

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09174-9 - George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art

Joan Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Part I

The Formative Years:
Intellectual and Emotional
Development

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09174-9 - George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art

Joan Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

BEFORE THE MOVE TO COVENTRY

WHEN HENRY JAMES tells us, in *The Middle Years*, of his brief but intimate encounter with George Eliot he declares that the personal contact added something for him to the enjoyment of her books, more particularly those he read afterwards:

I found it intimately concerned in my perusal of *Middlemarch*, so soon then to appear, and even in that of *Deronda*, its intervention on behalf of which defied any chill of time.

Those two great works, the masterpiece and the failure alike, command the attention of any reader who delights in good fiction; but perhaps something would be added if we could establish a relation with the author:

So it was, at any rate [Henry James continues], that my *relation*—for I didn't go so far as to call it ours—helped me to squeeze further values from the intrinsic substance of the copious final productions I have named, a weight of variety, dignity and beauty of which I have never allowed my measure to shrink.

He dictated those sentences in 1914 when, for most people, the measure of appreciation for George Eliot, and especially for her later work was shrinking. Since then it has expanded again; but it may be that if we could establish a closer relation with the author our appreciation of her work would be more discriminating and more complete than it is. The facts of her life are well known but they are easily misinterpreted; it is often supposed, for instance, that she shed her religious faith with equal ease and suddenness when she met the Hennells and the Brays at Coventry; and that the 'melancholy' in her books is the consequence of her unadmitted hankering for her lost religious beliefs. Or it is supposed that she lived to regret a hasty decision to live with

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09174-9 - George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art

Joan Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GEORGE ELIOT

G. H. Lewes in spite of legal impediments and that she longed afterwards for the status of a married woman, which she achieved by her marriage with J. W. Cross, eighteen months after Lewes's death. When we look more closely at her own *Letters and Journals*¹ or at contemporary memoirs, neither of these suppositions remains credible. We are forced to discard the imaginary portrait of a frustrated woman, deprived by her own choices of religious support and of social dignity and consequently sternly pre-occupied with the importance of morals. The caricature was never easily compatible with the impression of opulent power made by the novels. A perusal of printed evidences is a poor substitute for such an encounter as Henry James had when he found George Eliot deeply agitated by the illness of Lewes's son and was himself privileged to go and hasten the arrival of the doctor. But printed evidences are the only clue we have to the character of the author. From them we can learn much about the development of her thought and feeling prior to her creative activity. She was born with the gifts that made her a great novelist, but their development was slow and impeded and their idiosyncrasy is the consequence of nurture as well as nature.

It is possible to supplement our knowledge of the youthful Mary Ann Evans from the portraits of George Eliot's heroines Maggie Tulliver, Dorothea Brooke and, with certain added cautions, Romola. Of these three heroines, Maggie is the nearest to her author in circumstances, but all three have important intellectual and temperamental characteristics in common with her. They share her intense moral earnestness, her passionate nature with its tendency to self-mistrust and self-mortification, her thirst for

large draughts of intellectual day

as well as

thirsts of love more large than they.

And love for them all meant the opportunity for self-devotion as well as the assurance of being beloved. Like them also she

¹ J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life, Letters and Journals*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09174-9 - George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art

Joan Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BEFORE THE MOVE TO COVENTRY

suffered (until she found her own vocation) from the narrowness of the opportunities in her day for a young woman to develop and use intellectual powers. Mary Ann Evans would have welcomed such a suitor as Casaubon with the same feelings as did Dorothea. She may indeed have felt something similar (allowing for the different circumstances) for Dr Brabant when he handed over to her the wearisome task of translating Strauss's *Leben Jesu*. She was as ready as Dorothea to accept the scholar at his own valuation and to find joy in devoted service to his illusory grandeur of mind and soul.

