

Appendix B: Contemporary Reviews of Middlemarch

1. From Edward Dowden, "George Eliot," *Contemporary Review* 20 (August 1872): 403-22

[In this appreciative essay by a leading Shakespeare scholar of the day, the main interest in GE's novels is not her vivid characters but, rather, the remarkable narrative voice in her fiction, what Dowden calls her "second self." The dominating presence of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) suggests where her contemporaries thought GE belonged in the context of European ideas. The contemporary reception of the novel, as represented by this and the reviews that follow, tells us a great deal about the Victorian world of ideas and the intellectual, aesthetic, and ethical investments of GE's critics.]

When we have passed in review the works of that great writer who calls herself George Eliot, and given for a time our use of sight to her portraiture of men and women, what form, as we move away, persists on the field of vision, and remains the chief centre of interest for the imagination? The form not of Tito, or Maggie, or Dinah, or Silas, but of one who, if not the real George Eliot, is that "second self" who writes her books, and lives and speaks through them. Such a second self of an author is perhaps more substantial than any mere human personality encumbered with the accidents of flesh and blood and daily living. It stands at some distance from the primary self, and differs considerably from its fellow. It presents its person to us with fewer reserves; it is independent of local and temporary motives of speech or of silence; it knows no man after the flesh; it is more than an individual; it utters secrets, but secrets which all men of all ages are to catch; while, behind it, lurks well pleased the veritable historical self secure from unpertinent observation and criticism. With this second self of George Eliot it is, not with the actual historical person, that we have to do. And when, having closed her books, we gaze outward with the mind's eye, the spectacle we see is that most impressive spectacle of a great nature, which has suffered and has now attained, which was perplexed and has now grasped the clue—standing before us not without tokens on lip and brow of the strife and the suffering, but resolute, and henceforth possessed of something which makes self-mastery possible. The strife is not ended, the pain may still be resurgent; but we perceive on which side victory must lie.

This personal accent in the writings of George Eliot does not interfere with their dramatic truthfulness; it adds to the power with which they grasp the heart and conscience of the reader. We cannot say with confidence of any one of her creations that it is a projection of herself; the lines of their movement are not deflected by hidden powers of attraction or repulsion peculiar to the mind of the author; most noteworthy is her impartiality towards the several creatures of her imagination; she condemns but does not hate; she is cold or indifferent to none;

each lives his own life, good or bad; but the author is present in the midst of them, indicating, interpreting; and we discern in the moral laws, the operation of which presides over the action of each story, those abstractions from the common fund of truth which the author has found most needful to her own deepest life. We feel in reading these books that we are in the presence of a soul, and a soul which has had a history.

At the same time the novels of George Eliot are not didactic treatises. They are primarily works of art, and George Eliot herself is artist as much as she is teacher. Many good things in particular passages of her writings are detachable; admirable sayings can be cleared from their surroundings, and presented by themselves, knocked out clean as we knock out fossils from a piece of limestone. But if we separate the moral soul of any complete work of hers from its artistic medium, if we murder to dissect, we lose far more than we gain. When a work of art can be understood only by enjoying it, the art is of a high kind. The best criticism of Shakespeare is not that which comes out of profound cogitation, but out of immense enjoyment; and the most valuable critic is the critic who communicates sympathy by an exquisite record of his own delights, not the critic who attempts to communicate thought. In a less degree the same is true of George Eliot. There is not a hard kernel of dogma at the centre of her art, and around it a sheath or envelope which we break and throw away; the moral significance coalesces with the narrative, and lives through the characters....

In this nature, complete in all its parts, and with every part strong, the granite-like foundation of the whole is conscience, the moral perceptions and the moral will.... George Eliot is profoundly moved by the spectacle of human joy and human sorrow; death to her is always tragic, but there is something more tragic than cessation of breath, and of the pulse; there is the slow letting go of life and the ultimate extinction of a soul; to her the marriage joys are dear, but there is something higher than the highest happiness of lovers....

In each tale of George Eliot's telling, if the question arise of the ruin or restoration of moral character, every other interest becomes subordinate to this. The nodes of the plot from which new developments spring are often invisible spiritual events.... The relations that human beings can form with one another which are most intimate, most full of fate, are with George Eliot not intellectual or merely social relations, but essentially moral....

The conscience of George Eliot asserts itself so strongly because there are in her nature other powers strong also, and urging great claims upon the will. Her senses are framed for rich and varied pleasure. The avenues between the senses and the imagination are traversed to and fro by swift and secret intelligence. There are blind motions in her blood, which respond to vague influences, the moral nature of which may be determined by a contingency; there are deep incalculable instincts, the heritage from past generations, which suddenly declare themselves with an energy that had not been surmised. There are zeals and ardours of the heart, eager demands and eager surrenders. There is the grasping, permitted or restrained, of a richly endowed nature after joy,—after joy from which to avert the eyes for ever is bitter as the sundering of flesh and soul. This nature, in which conscience must needs be stern, is a nature of passionate sensibility. The pure

gleaming of gems, the perfect moulding of a woman's arm, the face of youth that is like a flower, and its aureole of bright hair, the strong voice of a singer that urges and controls, the exquisite movement and excitement of the dance, not one of these fails to find an answer in the large joy-embracing nature of George Eliot.... This capacity for pure joy, this noble sensibility to beauty, are attributes, not of the lower characters of George Eliot's creating, but of the worthiest. They are felt by her to be derived from the strength of our nature, not from its weakness....

A man or woman endowed with great susceptibility to beauty, and prior to experience making large demands upon the world for joy, runs the risk of terrible calamity. Dissociated from the sympathetic emotions the immoderate love of beauty, as Baudelaire¹ has well said, "leads men to monstrous and unheard of disorders." The appetite for joy consumes all that the earth can afford, and remains fierce and insatiate. It is impossible even to imagine such a calamity overtaking George Eliot, so numerous, and full of soundness and vigour are the sympathies which bind her to her fellows. There are certain artists who concentrate the light of an intense intelligence and passionate sympathy upon their two or three chief figures, which move in an oppressive glare of consciousness, while towards the rest they show themselves almost indifferent. George Eliot's sympathy spreads with a powerful and even flow in every direction.

George Eliot's manifold sympathies create behind her principal figures an ample background in which they find play and find repose. An English landscape in the manner of Constable,² rich with rough, soft colour, and infallible in local truth is first presented. Men, women, children, animals are seen, busy about their several concerns. The life of a whole neighbourhood grows up before us; and from this the principal figures never altogether detach themselves. Thus a perspective is produced; the chief personages are not thrust up against the eye; actions are seen passing into their effects; reverberations of voices are heard strangely altering and confused; and the emotions of the spectator are at once roused and tranquillised by the presence of a general life surrounding the lives of individuals....

But the sympathies of George Eliot reach out from the slow movement of the village, from the inharmonious stir of the manufacturing town, from the Hall Farm, and from the bar of the Rainbow Inn to the large interests of collective humanity. The artistic enthusiasm of the Renaissance period, the scientific curiosity of the present century, the political life at Florence long since, the political movements of England forty years ago, and religious life in manifold forms—Catholic, Anglican, and Nonconforming, are none of them remote from her imaginative grasp. Here the heart allies itself with a vigorous intellect, the characteristics of which are its need of clearness, of precision; and its habitual turn for generalisation. The "unlimited right of private haziness," so dear to many minds, is a right which George Eliot never claims on her own behalf. And in her mind facts, especially moral facts, are for ever grouping themselves into laws; the

1 Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), French poet.

2 John Constable (1776–1837), after J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851), the greatest British painter of the first half of the nineteenth century.

moral laws which her study of life discovers to her being definite and certain as the facts which they co-ordinate. The presence of a powerful intellect observing, defining, and giving precision explains in part the unfaltering insistence of the ethical purport of these books. It bears down upon the conscience of the reader with painful weight and tenacity.

