it, a complexity which Davis argues helps to endow her imaginative endeavours with potentially transformative effects on readers. By the time of *Middlemarch*, he believes, the novelist had created in the wise mentor Eliot her own greatest character, but the bearing of this figure on "the human search for meaning" (2) was partly dependent on the traces of Marian Evans in the fiction.

Discussing the influence of other texts on Marian Evans, Davis demonstrates how the works of J. A. Froude (*The Nemesis of Faith*) and Charles Hennell (*Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity*), plus the writers the future novelist translated (D. F. Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach and Baruch Spinoza), brought out for her the implications of what later parlance termed a "paradigm shift". These were intellectual, in that the decline of belief in God and an afterlife as bases for morality and motives for human behaviour obviously had a significant influence on people's worldviews. But Davis also shows how this intellectual focus sensitised her to all kinds of movements in thought and feeling, generating perceptions that would play out psychologically in Eliot's characters.

What is salient in his version of Marian Evans's reading life is her growing valorisation of human feeling and its resonances. The relation between thought and emotion was always

crucial, such that Feuerbach and Spinoza, for example, complemented each other. Whereas “Feuerbach inhabited the early world of intuition and feeling, Spinoza represented the late world of corrective reason and full consciousness” (115), but Spinoza also offered “an implicitly passionate act of analysis, emotion taken up into thought of itself, of the capacity to think” (126). Eliot then sought to transmit “vibrations”, or what Davis calls a “neural music of thinking and feeling” (55), aimed at communicating to readers the “emergent” (Lewes’s word), rather than the fixed.

Davis’s treatment of the fiction gives welcome attention to the first collection, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, and especially to the “vibrations” between Tryan and Janet in “Janet’s Repentance”. He then zones in on important – and always complex – interactions among characters, in the novels, plus descriptions of their individual psychological processes as they respond to difficult predicaments. Davis does not attempt a comprehensive handling of each novel, but offers very subtle and insightful explorations of aspects such as: Adam Bede’s changing responses to Hetty Sorrel (*Adam Bede*); Philip Wakem’s complicated perceptions about Maggie Tulliver (*The Mill on the Floss*); the nuances of Dorothea and Lydgate’s feelings about their spouses, and each other, in *Middlemarch*; and (unusually in critical writing on *Felix Holt*), Harold Transome’s relinquishing of Esther Lyon.

Although this is not an overtly polemical study, Davis conducts a defence of the nineteenth-century realist novel by championing the achievement of the writer he sees as its greatest practitioner. It is a form, he says, that some recent critical theory has scorned as “conservatively bland and unimaginative, bourgeois and parochial, not truly art at all” (233). Davis persuasively argues that the worth and impact of what Henry James called the “large, loose, baggy monsters” of Victorian fiction inhere in that very looseness and baggyness. Or more precisely, Eliot’s kind of novel is “as close as art could get to recreating life’s raw and diverse excess of unassimilated material” (266), and is all the more valuable for that.

Davis in fact prefers the perspective of Henry James’s brother William, the philosopher and psychologist, who was an admirer of Eliot and praised *Middlemarch* for being “fuller of human stuff than any novel that was ever written” (1). William James is one of several writers, past and present, whom Davis invokes as having grappled productively with Eliot’s fiction. Particularly illuminating as regards Victorian figures are his accounts of her regular sympathetic reviewer, Richard Holt Hutton, and troubled younger adherent, F. W. H. Myers. Hutton was unwilling to accept that human life could have meaning once faith in God and the afterlife was lost, but came to appreciate how Eliot’s literary effects were slow and cumulative like those of life itself, as well as how her creation of Tito in *Romola* showed “how near the best and the worst were to each other” (361). Myers shared Hutton’s religious quandaries, yet Eliot’s fiction alerted him to the subliminal aspects of the human psyche which his own writing would investigate. Davis points more briefly to contemporary writers, including novelists A. S. Byatt and Howard Jacobsen, whose work is testimony to Eliot’s ongoing legacy. Davis’s book has a great deal to offer, but the continuing impact of Eliot’s fiction is one topic I would have liked to read more about. Such a discussion would surely strengthen his case for her achievement.

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