But to understand her enthusiasm for the iconoclastic scholar we have first to watch the passionately religious little girl developing into the agnostic young woman. Religious zeal was not inculcated at home. All that we know about her father Robert Evans, and all that we guess when we attempt to make a composite picture from our impressions of Adam Bede, Mr Tulliver and Caleb Garth, assure us that it was not. Our right to use those three characters to help us derives in the first case from her own admission that Adam was 'suggested by my father's early life';¹ in the second from the fact that Maggie Tulliver is in a measure a self-portrait; and in the third from the fact that Caleb was, like Robert Evans, an estates manager of peculiar intelligence, integrity and devotion to his calling.² Of the three it is probably Caleb who most resembles Robert; whereas Tulliver has little in common with him except his relations with his wife's sisters and the quality of his love for his daughter. None of them is religious in the sense in which Mary Ann became religious under the influence of her schoolteacher Miss Lewis. It did not worry Robert that his daughter had become a Calvinist with a stern belief in predestination and a horror of all worldly delights. If it had he would not have sent her, after eight years at her evangelical school, to spend the next three under the Misses Franklin, daughters of a Baptist minister. Regular church

¹ Cross, vol. II, p. 67.

² Also Cross, doubtless with her authority, indicates that Caleb as well as Adam derived in a measure from Robert Evans.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09174-9 - George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art

Joan Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GEORGE ELIOT

attendance mattered to him as did all the orderly traditions of the English countryside. He was conservative rather than religious and was content with outward conformity and a high standard of moral conduct: 'a Tory who had not exactly a dislike for dissenters, but a slight opinion of them as persons of unfounded self-confidence'.¹ It was at her second boarding-school, of which Miss Lewis was principal and to which Mary Ann was sent with her elder sister at the age of eight, that she met for the first time with religious enthusiasm, a creed dominating the whole life and compelling self-repression and self-devotion. Moral earnestness and intellectual consistency were both native to her and she eagerly adopted the religious outlook of her teachers which dominated her life up to the age of twenty. Maggie Tulliver's masochistic self-repression is largely autobiographical. This is borne out by Mary Ann's letters to Miss Lewis. The first of those published by Cross was written when she was nineteen and records her first visit to London:

Let me tell you, though, that I was not at all delighted with the stir of the great Babel.

And no wonder since her brother Isaac remembered that 'she was so under the influence of religious and ascetic ideas, that she would not go to any of the theatres, but spent all her evenings alone reading'. In the same letter she writes:

For my part, when I hear of the marrying and giving in marriage that is constantly being transacted, I can only sigh for those who are multiplying earthly ties which, though powerful enough to detach their hearts and thoughts from heaven, are so brittle as to be liable to be snapped asunder by every breeze... I must believe that those are the happiest who are not fermenting themselves by engaging in projects for earthly bliss, who are considering this life merely as a pilgrimage, a scene calling for diligence and watchfulness, not for repose and amusement. I do not deny that there may be many who can partake with a high degree of zest of all the lawful enjoyments the world can offer, and yet live in near communion with their God... but I confess

¹ Cross, vol. 1, p. 4.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09174-9 - George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art

Joan Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BEFORE THE MOVE TO COVENTRY

that in my short experience and narrow sphere of action I have never been able to attain to this. I find, as Dr Johnson said respecting his wine, total abstinence much easier than moderation. I do not wonder you are pleased with Pascal; his thoughts may be returned to again and again with increasing rather than diminished relish. I have highly enjoyed Hannah More's letters: the contemplation of so blessed a character as hers is very salutary... Oh that we could live only for eternity! that we could realize its nearness! I know you do not love quotations, so I will not give you one; but if you do not distinctly remember it, do turn to the passage in Young's *Infidel Reclaimed* beginning, 'O vain, vain, vain all else eternity', and do love the lines for my sake.¹

It is an odd and rather repellent letter from a girl of nineteen; but, with Maggie Tulliver to help us, it is not impossible to feel sympathy for the inexperienced, ardent girl who finds total self-repression easier than moderation. Single-minded devotion to a person or an idea remained her characteristic after she adopted a more liberal outlook, but neither Hannah More nor the poet Young were to retain her respect.