The truths in presence of which we live, so long as the imagination of George Eliot controls our own, are not surmises, not the conjectures of prudence, not guesses of the soul peering into the darkness which lies around the known world of human destiny, nor are they attained by generous ventures of faith; they are tyrannous facts from which escape is impossible. Words which come peeling from "a glimmering limit far withdrawn," words "in a tongue no man can understand," do not greatly arouse the curiosity of George Eliot. Other teachers would fain lighten the burden of the mystery by showing us that good comes out of evil. George Eliot prefers to urge, with a force which we cannot resist the plain and dreadful truth that evil comes out of Evil—"whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." No vista of a future life, no array of supernatural powers stationed in the heavens, and about to intervene in the affairs of men, lead her gaze away from the stern, undeniable facts of the actual world. "Our deeds are like children that are born to us; they live and act apart from our will. Nay, children may be strangled, but deeds never: they have an indestructible life both in and out of our consciousness." Other teachers transfigure and transmute human joys and sorrows, fears and hopes, loves and hatreds, with light from a spiritual world: the sufferings of the present time are made radiant with the coming of the glory which shall be revealed in us; in George Eliot's writings it is the common light of day that falls upon our actions and our sufferings; but each act, and each sorrow, is dignified and made important by the consciousness of that larger life of which they form a part—the life of our whole race, descending from the past, progressing into the future, surrounding us at this moment on every side ...

George Eliot's humour allies itself with her intellect on the one hand, and with her sympathies and moral perceptions on the other. The grotesque in human character is reclaimed from the province of the humorous by her affections, when that is possible, and is shown to be a pathetic form of beauty. The pale, brown-eyed weaver, gazing out from his cottage door with blurred vision, or poring with miserly devotion over his golden hoard, touches us, but does not make us smile. The comedy of incident, the farcical, lies outside her province; once or twice, for reasons that appear hardly adequate, the comedy of incident was attempted, and the result was not successful. The humour of George Eliot usually belongs to her entire conception of a character, and cannot be separated from it. Her humorous effects are secured by letting her mind drop sympathetically into a level of lower intelligence, or duller moral perception, and by the conscious presence at the same time of the higher self. The humorous impression exists only in the qualified organs of perception which remain at the higher, the normal point of view. What had been merely an undulation of matter, when it touches the prepared surface of the retina, breaks into light....

Complete in all its parts, and strong in all, the nature of George Eliot is yet not one of those rare natures which without effort are harmonious. There is no

impression made more decisively upon the reader of her books than this. No books bear upon their faces more unmistakably the pain of moral conflict, and the pain of moral victory, only less bitter than that of defeat. Great forces warring with one another; a sorrowful, a pathetic victory—that is what we discern. What is the significance of it all? ...

The tragic aspect of life, as viewed by this great writer, is derived from the Titanic strife of egoistic desires with duties which the conscience confesses, and those emotions which transcend the interests of the individual. It seems to her no small or easy thing to cast away self. Rather the casting self away is an agony and a martyrdom. All the noblest characters she has conceived, certainly all those characters in presenting which a personal accent seems least doubtfully recognisable—the heroic feminine characters or those that might have been heroic, characters of great sensibility, great imaginative power, great fervour of feeling—Maggie, Romola, Fedalma, Armgart—cling with passionate attachment to the joy which must needs be renounced. The dying to self is the dying of young creatures full of the strength and the gladness of living. The world is indeed cruel; to be happy is so sweet. If the joy were ignoble it could be abandoned with less anguish and remorse, but it is pure and high....

The same doctrine of the necessity of self-renunciation, of the obligation laid upon men to accept some other rule of conduct than the desire of pleasure, is enforced in the way of warning with terrible emphasis. Tito Melema, Arthur Donnithorne, Godfrey Cass, Maggie Tulliver, are in turn assailed by one and the same temptation—to deny or put out of sight certain duties to others, to gratify some demand for egoistic pleasure or happiness, or to avoid some wholesome necessary pain. Arthur, vain affectionate, susceptible, owed no one a grudge, and would have liked to see everyone about him happy, and ready to acknowledge that a great part of their happiness was due to the handsome young landlord. Tito was clever and beautiful, kind and gentle in his manners, without a thought of anything cruel or base. And Godfrey was full of easy good nature; and Maggie of a wealth of eager love. But in the linked necessity of evil, each of these, beginning with a soft yielding to egoistic desires, becomes capable of deeds or of wishes that are base and cruel....

The scientific observation of man, and in particular the study of the mutual relations of the individual and society, come to reinforce the self-renouncing dictates of the heart. To understand any individual apart from the whole life of the race is impossible. We are the heirs intellectual and moral of the past; there is no such thing as naked manhood; the heart of each of us wears livery which it cannot throw off. Our very bodies differ from those of primeval savages—differ, it may be, from those of extinct apes only by the gradual gains of successive generations of ancestors. Our instincts, physical and mental, our habits of thought and feeling, the main tendency of our activity, these are assigned to us by the common life which has preceded and which surrounds our own. “There is no private life,” writes George Eliot in *Felix Holt*, “which has not been determined by a wider public life, from the time when the primeval milkmaid had to wander with the wanderings of her clan, because the cow she milked was one of a herd which had made the pastures bare.”...

It will be readily seen how this way of thinking abolishes rights, and substitutes duties in their place. Of rights of man, or rights of woman, we never hear speech from George Eliot. But we hear much of the duties of each. The claim asserted by the individual on behalf of this or that disappears, because the individual surrenders his independence to collective humanity, of which he is a part. And it is another consequence of this way of thinking that the leadings of duty are most often looked for, not within, in the promptings of the heart, but without, in the relations of external life, which connect us with our fellow-men. Our great English novelist does not preach as her favourite doctrine the indefeasible right of love to gratify itself at the expense of law; with the correlative right, equally indefeasible, to cast away the marriage bond as soon as it has become a painful incumbrance. She regards the formal contract, even when its spirit has long since died, as sacred and of binding force. Why? Because it is a formal contract. "The light abandonment of ties, whether inherited or voluntary, because they had ceased to be pleasant, would be the uprooting of social and personal virtue." Law is sacred. Rebellion, it is true, may be sacred also. There are moments of life "when the soul must dare to act upon its warrant, not only without external law to appeal to, but in the face of a law which is not unarmed with Divine lightnings—lightnings that may yet fall if the warrant has been false." These moments, however, are of rare occurrence, and arise only in extreme necessity....

"If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie?" As the life of the race lying behind our individual life points out the direction in which alone it can move with dignity and strength, so our own past months and years lying behind the present hour and minute deliver over to these a heritage and a tradition which it is their wisdom joyfully to accept when that is possible.... If no natural piety binds our days together, let us die quickly rather than die piecemeal by the slow paralysing touch of time....

2. From Richard Holt Hutton, review of *Middlemarch*, *Spectator* XLV (7 December 1872): 1554-56

[A prominent editor and religious writer, Hutton compares GE's breadth of her interest and her evocation of secondary characters to Shakespeare.]

...The real power of *Middlemarch* is ... no doubt spent on the delineation of two ill-assorted unions, both of them mainly due to the spontaneous preference of the woman for the man,—unions for neither of which, so far as we can see, is a perverted public opinion at all specially responsible. Nothing could be received with less favour by her friends than Dorothea's resolve to marry Mr Casaubon, the would-be author of "The Key to all Mythologies;" and Rosamond's wish to marry the ambitious young surgeon, Mr Lydgate, on account of his distinguished bearing and connection with the Lydgate's of Quellingham, also receives scant favour from her family and friends. But whatever the motive of George Eliot in choosing these marriages for her theme, it is impossible to rate too highly the power with which the misery they cause is delineated. Mr Casaubon, looking not so much for a wife, as for a gentle secretary with a melodious voice who will

read to him, write for him, and admire him to his heart's content without expecting anything from him more than he himself is,—one, in short, who will “observe his abundant pen-scratches and amplitude of paper with the uncritical awe of a delicate-minded canary;”—finds himself, instead married to a woman of imperious impulses and devoted character, who craves a part both in his heart and in his aims, making him feel the former somewhat dry and cold, and the latter obscure and dim....

