

A Woman of Letters

by Florence Boos

Selections from *George Eliot's Letters*, edited by Gordon S. Haight. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985, 567 pp., \$25.00 hardcover.

Three weeks before her death, on November 28th 1880, George Eliot wrote that "Burning is the most reverential destination one can give to relics which will not interest any one after we are gone." She and others may have destroyed many of her own letters, and some lacunae in her epistolary biography will never be filled. Correspondence may have existed, for example, with her admirer Edith Sincox; her young second husband John Cross destroyed parts of her journal and perhaps other letters, probably at her request. Those which remain provide a complex testimonial to her intellect, veracity, generosity, tact, good humor and tendency to self-deprecation.

At 34, she wrote her friend Sara Hennell: "I do nothing well but idling, and the consciousness of this is like a garment of lead about me. . . . It is the last lesson one learns, to be contented with one's inferiority—but it must be learned" (3 June 1854). In 1866, after *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Romola* and *Felix Holt*, she told the young American feminist Melusina Fay Peirce that "[T]he vision of something that life might be and that one's own ignorance and incompleteness have hindered it from being, presses more and more as time advances. . . . the only hope, is to try and unite the utmost activity with the utmost resignation" (14 September), and in 1871 wrote to the Rabbi Emmanuel Deutsch that "Hopelessness has been to me, all through my life, but especially in painful years of my youth, the chief source of wasted energy with all the consequent bitterness of regret" (7 July). She was convinced that the sources of her art were the "sins and sorrows" of her youth, and wrote after the publication of *Adam Bede*: "[M]y books are deeply serious things to me, and come out of all the painful discipline, all the most hardly-learned lessons of my past life" (18 October 1859).

Politically Eliot was a quietist with feminist sympathies, who accepted the division of sexual roles and class structure of her place and time, and who often expressed her concern for religious tolerance and wider sympathy "towards any faith in which human sorrow and human longing for purity have expressed themselves" (6 December 1859). This religious tolerance did not always extend to "[f]ree-thinkers as a class," for they tended to express "mere antagonism" (26 November 1862). But it did make her conspicuously free of several nineteenth-century taints—anti-semitism, for example. Of her portrayal of a devout Zionist in *Daniel Deronda*, she wrote: "[N]ot only

towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom we English come in contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace. . . . I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to" (29 October 1876; order reversed).



George Eliot. Drawing of 1865 by Sir Frederick W. Burton. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Eliot responded with special sympathy to women's education, though she expressed deep ambivalence about wider feminist issues in her letters. Her close friend Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon campaigned vigorously for women's suffrage and extension of the legal rights of married women, and belonged to a committee which founded the first Oxbridge women's college, Girton at Cambridge, in 1869. Other friends and correspondents included the suffragist Clementia Taylor and Bessie Parkes, co-editor of the *English Women's Journal*. Yet when J. S. Mill stood as a reformist candidate for Parliament in 1865, Eliot wrote that "I am not anxious that he should be in Parliament: thinkers can do more outside than inside the House" (10 July 1865); and her response to Mill's 1867 bill, the first parliamentary attempt to enfranchise women, was coolly polite: ". . . on the whole I am in-

clined to hope for much good from the serious presentation of women's claims before Parliament. I thought Mill's speech sober and judicious from his point of view. . . ." (to Clementia Taylor, 30 May 1867). More bluntly, she wrote her friend Sara Hennell that "I proceed to scold you a little for undertaking to canvass on the Women's Suffrage question. Why should you burthen yourself in that way, for an extremely doubtful good? I love and honour my friend Mrs. Taylor, but it is impossible that she can judge beforehand of the proportionate toil and interruption such labours cause to women whose habits and duties differ so much from her own" (12 October 1867).