She wrote of the former in 1845 to John Sibree:

I am glad you detest Mrs Hannah More's letters. I like neither her letters, nor her books, nor her character;

while the latter is the subject of a devastating piece of criticism contributed by her to *The Westminster Review*, January 1857:

If it were not for the prospect of immortality, he considers, it would be wise and agreeable to be indecent, or to murder one's father; and, heaven apart, it would be extremely irrational in any man not to be a knave.

The same moral passion that attracted her to Young when she was a girl repels her when she is a woman. His insistence on immortality is mercenary:

... to us it is conceivable that in some minds the deep pathos lying in the thought of human mortality... lies nearer to the fountains of moral emotion than the conception of extended existence. And surely it

¹ Cross, vol. 1, p. 40.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09174-9 - George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art

Joan Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GEORGE ELIOT

ought to be a welcome fact if the conception of *mortality* as well as of immortality be favourable to virtue. Do writers of sermons and religious novels prefer that men should be vicious in order that there may be a more evident political and social necessity for printed sermons and clerical fictions? Because learned gentlemen are theological, are we to have no more simple honesty and good-will?

True virtue, she has discovered, flowers naturally out of good feeling, it has nothing to do with calculation; she draws an interesting parallel between morality and the arts:

On its theoretic and preceptive side, morality touches science; on its emotional side Art. Now, the products of Art are great in proportion as they result from that immediate prompting of innate power which we call genius, and not from laboured obedience to a theory or rule; and the presence of genius or innate prompting is directly opposed to the perpetual consciousness of a rule. The action of faculty is imperious, and excludes the reflection *why* it should act. In the same way in proportion as morality is emotional, that is has affinity with Art, it will exhibit itself in direct sympathetic feeling and action, and not as the recognition of a rule. Love does not say 'I ought to love'—it loves. Pity does not say 'It is right to be pitiful'—it pities. Justice does not say, 'I am bound to be just'—it feels justly. It is only where moral emotion is comparatively weak that the contemplation of a rule or theory habitually mingles with its action; and in accordance with this, we think experience, both in literature and life, has shown that the minds which are pre-eminently didactic—which insist on a 'lesson', and despise everything that will not convey a moral—are deficient in sympathetic emotion.

When George Eliot's heart and mind matured she came to believe that repression was not the surest road to virtue. In the meanwhile, her moral passion took an ascetic form, under the influence of her ardent affection for her teacher. Throughout the formative years we can observe two characteristics of the personality which was to develop into the genius of the novelist: the passionate force of her affections and the intellectual energy with which she pursues the inquiries those affections suggest to her. When her emotions are involved her first impulse is to embrace the creed of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09174-9 - George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art

Joan Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BEFORE THE MOVE TO COVENTRY

the person she loves. She has the artist's and the woman's impulse to identify herself with the object of her sympathies. But she has also a powerful intellect and a hunger of the mind which impel her to explore ideas and to retain and interconnect them. Both characteristics directed her towards the change of faith which was consummated at Coventry in 1841. A letter to Miss Lewis on 20 May 1839 expresses a recognition in herself of a tendency towards what Keats calls 'negative capability'. It can be set beside Keats's letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818, about the 'poetical character'; Keats writes that:

A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity... It is a wretched thing to have to confess; but it is a very fact that not one word I utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature—how can it, when I have no nature? When I am in a room with people... the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me so that I am in a very little time annihilated...

Later, September 1819, Keats writes:

The only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing—to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts.

For Mary Ann Evans, in 1839, there was a conflict between her need for intellectual clarity and integrity and the artist's impulse to sympathize and assimilate. She writes to Miss Lewis:

I think no one finds more difficulty in coming to a decision on controverted matters than myself. I do not mean that I have not preferences; but, however congruous a theory may be with my notions, I cannot find that comfortable repose that others appear to possess after having made their election of a class of sentiments. The other day Montaigne's motto came to my mind (it is mentioned by Pascal) as an appropriate one for me—'Que sais-je?'—beneath a pair of balances...