... The painful sense of finding an acute critic instead of a worshipper, the feverish dread he feels of exciting his wife's pity, the irritable consciousness that he in no way imposes upon her judgment, and the consequent growth of self-distrust in himself, the soreness and jealousy with which he notices her tendency to interfere, however delicately, in his family arrangements, and to take under her protection a young cousin whom he had never liked, his inability to ask or even accept her sympathy when his life is threatened, and his wish to dictate her future life to her even from his grave, are all presented with a clear intellectual outline and vividness that nothing in any of the author's previous works has surpassed. Especially the last scenes of Mr Casaubon's life, where he shuts himself up in his own wounded sensitiveness so completely as to repel Dorothea's sympathy for his physical sufferings for fear it should be pity, and where he finally breaks through his reserve only to ask for a pledge that she will govern her life after his death by the wishes he expresses, are painted with a sombre force, and an insight into the bitterness of sore pride, which add some of the greatest of all its treasures to the stores of English literature. And it is impossible to say whether Mr Casaubon's or his wife's feelings are painted with most power. Dorothea's yearning to devote herself to a great ideal work, and her gradual discovery that in becoming Mr Casaubon's wife she has entered into no such work, that she has found a dried-up formalist where she expected a loving guide and teacher, that she has devoted herself to a pedant instead of a man of original and masterly intellect, are quite as finely painted as Mr Casaubon's troubles.... There is hardly a finer touch of genius in English literature than Dorothea's reply, as we may call it, after her husband's death, to his wish that she should complete the confused and pedantic work on which he had built his hopes of fame. “One little act of hers,” says the author, “may perhaps be smiled at as a superstition. The Synoptical Tabulation for the use of Mrs Casaubon she carefully enclosed and sealed, writing within the envelope, *‘I could not use it. Do you not see now that I could not submit my soul to yours, by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in?’*—Dorothea.” Then she deposited the paper in her own desk.” Such is the final touch which describes the breaking in pieces of poor Dorothea's effort after an ideal work....

The picture of the ambitious and robust-minded Lydgate's complete subjugation by the constant attrition of his wife's soft, selfish obstinacy, of his total inability to govern her, and his utter defeat by her, even when Rosamond is so completely in the wrong that she is detected in all sorts of underhand proceedings—of all responsibility for which she divests herself by simply not feeling it,—is a picture second, of course, in moral and intellectual interest, to the higher picture of Dorothea's shipwreck with Mr Casaubon, but certainly not second in originality or power. Rosamond, though she is guilty of one deliberate lie,—

which is, we fancy, too great a sin against the conventional standard of conduct which she herself admitted to be quite consistent with the idea of the character,—is by far the finest picture of that shallowness which constitutes absolute incapacity for either deep feeling or true morality, we have ever met with in English literature. When she conceals her fixed intentions of deceit and disobedience by a turn of her slender neck, or a gentle patting of her own hair, one turns away from the picture in real dismay, so true it is and so terrible. Nor can anything be more powerful than the picture of the deadening effect produced by her on Lydgate's gusty tenderness and impulsive nobility....

Such are the main threads of interest in this great book. But the wealth of the secondary life which adds so much to the effect of these great delineations, it is impossible even to indicate in such a review as this. Dorothea's good-natured, slip-shod uncle, Mr Brooke, whose conversation is so humorous a mosaic of kindness, scatterbrainedness, niggardliness, and helpless desultory ambition; her good-natured, prosaic brother-in-law, Sir James Chettam, the very incarnation of English high-feeling and narrow, commonplace intellect; her shrewd, commonplace sister Celia, and the exquisitely witty wordly-minded rector's wife, Mrs Cadwallader, are all figures which bring out the ardent romance and depth of Dorothea's nature in strong relief. The groups of Middlemarch townspeople are not less carefully fitted to bring out in strong relief the pictures of Rosamond and her husband. The tyrannous old miser, Rosamond's uncle, her spendthrift, but warm-hearted brother, her selfish father, her cosy, loving mother; the grim, half-sincere, half-hypocrite evangelical banker Bulstrode, and his ostentation-loving but devoted wife, with the various groups of gossiping townspeople, all serve to throw into relief the thin refinement, the petty vanity, the cold amiability of her nature; and the connection between Lydgate and his unhappy patron Bulstrode is exceedingly finely conceived for the purpose of fully trying the mettle of the former's character....

The whole tone of the story is so thoroughly noble, both morally and intellectually, that the care with which George Eliot excludes all real faith in God from the religious side of her religious characters, conveys the same sort of shock with which, during the early days of eclipses, men must have seen the rays of light converging towards a centre of darkness. Mr Farebrother,—a favourite type with George Eliot, the rector in Adam Bede was another variety of him—Caleb Garth, the noble land agent, and Dorothea, are all in the highest sense religious in temperament; two of them go through very keen temptations, and the struggles of one, Dorothea, are minutely and most powerfully described; but in all these cases the province chosen for the religious temperament is solely the discharge of moral duty, and the side of these minds turned towards the divine centre of life, is conspicuous only by its absence, especially in Dorothea's case. In reading the description of the night of Dorothea's darkest trial one feels a positive sense of vacancy; so dramatic a picture of such a one as she is, going through such a struggle without a thought of God, is really unnatural. The omission is owing no doubt to the very natural dislike of the author to attribute, out of pure dramatic instinct, to her highest and noblest character an attitude of spirit with which she could not herself sympathise....

Yet, say what we may, it is a great book. Warwickshire has certainly given birth to the greatest forces of English literature,¹ for we are indebted to it not only for by far the greatest of English authors, but also for by far the greatest of English authoresses; and though it would be too much to say that the latter ranks next to the former in our literature, even with a whole firmament of power between, it is not too much to say that George Eliot will take her stand amongst the stars of the second magnitude, with the cluster which contains Scott and Fielding,² and indeed all but Shakespeare, on a level of comparative equality with them,—or at least without any distance between her and the greatest of them which can compare for a moment with the distance which divides all of them from Shakespeare.

3. From Edith Simcox, “*Middlemarch*,” *Academy* 4 (1 January 1873): 1–4

[Simcox, a versatile and talented writer, belonged to the tribe of GE’s self-appointed “spiritual daughters.” In this review Simcox emphasizes the accurate representation of life in *Middlemarch* and the melancholy, humor, and sympathy which permeates GE’s fictional world.]

... *Middlemarch* ... marks an epoch in the history of fiction in so far as its incidents are taken from the inner life, as the action is developed by the direct influence of mind on mind and character on character, as the material circumstances of the outer world are made subordinate and accessory to the artistic presentation of a definite passage of mental experience, but chiefly as giving a background of perfect realistic truth to a profoundly imaginative psychological study. The effect is as new as if we could suppose a *Wilhelm Meister* written by Balzac. In *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, and the author’s other works there is the same power, but it does not so completely and exclusively determine the form in which the conception is placed before us. In *Silas Marner* there is a natural and obvious unity in the life of the weaver, but in *Romola*—where alone the interest is at once as varied and as profound as in *Middlemarch*—though the historic glories of Florence, the passions belonging to what, as compared with the nineteenth century, is an heroic age, are in perfect harmony with the grand manner of treating spiritual problems, yet the realism, the positive background of fact, which we can scarcely better bear to miss, has necessarily some of the character of an hypothesis, and does not inspire us with the same confidence as truths we can verify for ourselves. For that reason alone, on the mere point of artistic harmony of construction, we should rate the last work as the greatest; and to say that *Middlemarch* is George Eliot’s greatest work is to say that it has scarcely a superior and very few equals in the whole wide range of English fiction.