Eliot responded much more favorably to the foundation of Girton. She wrote Barbara Bodichon that "better Education of Women is one of the objects about which I have no doubt, and I shall rejoice if this idea of a college can be carried out" (16 November 1867). To Emily Davies, the woman who became its first Mistress, she wrote in the following year that ". . . complete union and sympathy can only come by women having opened to them the same store of acquired truth or beliefs as men have, so that their grounds of judgment may be as far as possible the same" (8 August 1868). Yet she apparently did not expect this "store of acquired. . . beliefs" to bring appreciable change in sexual roles, for she added that women's "peculiar constitution" made possible "a special moral influence." Earlier, she had formulated a similar special-sphere argument to John Morley: ". . . as a mere fact of zoological evolution, woman seems to me to have the worst share in existence. But. . . [i]t is the function of love in the largest sense, to mitigate the harshness of all fatalities. And in the thorough recognition of that worse share, I think there is a basis for a sublimer resignation in woman and a more regenerating tenderness in man" (14 May 1867). This sublimating belief in "a special moral influence" can also be traced in the sensibilities of her heroines and the structure of her plots: Dinah, Maggie, Esther, Mary Garth, Dorothea, Romola and even the once-egoistic Gwendolen Harleth achieve a "love in the largest sense," a love which renews those around them.

Eliot was less equivocal in her appreciation of other women authors. In one of the volume's earliest letters (27 October 1840), the 20-year-old Mary Anne Evans recommended "The Forest Sanctuary," a long poem by Felicia Hemans, and she wrote of George Sand's novels in 1849 that "I cannot read six pages without feeling that. . . one might live a century. . . and not know so much as these six pages will suggest" (9 February). Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* had ". . . something almost preternatural in its power" (15 February 1853),

and of Brontë herself she exclaimed: ". . . what passion, what fire in her! Quite as much as in George Sand, only the clothing is less voluptuous" (5 March 1853). An 1852 visit to Ambleside provided her with a "tonic in the shape of Harriet Martineau with her simple, energetic life, her Building Society, her winter Lectures and her cordial interest in all human things" (30 October 1852). In 1853, she remarked that "one cannot help loving" Elizabeth Gaskell "as one reads her books," though "[s]he is not contented with the subdued colouring—the half-tints of real life" (1 February). In other passages she remarked sympathetically on the lives of Anna Jameson, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and quoted Margaret Fuller: "How inexpressibly touching that passage from her journal—I shall always reign through the intellect, but the life! the life! O my God! shall that never be sweet? I am thankful, as if for myself, that it was sweet at last" (27 March 1852).

Among the most idiosyncratic qualities of Eliot's letters is their pointed mixture of wit and self-deprecation. A visit from Bodichon would make her "a little less of a flaccid cabbage plant" (12 May 1863), and she anticipated her satiric presentation of Casaubon in the account of a certain Professor Bücherwurm, whose proposal of marriage required an "ability to translate, a very decided ugliness of person and a sufficient fortune" (21 October 1846). Odd metaphors carry simple points: writing the Brays from Switzerland is "like ringing a bell hung in the planet Jupiter—it is so weary a while before one's letters reach" (20 August 1849). Others, less odd, carry less simple points: the artist Burne-Jones is "rising into the inconvenient celebrity which is made up of echoes as well as voices" (3 March 1876); ". . . I am radiant with benevolence, as it is so easy to be when one is perfectly comfortable" (17 June 1853). Of her image in a photograph she sent to Caroline Bray and Sara Hennell, she writes that: "I can't say much that is good of her, but I am confident that she will not misconduct herself in your society. She will sit in modest silence, looking ready to enjoy any joke that is passing" (27 March 1858).