She is immediately aware of the dangers, to a devout Christian, of adopting such a motto and she adds:

...though, it is an ambiguous one, and may be taken in a sense that I desire to reprobate, as well as in a Scriptural one to which I do not refer. I use it in a limited sense as a representation of my oscillating judgment.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09174-9 - George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art

Joan Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GEORGE ELIOT

The views between which her judgement was oscillating at that time were those of the Evangelical Church and those of the Oxford Movement. Miss Lewis's devotion to the one and Isaac's conversion to the other must have divided her sympathies, and her intellect began to explore in both directions. The letter makes it clear that she has been focussing her attention upon two points at issue between them: first, the question of scriptural authority for episcopalianism and the ensuing controversy about the national establishment; and secondly, the fundamental doctrinal question about 'justification by faith'. She has been reading the works of writers on both sides:

On no subject do I veer to all points of the compass more frequently than on the nature of the visible Church. I am powerfully attracted in a certain direction, but when I am about to settle there, counter-assertions shake me from my position... I have been reading the new prize essay on *Schism* by Professor Hoppus and Milner's *Church History* since I last wrote to you: the former ably expresses the tenets of those who deny that any form of Church government is so clearly dictated in Scripture as to possess a divine right, and, consequently, to be binding on Christians; the latter, you know, exhibits the views of a modern Evangelical Episcopalian on the inferences to be drawn from ecclesiastical remains.

Apparently these inferences are that separatists must not be excluded from 'the visible Church' but that episcopalianism and a national church are indicated as the best form of church government. She has also been reading Gresley's *Portrait of an English Churchman*, which seems to her to make extravagant claims for the superiority of the Anglican over all other Christian Churches, and the Oxford Tracts which

...evince by their compliments to Rome... and their attempts to give a Romish colour to our ordinance, with a very confused and unscriptural statement of the great doctrine of justification, a disposition rather to fraternise with the members of a Church carrying on her brow the prophetic epithets applied by St John to the Scarlet Beast, the mystery of iniquity, than with pious Nonconformists.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09174-9 - George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art

Joan Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BEFORE THE MOVE TO COVENTRY

It is clear that, despite her love for her brother, Mary Ann's disposition is rather to 'fraternize' with the Nonconformists than with Rome. The protestant influence of Miss Lewis, an Evangelical churchwoman, had been followed up by the protestant influence of the Misses Franklin, who were Baptists. All these teachers, who had won her love and her respect, accepted Calvin's doctrine of election and of justification by faith. The doctrine teaches that good works cannot earn grace though they will be among the proofs that it has been given. In 1837 Mary Ann had been so convinced a Calvinist that she was shocked by the Arminianism of her Methodist aunt, her father's sister-in-law, the prototype of Dinah Morris. Mathilde Blind quotes, in her biography of George Eliot, from a letter written to Sara Hennell in 1859:

I had never talked with a Wesleyan before and we used to have little debates about predestination, for I was then a strong Calvinist. Here her superiority came out, and I remember now, with loving admiration, one thing which at the time I disapproved; it was not strictly a consequence of her Arminian belief, and at first sight might seem opposed to it, yet it came from the spirit of love which clings to the bad logic of Arminianism. When my Uncle came to fetch her, after she had been with us a fortnight or three weeks, he was speaking of a deceased minister, once greatly respected, who, from the action of trouble upon him had taken to small tipping, though otherwise not culpable. 'But I hope the good man is in heaven for all that', said my Uncle. 'Oh yes,' said my Aunt, with a deep inward groan of joyful conviction, 'Mr A's in heaven, that's sure.' This was at the time an offence to my stern, ascetic, hard views—how beautiful it is to me now.

It is interesting to notice here, in passing, that the anecdote of a good man who took to 'small tipping' as the result of 'trouble' was probably the germ of the short story *Janet's Repentance*.

The beliefs George Eliot held when she wrote that letter were gradually evolved during these early years (not suddenly adopted when she met the Brays in 1841). They were evolved by means of the books she read and thought about and to which she was led partly by her affections. If she differed in religious