As “a study of provincial life,” if it were nothing more, *Middlemarch* would

1 Including Shakespeare, at Stratford-upon-Avon, and GE at Arbury, Warwickshire.

2 Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) and Henry Fielding (1707–54), two of GE’s great precursors.

have a lasting charm for students of human nature in its less ephemeral costumes; besides the crowds of men and women whom we have all known in real life, where, however, to our dimmer vision, they seemed less real and life-like than in the book, the relations between the different clusters, the proportions in which the different elements mix, the points of contact and the degree of isolation in the different ranks; the contented coexistence of town and country, the channels of communication between the two always open and yet so rarely used, the effect of class distinctions in varying the mental horizon and obliging the most matter-of-fact observer to see a few things in perspective,—all the subtle factors which make up the character of a definite state of society are given with inimitable accuracy and fulness of insight. The picture in its main outlines is as true of the England of today or the England of a hundred years ago as of the England of the Reform agitation. The world as we know it has its wise and good, its fools and hypocrites scattered up and down a neutral-tinted mass in much the same proportion as at Middlemarch. The only difference is that they are not so plainly recognisable, and this is perhaps the reason that a first perusal of the book seems to have an almost oppressive effect on ordinary readers, somewhat as little children are frightened at a live automaton toy. It is not natural to most men to know so much of their fellow-creatures as George Eliot shows them, to penetrate behind the scenes in so many homes, to understand the motives of ambiguous conduct, to watch “like gods knowing good and evil” the tangled course of intermingled lives, the remote mainsprings of impulse and the wide-eddy effects of action. Even with the author’s assistance it is not easy to maintain the same height of observant wisdom for long, and since the intricacy of the subject is real, a feeling of even painful bewilderment in its contemplation is not entirely unbecoming.

But the complicated conditions of so seemingly simple a thing as provincial life are not the main subject of the work. The busy idleness of Middlemarch, its trade, its politics, its vestry meetings, and its neighbouring magnates, only form the background of relief to two or three spiritual conflicts, the scenery amongst which two or three souls spend some eventful years in working out their own salvation and their neighbours’, or in effecting, with equal labour, something less than salvation for both. The story of these conflicts and struggles is the thread which unites the whole, and sympathy with its incidents is the force that reconciles the reader to the unwonted strain upon his intellectual faculties already noticed; and to the yet further effort necessary to recognise the fact that the real and the ideal sides of our common nature do coexist in just such relations, and with just such proportionate force as the author reveals. For, without this admission, it is impossible to appreciate the full literary and artistic perfection of the work as a whole; some readers may delight spontaneously in the author’s moral earnestness, and only admire her satirical insight, while others delight in her satire and coldly admit the excellence of the moral purpose; but the two are only opposite aspects of the same large theory of the universe, which is at once so charitable and so melancholy that it would be intolerable (although true) without the sauce of an unsparing humour.

4. From [Henry James], unsigned review, *Galaxy* XV (March 1873):
424–28

[A much-quoted review of the pre-eminent novel of the Victorian era by the American-born Henry James, the pre-eminent novelist of the next generation.]

Middlemarch is at once one of the strongest and one of the weakest of English novels. Its predecessors as they appeared might have been described in the same terms; *Romola*, is especially a rare masterpiece, but the least *entraînant*¹ of masterpieces. *Romola* sins by excess of analysis; there is too much description and too little drama; too much reflection (all certainly of a highly imaginative sort) and too little creation. Movement lingers in the story, and with it attention stands still in the reader. The error in *Middlemarch* is not precisely of a similar kind, but it is equally detrimental to the total aspect of the work. We can well remember how keenly we wondered, while its earlier chapters unfolded themselves, what turn in the way of form the story would take—that of an organised, moulded, balanced composition, gratifying the reader with a sense of design and construction, or a mere chain of episodes, broken into accidental lengths and unconscious of the influence of a plan. We expected the actual result, but for the sake of English imaginative literature which, in this line is rarely in need of examples, we hope for the other. If it had come we should have had the pleasure of reading, what certainly would have seemed to us in the immediate glow of attention, the first of English novels. But that pleasure has still to hover between prospect and retrospect. *Middlemarch* is a treasure-house of details, but it is an indifferent whole.

Our objection may seem shallow and pedantic, and may even be represented as a complaint that we have had the less given us rather than the more. Certainly the greatest minds have the defects of their qualities, and as George Eliot's mind is pre-eminently contemplative and analytic, nothing is more natural than that her manner should be discursive and expansive. "Concentration" would doubtless have deprived us of many of the best things in the book—of Peter Featherstone's grotesquely expectant legatees, of Lydgate's medical rivals, and of Mary Garth's delightful family. The author's purpose was to be a generous rural historian, and this very redundancy of touch, born of abundant reminiscence, is one of the greatest charms of her work. It is as if her memory was crowded with antique figures, to whom for very tenderness she must grant an appearance. Her novel is a picture, vast, swarming, deep-coloured, crowded with episodes, with vivid images, with lurking master-strokes, with brilliant passages of expression; and as such we may freely accept it and enjoy it. It is not compact, doubtless; but when was a panorama compact? And yet, nominally, *Middlemarch* has a definite subject—the subject indicated in the eloquent preface. An ardent young girl was to have been the central figure, a young girl framed for a larger moral life than circumstance often affords, yearning for a motive for sustained spiritual effort and only wasting her ardour and soiling her wings against the meanness of opportunity. The author, in other words, proposed to depict the career of an

1 Captivating, involving (French).

obscure St. Theresa. Her success has been great, in spite of serious drawbacks. Dorothea Brooke is a genuine creation, and a most remarkable one when we consider the delicate material in which she is wrought. George Eliot's men are generally so much better than the usual trowsered offspring of the female fancy, that their merits have perhaps overshadowed those of her women. Yet her heroines have always been of an exquisite quality, and Dorothea is only that perfect flower of conception of which her predecessors were the less unfolded blossoms. An indefinable moral elevation is the sign of these admirable creatures; and of the representation of this quality in its superior degrees the author seems to have in English fiction a monopoly. To render the expression of a soul requires a cunning hand; but we seem to look straight into the unfathomable eyes of the beautiful spirit of Dorothea Brooke. She exhales a sort of aroma of spiritual sweetness, and we believe in her as in a woman we might providentially meet some fine day when we should find ourselves doubting of the immortality of the soul. By what unerring mechanism this effect is produced—whether by fine strokes or broad ones, by description or by narration, we can hardly say; it is certainly the great achievement of the book. Dorothea's career is, however, but an episode, and though doubtless in intention, not distinctly enough in fact, the central one. The history of Lydgate's *ménage*,¹ which shares honours with it, seems rather to the reader to carry off the lion's share. This is certainly a very interesting story, but on the whole it yields in dignity to the record of Dorothea's unresonant woes. The "love-problem," as the author calls it, of Mary Garth, is placed on a rather higher level than the reader willingly grants it. To the end we care less about Fred Vincy than appears to be expected of us. In so far as the writer's design has been to reproduce the total sum of life in an English village forty years ago, this commonplace young gentleman, with his somewhat meagre tribulations and his rather neutral egotism, has his proper place in the picture; but the author narrates his fortunes with a fulness of detail which the reader often finds irritating. The reader indeed is sometimes tempted to complain of a tendency which we are at loss exactly to express—a tendency to make light of the serious elements of the story and to sacrifice them to the more trivial ones. Is it an unconscious instinct or is it a deliberate plan? With its abundant and massive ingredients *Middlemarch* ought somehow to have depicted a weightier drama. Dorothea was altogether too superb a heroine to be wasted; yet she plays a narrower part than the imagination of the reader demands. She is of more consequence than the action of which she is the nominal centre. She marries enthusiastically a man whom she fancies a great thinker, and who turns out to be but an arid pedant. Here, indeed, is a disappointment with much of the dignity of tragedy; but the situation seems to us never to expand to its full capacity. It is analysed with extraordinary penetration, but one may say of it, as of most of the situations in the book, that it is treated with too much refinement and too little breadth. It revolves too constantly on the same pivot; it abounds in fine shades, but it lacks, we think, the great dramatic *chiaroscuro*.² Mr Casaubon, Dorothea's husband (of

1 Home life (French).

2 The relationship of light and shadow in a pictorial work of art (Italian).

whom more anon) embittered, on his side, by matrimonial disappointment, takes refuge in vain jealousy of his wife's relations with an interesting young cousin of his own and registers this sentiment in a codicil to his will, making the forfeiture of his property the penalty of his widow's marriage with this gentleman. Mr Casaubon's death befalls about the middle of the story, and from this point to the close our interest in Dorothea is restricted to the question, will she or will she not marry Will Ladislaw? The question is relatively trivial and the implied struggle slightly factitious. The author has depicted the struggle with a sort of elaborate solemnity which in the interviews related in the last two books tends to become almost ludicrously excessive.