In 1852, Herbert Spencer considered and rejected marriage to Eliot, and wrote her "that [he] felt in no danger of falling in love with her." When Spencer left her at the seaside to return to the July heat of London, she wrote to her "Dear Friend" that she claimed "[n]o credit. . . for my virtues as a refrigerator. I owe them all to a few lumps of ice which I carried away with me from that tremendous glacier of yours" (8 July 1852). Three weeks later, she added: "If, as you intimated in your last letter, you feel that my friendship is of value to you for its own sake—mind on no other ground—it is yours. Let us, if you will, forget the past, except in so far as it may have brought us to trust in and feel for each other, and let us

RUSSIAN AND POLISH WOMEN'S FICTION

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY HELENA GOSCILO

These eleven stories offer diverse perspectives on Russian and Polish women, their values, and their ways of life from the nineteenth century to the present day. Gosciolo provides an introductory survey of Polish and Russian women's history and biographies of the authors.

360 pages. \$29.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper

BLACK AND WHITE WOMEN OF THE OLD SOUTH

The Peculiar Sisterhood in American Literature
MINROSE C. GWIN

Gwin examines both fiction and autobiography and finds the volatile, often violent connection between black and white women to be paradigmatic of the southern racial experience.

248 pages. \$19.95



WOMEN WRITERS AND THE CITY

Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism
EDITED BY SUSAN M. SQUIER

Essays on American, British, and Continental writers by: Susan M. Squier, Sandra Dijkstra, Susan Rava, Elyse Blankley, Nancy L. Paxton, Louise A. DeSalvo, Jane Marcus, Sydney J. Kaplan, Christine W. Sizemore, Sherrill E. Grace, Sidney H. Bremer, Carolyn Mitchell, Wendy Martin, and Blanche H. Gelfant.

318 pages. \$22.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper

BLACK WOMEN IN THE FICTION OF JAMES BALDWIN

TRUDIER HARRIS

Analyzing works written over a thirty-year period, Harris shows how Baldwin's black female characters progress from guilt-ridden figures, completely subservient to church, God, and man, to women who believe that the church affords no comfort.

240 pages. \$22.50

WOMEN, ETHNICS, AND EXOTICS

Images of Power in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Fiction
KRISTIN HERZOG

"Herzog's study is concise, enlightening, closely and persuasively argued. It does a good job of synthesizing recent and classic scholarship on the American Renaissance and on the subject of 'primitivism' generally."—The Centennial Review.

280 pages. \$22.95

FEMINIST ARCHETYPAL THEORY

Interdisciplinary Re-Visions of Jungian Thought
EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND A THEORETICAL CONCLUSION, BY ESTELLA LAUTER AND CAROL SCHREIER RUPPRECHT

These essays offer a flexible proposal for a coherent feminist archetypal theory that overcomes the sexism in Jungian theory while retaining its useful insights. Contributors: Demaris S. Wehr, Estella Lauter, Annis V. Pratt, Sylvia Brinton Perera, and Carol Schreier Rupprecht.

304 pages. 9 illustrations. \$23.50

The University of Tennessee Press

Knoxville 37996-0325

help to make life beautiful to each other as far as fate and the world will permit us" (29 July). She responded with similar restraint to other, smaller slights and rejections — from Charles and Caroline Bray, John Chapman, Agnes Lewes, her sister Christina and her ever-censorious and narrow-minded brother Isaac Evans, the model for Tom in *The Mill on the Floss*. Her greatest strength, in art and in life, may have derived from this ability to sublimate many forms of pride and self-regard into something deeper and more contemplative, and achieve the sort of sympathetic self-detachment she expressed in a letter of condolence to Mrs. Robert Lytton: "I think it is possible... for us to gain much more independence than is usually believed, of the small bundle of facts that make our own personality" (8 July 1870).

In radical contrast to her patience with other intrusions, she defended fiercely the nature of her art, and her extralegal marriage with George Henry Lewes. Both drew much obtuse criticism and unsolicited advice (as did her later marriage to the much younger John Cross, after Lewes' death), and her responses never wavered. To the feminist Sara Hennell, who sympathized with Eliot and reported others' condemnation, she replied that "Faulty, miserably faulty I am—but least of all faulty when others most blame" (5 June 1857). To Carolyn Bray, who openly disapproved, she wrote: "[I]f there is any one action or relation of my life which is and always has been profoundly serious, it is my relation to Mr. Lewes" (4 September 1855). She pointedly referred to Lewes as "my husband," and signed her name to formal letters for 25 years as M. E. Lewes. Informal use of "Mrs. Lewes" was also important: when Clementia Taylor called at her home for "Miss Evans," Eliot wrote her that three sons called her "mother," and "the point is not one of mere egoism or dignity, when I request that any one who has a regard for me will cease to speak of me by my maiden name" (1 April 1861).

