

GEORGE ELIOT: A BIOGRAPHY, by Gordon S. Haight. *O.U.P.*, 1968. 616 pp. 55s.

In a lengthy review-article entitled 'Silly novels by lady novelists' in the *Westminster Review* for October 1856, Marian Evans wrote: 'A really cultured woman, like a really cultured man, is all the simpler and the less obtrusive for her knowledge . . . she does not give you information, which is the raw material of culture—she gives you sympathy, which is its subtlest essence.' In 1871, now writing as George Eliot to her publisher, she describes her design in her new novel, *Middlemarch*, as showing 'the gradual action of ordinary causes rather than exceptional'. Professor Gordon Haight is well equipped with 'information' on George Eliot: it was in 1933 that he decided to 'spend a summer' preparing a new biography; seven volumes of *Letters* have testified to his sustained labours since. In approaching his task, now, as biographer he disclaims 'speculation': 'one can only tell the facts', he writes *à propos* of a possible guilt-orientated interpretation of Eliot's early Evangelical period (p. 22), and his facts, drawn mainly from the letters, Lewes's journal and such sources as Edith Simcox's recently edited *Autobiography*, are in the main unlikely to be contested, at least till certain letters concerning Eliot's relations with Herbert Spencer are released in 1985. Professor Haight also organizes his facts well, interweaving the numerous quotations from the letters to bring out certain patterns of response and behaviour that characterized Marian Evans: a sense of isolation that persisted even in the closest of social contexts, at least till her love of G. H. Lewes swamped it; an 'expansive affection' that threatened to come into play as soon as any intellectual contact had been established; a need to be loved, a sense of personal unattractiveness, an initial intellectual diffidence. These traits interact in all her relationships, and it is as embodied in those relationships that Professor Haight conveys them to us, rather than by direct 'psychologizing' examination and analysis. This approach reflects its origin in the close study of the letters; throughout we can feel the editor Haight behind the biographer. Occasionally a mere editorial note intrudes, reminding us parenthetically, e.g. that the Daimler Coventry works has now obliterated a once pleasant walk from the Evans's home to the Brays's. But the editorial stance comes through more positively in a close fidelity to the shift in names that we find in the letters: Marian, Mary Ann, Polly, Mrs Lewes, George Eliot; the technique is more than editorial

pedantry: it comes close to tackling the tension inherent in 'objective' reporting of another's personal life. By eschewing all comment on Mrs Lewes's first meeting with 'John Walter Cross', a casual encounter when his mother called on the Lewes's in Rome, but then gradually allowing Cross to become 'John', 'Johnny Cross' and 'Johnny', Professor Haight 'presents rather than describes' (cf. p. 184) the real process which led to the final marriage.

Love is, precisely, a relationship; having a headache is not; headaches, constant, pressing, tiring headaches, were textured into George Eliot's life, a close and intimate part of her; yet one cannot, as conventional biographer, preface each day's account with a mention of the ever-present headache. The urgency and pressure of work (especially the *Westminster Review* period: not only editing but herself reviewing, e.g. 109 books in twenty months) is well given as the context which forced those headaches to come, yet we do not, cannot, penetrate the felt experience of them. But George Eliot did not only enter into shifting, patterned relationships with a changing group of friends, acquaintances and colleagues; nor did she only have headaches; she wrote novels. To 'be a novelist' is to have a certain relationship with one's society, through one's readers; actually to write a novel is not, exactly, like 'having' a relationship, nor, exactly, like 'having' a headache. George Eliot as novelist is the dimension of Marian Evans that brings us to her biography, but it is the dimension that escapes us in the biography. Perhaps it was bound to. Bulwer Lytton remarked of his own biography of Rienzi that he appeared 'more like the historian of Rienzi's clothes, so minute is he on all details of their colour and quality, so silent is he upon everything that could throw light on the motives of the wearer'. How can one throw light on the 'motives' of Evans as 'Eliot', as novelist? Haight is not exactly silent: he usefully, e.g. reminds us of the relevance of the review-essay on Riehl (1856) and traces something of the research that went into *Adam Bede* and *Romola*. But it is then unsatisfactory to say, of a boarding house in Tenby, that 'it might justly display a plaque saying "George Eliot was born here"' (p. 207) on the grounds that the title 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton' came into her mind as she dozed one morning in that boarding house. *Are* novelists 'born' like that? There

is still a tension in our own conception of the artist: an 'inspiration' theory, clearly, is almost incoherent for us, yet the notion of the novelist as craftsman and nothing more seems inadequate; do we admit 'the gradual action of ordinary causes' or still expect the 'exceptional'? Haight really opts for neither, but does not resolve the tension: between the two there lies the blank, something irrecoverable, opaque. The problem is caught by two quotations, from Cross's biography and from a letter of Eliot to Blackwell in 1877, both about *Romola*: 'She told me she could put her finger on it as marking a well-defined transition in her life: "I began it a young woman—I finished it an old woman",' and 'There is no book of mine about which I more thoroughly feel that I could swear by every sentence as having been written with my best blood, such as it is, and with the most ardent care for veracity of which my nature is capable.' Is the felt difference between being an old woman and a young woman to be 'explained' in terms of that immense detail and care that worked on every sentence? Is the difference we ourselves feel, in reading this biography, between the Mary Ann, of evangelical severity and 'always shy of social functions' (p. 30), we meet in the first chapter, and the almost-George Eliot figure we are beginning to grasp by the Chapman/

*Westminster Review* period of the third chapter onwards, to be 'explained' in terms of the two years' sheer work spent in translating Strauss's *Leben Jesu* (pp. 52-9)? If that is so, the matured wisdom, the deep 'life', achieved through being the novelist she was can only be observed in process, not, as in Haight, through a travelogue, which was the activity surrounding the appearance of the novels, but by following through the work endeavour that, e.g. Jerome Beaty attempted to track in '*Middlemarch*' from *Notebook to Novel*.

That one feels compelled to circle these problems rather than pick at minute errors (Sophocles's Oedipus 'trilogy', p. 195) or misprints ('Prudhon', p. 77; Crabbe Robinson, 342; WR 67 for WR 66, 185, fn) or quaint English ('napped' e.g.) is a measure of Haight's complete success as a conventional biographer; that the questions remain insistent, the blank rests unfilled, erodes one's acceptance of the convention. It is, deeply, part of the same reaction that one should feel jolted, disturbed, when the biographer of a great novelist thanks an academic colleague who has '*tested* . . . for narrative interest' that biography (p. ix). The problem of information, sympathy and 'culture' remains, facing biographer and reader alike.

BERNARD SHARRATT

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