The dramatic current stagnates; it runs between hero and heroine almost a game of hair-splitting. Our dissatisfaction here is provoked in a great measure by the insubstantial character of the hero. The figure of Will Ladislaw is a beautiful attempt, with many finely-completed points; but on the whole it seems to us a failure. It is the only eminent failure in the book, and its defects are therefore the more striking. It lacks sharpness of outline and depth of colour; we have not found ourselves believing in Ladislaw as we believe in Dorothea, in Mary Garth, in Rosamond, in Lydgate, in Mr Brooke and Mr Casaubon. He is meant, indeed, to be a light creature (with a large capacity for gravity, for he finally gets into Parliament), and a light creature certainly should not be heavily drawn. The author, who is evidently very fond of him, has found for him here and there some charming and eloquent touches; but in spite of these he remains vague and impalpable to the end. He is, we may say, the one figure which a masculine intellect of the same power as George Eliot's would not have conceived with the same complacency; he is, in short, roughly speaking, a woman's man. It strikes us as an oddity in the author's scheme that she should have chosen just this figure of Ladislaw as the creature in whom Dorothea was to find her spiritual compensations. He is really, after all, not the ideal foil to Mr Casaubon which her soul must have imperiously demanded, and if the author of the "Key to all Mythologies" sinned by lack of order, Ladislaw too has not the concentrated fervour essential in the man chosen by so nobly strenuous a heroine. The impression once given that he is a *dilettante* is never properly removed, and there is slender poetic justice in Dorothea's marrying a *dilettante*. We are doubtless less content with Ladislaw, on account of the noble, almost sculptural, relief of the neighbouring figure of Lydgate, the real hero of the story. It is an illustration of the generous scale of the author's picture and of the conscious power of imagination that she has given us a hero and heroine of broadly distinct interests—erected, as it were, two suns in her firmament, each with its independent solar system. Lydgate is so richly successful a figure that we have regretted strongly at moments, for immediate interest's sake, that the current of his fortunes should not mingle more freely with the occasionally thin-flowing stream of Dorothea's. Toward the close, these two fine characters are brought into momentary contact so effectively as to suggest a wealth of dramatic possibility between them; but if this train had been followed we should have lost Rosamond Vincy—a rare psychological study. Lydgate is a really complete portrait of a *man*, which seems to us high praise. It is striking evidence of the altogether superior quality of George

Eliot's imagination that, though elaborately represented, Lydgate should be treated so little from what we may roughly (and we trust without offence) call the sexual point of view. Perception charged with feeling has constantly guided the author's hand, and yet her strokes remain as firm, her curves as free, her whole manner as serenely impersonal, as if, on a small scale, she were emulating the creative wisdom itself. Several English romancers—notably Fielding, Thackeray, and Charles Reade—have won great praise for their figures of women: but they owe it, in reversed conditions, to a meaner sort of art, it seems to us, than George Eliot has used in the case of Lydgate; to an indefinable appeal to masculine prejudice—to a sort of titillation of the masculine sense of difference. George Eliot's manner is more philosophic—more broadly intelligent, and yet her result is as concrete or, if you please, as picturesque. We have no space to dwell on Lydgate's character; we can but repeat that he is a vividly consistent, manly figure—powerful, ambitious, sagacious, with the maximum rather than the minimum of egotism, strenuous, generous, fallible, and altogether human. A work of the liberal scope of *Middlemarch* contains a multitude of artistic intentions, some of the finest of which become clear only in the meditative after-taste of perusal. This is the case with the balanced contrast between the two histories of Lydgate and Dorothea. Each is a tale of matrimonial infelicity, but the conditions in each are so different and the circumstances so broadly opposed that the mind passes from one to the other with that supreme sense of the vastness and variety of human life, under aspects apparently similar, which it belongs only to the greatest novels to produce. The most perfectly successful passages in the book are perhaps those painful fireside scenes between Lydgate and his miserable little wife. The author's rare psychological penetration is lavished upon this veritably mulish domestic flower. There is nothing more powerfully real than these scenes in all English fiction, and nothing certainly more *intelligent*. Their impressiveness and (as regards Lydgate) their pathos, is deepened by the constantly low key in which they are pitched. It is a tragedy based on unpaid butcher's bills, and the urgent need for small economies. The author has desired to be strictly real and to adhere to the facts of the common lot, and she has given us a powerful version of that typical human drama, the struggles of an ambitious soul with sordid disappointments and vulgar embarrassments....

In reading, we have marked innumerable passages for quotation and comment; but we lack space and the work is so ample that half a dozen extracts would be an ineffective illustration. There would be a great deal to say on the broad array of secondary figures, Mr Casaubon, Mr Brooke, Mr Bulstrode, Mr Farebrother, Caleb Garth, Mrs Cadwallader, Celia Brooke. Mr Casaubon is an excellent invention; as a dusky *repoussoir*¹ to the luminous figure of his wife he could not have been better imagined. There is indeed something very noble in the way in which the author has apprehended his character. To depict hollow pretentiousness and mouldy egotism with so little of narrow sarcasm and so much of philosophic sympathy, is to be a rare moralist as well as a rare story-

1 Contrast (French).

teller. The whole portrait of Mr Casaubon has an admirably sustained greyness of tone in which the shadows are never carried to the vulgar black of coarser artists. Every stroke contributes to the unwholesome, helplessly sinister expression. Here and there perhaps (as in his habitual diction), there is a hint of exaggeration; but we confess we like fancy to be fanciful. Mr Brooke and Mr Garth are in their different lines supremely genial creations; they are drawn with the touch of a Dickens chastened and intellectualised. Mrs Cadwallader is, in another walk of life, a match for Mrs Poyser, and Celia Brooke is as pretty a fool as any of Miss Austen's. Mr Farebrother and his delightful "womankind" belong to a large group of figures begotten of the superabundance of the author's creative instinct. At times they seem to encumber the stage and to produce a rather ponderous mass of dialogue; but they add to the reader's impression of having walked in the Middlemarch lanes and listened to the Middlemarch accent....