The union of Eliot and the often-ailing Lewes was in fact mutually sustaining to an extent which has few parallels in the history of literature. In 1857, she wrote that "I am happy—happy in the highest blessing life can give us, the perfect love and sympathy of a nature that stimulates my own to healthful activity" (6 June). Twenty-two years later, she assuaged her grief with the consolation that "pain is easier because he has not to bear it..." (30 January 1879). He read critically everything she wrote. During the writing of *Amos Barton* they agreed that she would write a sample passage to test her ability to evoke pathos; the result was that "We both cried over it, and then he came up to me and kissed me, saying 'I think your pathos is better than your fun'" (*Journal*, 6 December 1857).

She stubbornly defended a deep authorial anonymity. John Chapman, owner and nominal editor of *The Westminster Review*, had exploited her in many professional and economic ways, but it was his verbal query to Spencer whether Eliot had written *Scenes from Clerical Life* which led to her sharp rebuke and their eventual rupture. Perhaps the best rationale for this behavior was economic: only substantial income from her novels could keep her writing them, and she feared censorious critical attacks motivated by her "scandalous" life. More understandable, at any rate, was her response to the many letters and calls which came with later fame and respectability. She received visitors at set time or by invitation, and made no calls herself.

Most transparently justified of all were her efforts to preserve the integrity of her work. To her publisher John Blackwood she insisted that human psychology cannot be fided: "I cannot stir a step aside from what I feel to be true in character. If anything strikes you as untrue to human nature in my delineations, I shall be very glad if you will point it out to me, that I may reconsider the matter... alas! inconsistencies and weaknesses are not untrue" (18 February 1857). In response to Bulwer-Lytton's criticism of the dialect in *Adam Bede*, and Adam's marriage with Dinah, she announced bluntly that "I would have my teeth drawn rather than give up either" (23 February 1860).

Her insistence on such details was deeply based in her temperament and in a view of art which might be called a "sympathetic moral realism." She expressed this view consistently, from her earliest comments on novels to her

teacher Maria Lewis until her death, and its emotional and ethical language was characteristically Victorian: "If Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally" (5 July 1859). Her insight was to see that such "sympathies" must be evoked by honest confrontation of error and loss, and scrupulous recreation of each dilemma and choice: "My artistic bent is directed not at all to the presentation of eminently irreproachable characters, but to the presentation of mixed human beings in such a way as to call forth tolerant judgement, pity, and sympathy" (to Blackwood, 18 February 1857); and "If the ethics of art do not permit the truthful presentation of a character essentially noble but liable to great error... then, it seems to me, the ethics of art are too narrow, and must be widened to correspond with a widening psychology" (to Blackwood, 9 July 1860). In *Daniel Deronda*, she explained, "my design... is to show the gradual action of ordinary causes rather than exceptional..." (to Blackwood, 24 July 1871) and to the positivist Frederick Harrison she wrote more abstractly in 1866 that "[A]esthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity," but it should not be didactic nor theoretical: "if it ceases to be purely aesthetic—if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram—it becomes the most offensive of all teaching." There must be "agonizing labour... to make art a sufficiently real background... so that the presentation will lay hold on the emotions as human experience..." (15 August).

