GEORGE ELIOT'S INTELLECTUAL LIFE

It is well known that George Eliot's intelligence and her wide knowledge of literature, history, philosophy and religion shaped her fiction, but until now no study has followed the development of her thinking from her early years to her later works. This intellectual biography traces the course of that development from her initial Christian culture, through her loss of faith and working out of a humanistic and cautiously progressive worldview, to the thought-provoking achievements of her novels. It focuses on her responses to her reading in her essays, reviews and letters as well as in the historical pictures of *Romola*, the political implications of *Felix Holt*, the comprehensive view of English society in *Middlemarch*, and the visionary account of personal inspiration and possible national renewal in *Daniel Deronda*. This portrait of a major Victorian intellectual is an important new addition to our understanding of Eliot's mind and works, as well as of her place in nineteenth-century British culture.

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Preface

What to call her? The subject of this study changed her name repeatedly during her life, but I shall refer to her throughout as George Eliot, not only for convenience but on a psychological premiss. While modifying her social identity by renaming, she was continuously creating an intellectual identity. "George Eliot" names this evolving self-creation.

This developmental view of Eliot avoids thinking of her as permanently attached to any ideology or definitively influenced by any other thinker. As with all great writers, her mind was marked by independence, a synthetic tendency, and broad sympathy.

A few words on method. My preparation for writing this study involved reading (or reading in) what George Eliot read. As a teacher of mine once remarked, she read "everything" – and what she didn't read, Lewes read. So I haven't read every word she read; considering the dross she had to review, it's not certain that she read every word either. My aim in serving as an intellectual historian has been somewhat different from that of my training as a literary critic. It is the Collingwoodian one, to recreate in my own understanding the mind of the historical subject, to grasp the motivation, content and action of that mind in her writing, both fictional and non-fictional. This is, of course, an unattainable goal, not the less worth striving for. A related methodological concern has been to make it difficult for the reader to discern where I agree or disagree with Eliot's ideas. In this aim, too, I have probably not succeeded.

Eliot's novels will be considered here not as works of art but as moments for the emergence of ideas. This is obviously an artificial distinction, for artistic constructs are ideas, too. Yet it should be possible to discuss distinct elements of an artwork without undertaking the task of literary criticism, the explication of whole works. The theoretical challenges of my approach lie within the sphere of the history of ideas, rather than in literary criticism, which has its own theoretical problems. There are roughly three approaches to ideas in fiction: an author believed certain things and here they are in the

novel or poem – the insertive approach; here is an idea in a novel or poem, and the author must have believed it – the extractive approach; and, here is how an idea works in the course of a novel or poem – the functional approach. I have looked for opportunities to discuss active ideas in Eliot's fiction, just as my reading of her non-fictional writings stresses the dynamic element in her thinking.

There have been numerous studies of Eliot's ideas. To recall only book-length, and highly rewarding, works: Pierre Bourl'honne's *George Eliot: Essai de biographie intellectuelle et morale* (1933); Michael Wolff's unpublished dissertation, "Marian Evans to George Eliot: The Moral and Intellectual Foundations of Her Career" (1958); Bernard J. Paris's *Experiments in Life: George Eliot's Quest for Values* (1965); William Myers's *The Teaching of George Eliot* (1984); and Valerie Dodd's *George Eliot: An Intellectual Life* (1990). The common goal of their efforts has been summation: to assemble a coherent order of Eliot's ideas so as to present her mind as an accomplished – a highly accomplished – structure. I have chosen to present it as a work in progress, emphasizing not merely its transitional but its progressive character. Just as – as shall emerge in what follows – Eliot's fiction traces the progress of her heroes and heroines toward more adequate ways of conducting their lives, just as – it shall also be maintained – her main philosophic affinities were to theories of past and potential human advancement, so in her own life she lived out the extended drama of intellectual challenge and response.

By looking at matters from a slightly different angle, one sees – or thinks one sees – some different things, or the same ones differently. By taking the tack mentioned above, I have come to believe a number of things about Eliot's mind that are not in the current repertoire of received ideas of the subject. As suggested above, she emerges as a progressive – though not a "liberal," in either the Victorian or current senses of the term – who believed in the possibility and reality of improvement in the social and personal spheres. (I shall shortly qualify this claim.) She was closer to John Stuart Mill's version of progress, as is manifested by her consistent and appreciative reading of the great liberal's works as they appeared, than to Auguste Comte's, which she read scantily, and with increasing chagrin as his authoritarian tendencies emerged. She was receptive to and even a passing participant in the growth of scientific discovery, closely supportive of her common-law husband's career change in this direction, and not a skeptic of scientific truth, as maintained by recent critics. She was a humanist, to use the term for a loose association of thinkers that emerged in the nineteenth century, deriving a set of ethical values from a tradition broader than the Judeo-Christian one alone. And she was tragically idealistic, if one may

coin a phrase, believing both in the awesome spirituality of human aspirations toward the higher life and in the ultimate inefficacy of all attempts to realize the ideal. (As a footnote: I make a distinction between "idealist" and "idealistic" – the former referring to a distinct philosophic position, the latter to a broader orientation, for which "progressive," "meliorist" and "visionary" are at times useful equivalents.) If these be heresies, I shall try to make the most of them.

As a contribution to the history of ideas, the present work exposes what some will consider fatal flaws in that approach. In place of currently fashionable *marxisant* views of the strong, even determining, relation between ideas and social history, there will be an emphasis here on the relations of one mind to another, as these developed in the course of reading and personal encounters. There will be little talk of the Victorian frame of mind, nascent capitalism and bourgeois ideology. In partial compensation, there will be close attention to Eliot's views of the middle class she intimately knew and portrayed in her novels as deathlessly as Balzac did for the French equivalent. (Indeed, one of the suggestions in a chapter on her fictional modes is to make plausible this connection.) With all her awareness of how her nation and her world were developing and struggling around her, Eliot's thinking was largely conducted by individual interaction, one thinker thinking another's thoughts and responding with his own or with variations on the other's. To place my adherence to this approach in its own intellectual context, it is the tradition of A. O. Lovejoy and his followers, which may be called the internal history of ideas, as distinct from the external history that relates ideas to their non-intellectual, material contexts. If this be theoretical idealism, I shall try to make the most of it.

Finally, a word on a neglected matter. In all the talk of intellectuals, ideas, mind, thinking, etc., one term fails to make an appearance: intelligence. If one were to look for instances of the life of the mind being constrained by the social conditions of the time, this avoidance would provide a strong example. But the brute fact lies before us: George Eliot was an extremely intelligent person who, largely self-educated in languages, literary and other arts, religion and philosophy of religion, the social sciences, etc., etc., developed herself not only into what many regard as England's greatest novelist but into a leading intellectual of her time. These developments, too, will receive due consideration.