All these people, solid and vivid in their varying degrees, are members of a deeply human little world, the full reflection of whose antique image is the great merit of these volumes. How bravely rounded a little world the author has made it—with how dense an atmosphere of interests and passions and loves and enmities and strivings and failings, and how motley a group of great folk and small, all after their kind, she has filled it, the reader must learn for himself. No writer seems to have drawn from a richer stock of those long-cherished memories which one's later philosophy makes doubly tender. There are few figures in the book which do not seem to have grown mellow in the author's mind. English readers may fancy they enjoy the "atmosphere" of *Middlemarch*; but we maintain that to relish its inner essence we must—for reasons too numerous to detail—be an American. The author has commissioned herself to be real, her native tendency being that of an idealist, and the intellectual result is a very fertilising mixture. The constant presence of thought, of generalising instinct, of *brain*, in a word, behind her observation, gives the later its great value and her whole manner its high superiority. It denotes a mind in which imagination is illumined by faculties rarely found in fellowship with it. In this respect—in that broad reach of vision which would make the worthy historian of solemn fact as well as wanton fiction—George Eliot seems to us among English romancers to stand alone. Fielding approaches her, but to our mind, she surpasses Fielding. Fielding was didactic—the author of *Middlemarch* is really philosophic. These great qualities imply corresponding perils. The first is the loss of simplicity. George Eliot lost hers some time since: it lies buried (in a splendid mausoleum) in *Romola*. Many of the discursive portions of *Middlemarch* are, as we may say, too clever by half. The author wishes to say too many things, and to say them too well; to recommend herself to a scientific audience. Her style, rich and flexible as it is, is apt to betray her on these transcendental flights.... *Silas Marner* has a delightful tinge of Goldsmith¹—we may almost call it: *Middlemarch* is too often an echo of Messrs Darwin and Huxley.² In spite

1 Oliver Goldsmith (?1730–74), prolific hack writer, dramatist, poet, and author of the widely admired novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766).

2 Charles Darwin (1809–82) and T.H. Huxley (1825–95) were among the greatest scientists of the age and gifted writers.

of these faults—which it seems graceless to indicate with this crude rapidity—it remains a very splendid performance. It sets a limit, we think, to the development of the old-fashioned English novel. Its diffuseness, on which we have touched, makes it too copious a dose of pure fiction. If we write novels so, how we shall write History? But it is nevertheless a contribution of the first importance to the rich imaginative department of our literature.

5. [William Hurrell Mallock], unsigned review of *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), *Edinburgh Review* CL (October 1879): 557–86

[In one of the shrewdest contemporary assessments of GE's writings, Mallock, a satirist and conservative critic, identifies GE as "the first great 'godless' writer of fiction that has appeared in England." Mallock does not mean, however, that GE is a blasphemous or biblically illiterate writer. Rather, as the genuine heir to Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Auguste Comte, GE has made her creed an intense belief in "humanity:"]

A distinguished living author once observed in our hearing, that there was a time when George Eliot's genius seemed to him to be of almost boundless promise. "I even thought," he proceeded, "that some day she might perhaps have equalled Miss Austen."¹ There are few, we conceive, amongst George Eliot's admirers who would either thank our critic for these liberal hopes, or sympathise with him in his implied disappointment; nor do we ourselves share in the temper of his criticism. We disagree with him, however, not because his judgment was entirely false, but because it was only very partially true. So far as he had viewed the matter, his view was accurate. It is misleading only because its scope was limited. There are few minds which have accomplished much, that to observant eyes have at one time not promised more. Even the most many-sided genius must have given hints, at the outset, of the possession of many powers it could never bring to perfection; and we shall often best estimate a writer's chief achievements by examining first the extent and the nature of his partial failures. When, therefore, it is said that George Eliot might have been a second Miss Austen, and has failed to be so, we need not, in assenting to this, be passing a degrading judgment. We advance instantly from our notice of the success she has foregone, to inquiring what other success she has tried to achieve instead of it—what greater birthright she has bought by the sacrifice of her mess of pottage. This inquiry is not altogether an easy one; and a more significant homage could not be paid to the authoress than to say that it is worth our while, in her case, to make it with all care and seriousness. Her present volume is especially welcome, not only because it suggests such a task to us, but also because it will assist us in attempting it.

The most obvious aspect under which we look at her is that simply of a novelist—as a dramatic artist in prose. It is not here her real pre-eminence lies; but

1 Jane Austen (1775–1817), perhaps GE's only peer as a woman novelist in English.

we will confine ourselves at first to this very restricted view of her, and regard her as though she were simply a novelist among novelists.

Now, the qualities that a novelist most requires are, in their own degree, the same as those required by a dramatist. A novel, like a drama, is a work of art, and must, like a drama, conform to certain artistic laws, and present certain artistic qualities. The most prominent of these have their close analogies in painting. The first requirements in a picture are that it conform to certain rules of composition, grouping, chiaroscuro, and perspective. In like manner we require first of all in a novel or a drama that there be a certain method, grace, and unity in the plot. The various incidents must be presented to us in their due proportion. The attention must not be distracted by unnecessary figures or events. Everything must be properly subordinate to some central interest; and form parts of a single organic whole. When the novelist or the dramatist fulfils these requirements, we may say, in painters' language, that the *composition* of his piece is perfect. As equally apposite examples of this kind of perfection, we may cite two works, which, in other ways, are of a widely different character—*Tom Jones*,¹ and the *Cedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles.² But *composition* is not all. We require moral perspective and moral chiaroscuro as well. What is trivial and incidental must not be drawn too large. What is important must not be drawn too small. And further, the lights and shades, or, if we like to add a new metaphor, the colours, must be properly harmonised and distributed. Everything must not be made an unrelieved darkness by vice or sorrow, or a flat and even brightness by joy or virtue. The novelist and the painter have each of them a kindred artistic effect to produce with shine and shadow, and with various combinations of colour.

Further, there is a second class of requirements needful for a novelist, which might also, were there occasion for it, be illustrated by a reference to painting; and this is an insight into the human heart which is not only profound, but at the same time wide and impartial; and a power, not alone of describing character, but still more of presenting it in action.

If we judge George Eliot's work by the tests above suggested, there is scarcely one adverse criticism to which it is not open. The *composition* of her stories is to the utmost rude and faulty; or rather, in the artistic sense of the word, there is no composition in them at all. In *Middlemarch*, for instance, we have not one plot, but two, and these joined together in the clumsiest and most unskilful fashion. Elsewhere, it is true, her designs may have more unity; but the unity, even where most traceable, is obscured or quite distorted by masses of irrelevant detail. Every stone in her building may be of marble, and of marble finely cut: but the building as a whole is not fitly framed together; and many of the blocks which exhibit the finest carving are not only not needed by the structure, but they overload it, and destroy its symmetry. She recognises the time-worn truth that a story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end; but between these three parts she observes no just proportion. Her action moves onwards by fits and starts. She

1 *The History of Tom Jones* (1749) by Henry Fielding (1707–54), one of the greatest comic novels in the English language.

2 *Cedipus Tyrannus*, tragedy by Sophocles (496–406 BCE).

hurries when we would have her linger: she lingers when we would have her hurry: and her pace seems to depend not so much on the nature of the road, as on the flowers she desires to pluck by the side of it, or the views of distant scenery which she leans over gates to contemplate.

But there is a greater defect still to notice. In dealing with her principal characters she does not, as a general rule, so much *present* them, as *describe* them to us. And we are made all the more keenly conscious of this, because with her minor characters her procedure is exactly opposite.... The former group is a painting left to speak for itself. The latter is a charcoal sketch, with a long explanation under it. We are not saying that the sketch may not show higher powers than the painting: but they are not powers of the same order; they are not the powers we expect to find in an artist. And so far as artistic success—the success of the true novelist—goes, it is not too much to say that with George Eliot this varies in an inverse ratio to the importance which she herself attaches to her subjects.

It will be recollected that in making these remarks we are purposely narrowing our view. We are regarding the authoress under only one aspect. And if our judgment should seem to be somewhat too severe, it is she herself who is responsible for the severity. We are trying her by standards that she has herself suggested; and those standards are the highest. We are condemning the faults of what she has done by the perfection of what she shows us she might have done. She might have been a second Miss Austen: and that within its limits is no small praise; for it means at any rate that she might have been a consummate artist. And it is only because we see her to have been capable of perfect art, that we are forced to note the imperfections of the art she has actually given us.