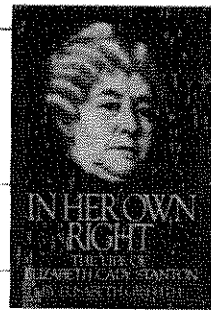
I have quoted extensively to illustrate the mixture of eloquence, passion and reflection in Eliot's letters. Would she herself have sanctioned their publication? Probably not. She insisted many times that her best self was embodied in her works: "[I]t would be sad if one's books were not the best of one" (17 September 1873); "Is it not odious that as soon as a man is dead his desk is raked, and every insignificant memorandum which he never meant for the public, is printed for the gossiping amusement of people too idle to re-read his books?" (20 February 1874); "Biographies generally are a disease of English literature" (19 December 1879); and "[O]ur writing is a sort of offspring that may be much better than ourselves and leave us poor creatures in our own person" (26 February 1880, the year of her death). At most she would tolerate an autobiography, if one happened to be available: "The best history of a writer is contained in his writings—these are his chief actions. If he happens to have left an autobiography telling (what nobody else can tell) how his mind grew, how it was determined by the joys, sorrows, and other influences of childhood and youth—that is a precious contribution to knowledge" (19 December 1879).

Like many Victorians she also burned letters from her friends, for these "could only fall into the hands of persons who knew little of the writers, if I allowed them to remain till after my death" (8 February 1861). The viciousness she and Lewes had suffered make such protectiveness and secrecy understandable if anything can, especially in a period when such literary-epistolary bonfires were fairly routine. But she does seem to have needed at some level to exempt herself from that "presentation of mixed human beings in such a way as to call forth tolerant judgment, pity and sympathy," and that "presentation of a character essentially noble but liable to [not so] great error" she defended so eloquently in the letters to Blackwood quoted above.

In the end, of course, she did not leave an autobiography. Only her extant letters bear direct witness to the growth of her sensibility and convictions; but these letters by Mary Anne Evans/George Eliot, culled by Gordon Haight, are some of the finest written and most substantive of their century. Publication of the *Selections* may encourage some who read them to turn to Haight's complete nine-volume edition, for one of the fullest available records of one woman's private and intellectual life. Others will do what she would vastly have preferred, and (re)turn to her eight works of fiction, including some she regarded highly which are less often read, such as *Felix Holt*, *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*. Few, at any rate, will fail to appreciate the wry courage and generosity of a woman who embodied in her life and work the "feminine" insight that "It is the function of love in the largest sense... to mitigate the harshness of all fatalities." □

One of The New York Times's Best Books of 1984

Now in
paperback



"A well-rounded biography that does full justice to this truly extraordinary woman... an important step toward gaining Stanton the recognition she deserves."
—*New York Times Book Review*

"At last there's a biography of Stanton worthy of its subject. Like Stanton herself the book is feisty, intelligent, articulate... full of the concrete reality of this feminist heroine's life."
—*Betty Friedan*

"Illuminates both women's forgotten history, and their magnificent ability to stand in their own light."
—*Washington Post*

"The best to date of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. ... Griffith has done an admirable job of disinterring the woman as well as the warrior."
—*Ms Magazine*

"Fluently written and impeccably researched, it successfully melds the public and private person."
—*Philadelphia Inquirer*

304 pp.; 16 pp. halftones \$7.95

OXFORD PAPERBACKS

Oxford University Press
200 Madison Avenue • New York, NY 10016

New Paperback

The Female Experience in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth- Century America

A Guide to the History of
American Women

Jill K. Conway

With the assistance of
Linda Kealey and Janet E. Schulte



This guide to sources in the history of American women from 1740 to 1900 is enriched by fifty-two carefully crafted and informed essays introducing each subsection of the work. The author, past president of Smith College and a leading scholar of American women's history, raises issues that she describes as "theoretical questions which must be addressed if that history is to be more than episodic and antiquarian in nature." Available in paperback for the first time, the book provides major sections on American culture of the period, industrialization and women's work, cultural roles of middle-class women (including women's intellectual work), women's religious life and reform movements, women and politics, and biology and domestic life.

\$14.50 at your bookstore or
Princeton University Press
31 William Street
Princeton, NJ 08540