But if she has failed as a novelist where novelists of less genius have succeeded, she exhibits powers to which, amongst other novelists, we can hardly find a parallel, and which only very rarely have expressed themselves in prose fiction at all. She may be less than Miss Austen in art, but she is greater than Scott¹ in insight. Indeed, to compare her even to Scott is an unfairness to her. We must go for our parallel yet a stage higher; and we must not stop short of the world's greatest poets. The art of the novelist, and presumably his vision also, rests on the surface of life and of society. His eyes, so far as he can use them, may be as keen and piercing as the poet's; but he uses them from a different point of view. The varied human landscape lies before him, and he paints what he sees of it; but he is not, like the poet, at a sufficient height above it, to see to the bottom of its deep ravines and valleys, or to the summits of its lofty mountains. That it has deep valleys and that it has mountain peaks, he presumes; but he has neither descended to the one, nor scaled the other. With George Eliot, however, the case is different. She, like the poet, takes a more commanding standpoint. Her eyes are occupied with the high and deep places of the human spirit, and the larger and profounder questions of human destiny. For her, as for the poet, life is, as it were, transparent; and she sees the mightiest issues hiding under the most trivial. Her

1 Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), poet and novelist who was influential in GE's development.

materials for excitement and interest are not the excitements of adventure, with their varieties of surface incident; her materials for tragedy are not murders or escapes from murder, with the manœuvres of criminals and detectives: but they are the inner spiritual events that take place beneath the surface, and of which the outer events are for her the signs merely. Her works partake thus of the quality that separates the poetry of a great drama from the prose of a great novel. The essential difference, for instance, between *Hamlet* and *Pendennis*¹ lies in the different level in human life to which the two works pierce. The one reaches to the poetry of life; the other only presumes it, or at best points to it from a distance. But the vision of George Eliot goes straight to it, and encounters it face to face. She has seen and has felt like Sophocles, that

Full many things are wonderful, but none
More fearful and more wonderful than man;²

and she has seen and felt this with something of the emotion that is common and almost peculiar to the greatest tragic poets.

And yet with all this George Eliot is not a poet; and putting form altogether out of the question, her works are not poetry. They bear the same relation to poems that a chrysalis does to a butterfly, just before the change. We feel them to be quivering with a life that demands some further development. We feel that something is on the ground that requires to fly, and that is every moment on the point of soaring. But the wings never unfold themselves. The strength is wanting somewhere by which the prison is to be broken.

Thus, to pass on her work any general literary judgment is a somewhat puzzling task. But going again for assistance to a simile drawn from painting, we may compare her work, not so much to so many separate pictures, as to so many separate canvases, each covered with a number of pictorial fragments—fragments connected together indeed by some thread, inward or outward, of thought or meaning; but neither in conception nor execution fused together into coherent artistic wholes. We have studies for some heroic subject—some great and solemn action—which are instinct with power and genius, but in which the figures are grouped ill, and often only partly outlined; and we have this heroic group broken or surrounded by a number of semi-serious figures—not in outline, but painted in solid colour, and with the most masterly and complete finish. Such at least is the impression which her earlier works have made on us. Her manner latterly, it is true, has grown in some ways more congruous; but this is not because she has learnt to finish the whole of her pictures as she once did their secondary parts; but because she has ceased to use her brush at all, and has left the whole in the condition of shadowy sketches.

To the eye, therefore, of purely artistic criticism, George Eliot's work, even at its highest, is full of flaws and blemishes. The world, however, is not made up

1 *The History of Pendennis* (1848-50), a novel by William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-63).

2 From *Antigone*, line 333.

entirely of artistic critics; and the common sense of the public with its wise want of fastidiousness, often detects in a writer what there is of genius, the better for not detecting what there is lacking in art and skill. And such is the case with George Eliot. She sees truths about life which vast numbers of men and women feel to be true, and which they are grateful to her for having expressed and set before them. She has given definiteness to views which before were dim and vague to them; she has given voice to thoughts and feelings which before were inarticulate. They feel that she has done this for them *somehow*; and *how*, they neither know nor care to criticise. Her books are more to them like Bibles than books of mere amusement; and they have been treated and read with a reverence that was perhaps never before accorded to any works of fiction.

Her position is thus sufficiently remarkable; but there is a point about it beyond any we have yet touched upon, which makes it more remarkable still; and this is a point, probably, that is little suspected by the larger part of her most earnest and most reverent students. She is the first great *godless* writer of fiction that has appeared in England; perhaps, in the sense in which we use the expression, the first that has appeared in Europe. To say this may sound a paradox or an insult; but it is neither. And this will appear presently, when we have explained the meaning which we attach to the obnoxious word *godless*.

We must remember that generally, up to the present time, human conduct was, amongst serious people, supposed to bear reference, before all things, to some power above ourselves, and of a different nature, to whom our souls belonged, and for whose sake we were bound to keep them pure. And this conception has so penetrated our modern civilisation, that it has been implied in the entire lives and thoughts of numbers who not only never thought of affirming it, but who even posed as deniers of the belief upon which it rested. Shakespeare, for instance, may or may not have been a religious man; he may or may not have been a Catholic, or a Protestant.¹ But whatever his personal views or feelings may have been, the light by which he viewed life was the light of Christianity. The shine, the shadow, and the colours of the moral world he looked upon, were all caused or cast by the Christian Sun of Righteousness. But now amongst the vast changes that human thought has been undergoing, the sun that we once all walked by has for many eyes become extinguished; and every energy has been bent upon supplying man with a substitute, which shall have, if possible, an equal illuminating power, and at any rate the same power of moral actinism. This substitute at present is, it is true, somewhat nebulous; but the substance it is composed of is already sufficiently plain. The new object of our duty is not our Father which is in Heaven, but our brothers and our children who are on earth. It is to these alone, according to the new gospel, that our piety is due; it is indeed to these that all true piety has, in all ages, been ignorantly paid. It is needless to dwell upon this conception longer. Whether we think it sound or hollow, its general character is familiar enough to all of us; and we know that a growing

1 The controversy over Shakespeare's religious affiliation—Protestant or Catholic—continues to the present day.

number of men and women around us are adopting it. But it is one thing to adopt a belief in theory—another thing to put it in practice; and again another thing, to receive it, as it were in solution, into our daily thoughts and feelings, so that we not only act and think by it, but also instinctively judge and feel by it. This third stage is the one that is reached latest, and we doubt whether as yet any considerable body of men and women have attained to it. The nearest approach to it, so far as we know, is to be found in the novels of George Eliot: only there even it is not reached perfectly; for the moral standard of the novelist, and the rational justification of her own judgments and sympathies, are not present to her mind instinctively, and as matters of course; but they are for ever being consciously emphasised by herself, and for ever being pointed out, more or less directly, to the reader. At any rate, in the world of earnest art, she is the first legitimate fruit of our modern atheistic pietism; and as such, she is an object of extreme interest, if not to artistic epicures, at any rate to all anxious inquirers into human destiny. For in her writings we have some sort of presentation of a world of high endeavour, pure morality, and strong enthusiasm, existing and in full work, without any reference to, or help from, the thought of God. *Godless* in its literal sense, and divested of all vindictive meaning, exactly describes her writings. They are without God, not against Him. They do not deny, but they silently and skilfully ignore Him. We have the same old liturgies of human faith and action, only they are intercepted and appropriated by a new object, when they seemed to be on their way to the old. The glory and the devotion that was once given to God is transferred silently to man.

The way in which this feat is performed is very remarkable; for the characters she presents us with are suffered rarely, if ever, to hold opinions that are consciously to themselves at all akin to the author's. On the contrary, they are most of them Christian people, with the love of God and the fear of hell presumably before their eyes. But in all their more vital struggles after God, the supernatural element in their beliefs is represented as having no effect on them. It is treated as a husk or a shell, concealing, or perhaps sheltering, something more precious than itself; or at least conveying a truth in metaphor through the channel of a sacramental lie.... Savonarola¹ is the spokesman of Humanity made divine, not of Deity made human. In so far as he is not this, but the reverse of this, there, according to George Eliot, lies his weakness and not his strength. The "higher life," the withdrawal from man for the sake of communion with God, is for her a diseased weakness, if not a wickedness. The Christ of the Christian Church says, "If a man love father and mother more than me, he is not worthy of me." The Christ of George Eliot says the exact opposite: "A man is not worthy of me unless he love me less than father or mother." With her, as she says often and

1 Girolamo Savonarola (1452-98), Dominican monk and demagogic preacher who challenged the authority and exposed the corruption of the Medici and Pope Alexander VI. He was tried, excommunicated, and burned as a heretic in Florence. GE examines his character in *Romola* (1863).

explicitly, the “transcendent morality” is to share willingly in the “common lot,” and not to seek escape from ties “after those ties have ceased to be pleasant.” She urges with a solemn eloquence, she seems to see in a solemn ecstasy, that a man’s highest life is to be found in sorrow, borne for the sake of others; and that all seeming miseries may be turned to blessings, by making an offering of them to something beyond ourselves. But an offering to what? To the God who has made us, loved us, suffered for us, and into whose presence we may one day win admission? To no such God; but to some impersonal cause, some force of human progress, “Make your marriage-sorrows,” says Savonarola to Romola, “an offering, too, my daughter: an offering to *the great work* by which sin and sorrow are to be made to cease.” This is the one teaching of all her novels; and its fundamental difference from the highest Christian teaching lies in this, that it asserts the part to be greater and more complete than the whole; that it asserts those human hopes, and loves, and enthusiasms which Christianity has developed for us, and bequeathed to us, to be in reality complete in themselves, and clogged and weighted only, not supported by, what were once supposed to be their divine foundations.

This fact, as we have said before, is probably little suspected by the majority of George Eliot’s readers. These carry with them the lamp of their own religion into that tender but gloomy world into which the author leads them; and do not perceive what the only light is, with which it would be else provided. They have themselves supplied what is wanting before they have felt the want. And they have imagined that the beliefs which they do not find dwelt upon, have been presupposed as true, instead of being studiously ignored as false. But if we would really see George Eliot in all her full significance, we must not close our eyes thus. If we do, we shall not only miss the one thing which she has renounced much to teach us; but we shall miss something that is of an importance far more general. We shall miss the first concrete examples of the workings of the new religion of humanity; and the only means as yet offered us by which to test the results of it, as seen or anticipated by one of its own apostles. Further, if we look at her in this way, and with this intention, her work, which seems so chaotic when judged by any mere artistic tests, becomes incongruous and intelligible. It is not so much a series of novels, interspersed with philosophical reflections; it is a gradual setting forth of a philosophy and religion of life, illustrated by a continuous succession of diagrams. That this is the true view of the matter has been getting more and more evident as the career of the author has proceeded. How far this line of development has been conscious and intentional, with herself, it is not ours to inquire. But, consciously or unconsciously, the main stream of her powers has drifted into the philosophic channel, and has left her artistic powers as a mere auxiliary to these, although from the very nature of the case closely connected with them. It is, therefore, by her philosophy that she has the strongest claim to be judged....

...The first article of her creed is—I believe in Humanity as the embracer of every moral end that is possible for man; as the only and sufficient object of his highest hopes, and his truest religious emotions. And it is her aim, con-

scious or unconscious, throughout all her writings to exhibit to us the highest lives directed and nourished only by motives that are purely human. One thing therefore is at once evident. She does not, if we recollect rightly, profess herself to be an optimist. We think indeed she has expressed her convictions somewhere as a creed of “*meliorism*.” But at any rate the whole fabric of her system and her emotions rests, for its one foundation, on a profound satisfaction in the fact of the human race existing, and an earnest hope and expectation of a blessed, if not of a quite perfect, future for it. It is an unspeakable good that it exists now; it will be a yet more unspeakable good that it exists by-and-by. We need not, however, seek to define her hopes too exactly. It is sufficient that her entire philosophy is an impassioned protest against pessimism, and that it presents the human life and the human lot to us as worthy of all our piety—all our love and reverence. The question that at once arises is, how far does this Deity, as she presents it to us, justify or excite the adoration that she is so pressing we should accord to it? And the answer to this question is somewhat startling. George Eliot, as we have said, is theoretically no pessimist; and yet the picture she presents to us of the world we live in almost exactly answers to the description given of it by Schopenhauer,¹ as nothing better than a “penal settlement.” It might at first sight seem hard to account for this inconsistency. It might seem that her philosophic theories and her true natural vision were at hopeless war with one another; and that her diagrams refuted instead of illustrating the text of her proposition. Or we might figure her as labouring under a destiny the exact reverse of Balaam’s; and having resolved to bless the human destiny, finding herself constrained by the power of truth to curse it.

For in what light is it that she exhibits men to us? She exhibits them as, first and before all things, beings who are not isolated, but linked together by countless ties of duty and affection; and the essence of all right conduct, and the moral *raison d’être*² of existence, consists, according to her, in our willingly keeping these ties inviolate. Thus far the matter does not sound unpromising. But if we go farther, it will appear that the race of beings that are thus linked together, form no happy and rejoicing brotherhood, finding each a glad reward in the sense that the rest are helped by him; but a sad and labouring race of chained convicts, whose highest glory it is not to attempt escaping. We are all born, she teaches, with bonds about us, and we inevitably increase their number, prompted by our own cravings, as we live on. And, says George Eliot, every such bond “is a debt: the right lies in the payment of that debt; *it can lie nowhere else*. In vain will you wander over the earth; you will be wandering away for ever from the right.”

1 Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), pessimistic philosopher, whose influential major work, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* [*The World as Will and Representation*] (1819), attracted a devoted international following, especially among artists and writers, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

2 Reason for being (French).

Now “the right,” according to her teaching, has two distinct characteristics: in the first place, it is the hardest thing of all to attain; and in the next place, it is the only thing that is worth attaining. But when it is attained it seems, as she describes it, little better, at the best, from the human stand-point, than a choice between evils. “Renunciation,” she says explicitly, “does not cease to be a sorrow; but it is a sorrow borne willingly.” And again she says in another place, “the highest happiness ... often brings so much pain with it that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything else, because our souls see it is good.” But thus far clearly she must be doing it some injustice. For elsewhere a sense of positive rapture is supposed to be a part of its content; and despite all its anguish, it is supposed to admit us to some “vision, that makes all life below it dross for ever.” The matter is a mystery, and is seen by herself to be so; so much so, indeed, that the illustration and simplification of it is really the one purpose that runs through all her novels. The central action of all of them—at least of all the later ones—is transparently the same. It is the choice or the refusal of some person or persons of this highest happiness, which can hardly be told from pain, but which, when once chosen, is to make all else dross for ever. And by these examples she seeks to convince us of three things: firstly, that the *right*, for its own sake, and resting on a strictly human basis, does practically bring its own reward with it, in the way her system requires of it; secondly, that men and women will recognise this truth, without any bias derived from supernatural hopes of affections; and, lastly, we gather her to imply that though the number of these loftier natures be but small, they yet impart a kind of vicarious value and sanctity to the entire race they belong to; and thus give ground to the philosopher for a solemn piety towards that race as it is, and a sure if anxious hope for it as it will be.

6. Margaret Oliphant, Chapter XI, “Of the Younger Novelists,” *The Victorian Age of English Literature* (1882)

[Oliphant’s disapproval of GE’s departure from the simplicity of her earlier works suggests how unprepared some of her contemporaries were for the stylistic innovations of *Middlemarch*.]

There is perhaps no name so influential and important in the imaginative literature of the half century as that of George Eliot (1819–1880), (Marian Evans, Mrs Lewes, Mrs Cross, however the reader chooses to call her). Notwithstanding the pre-eminence of Dickens and Thackeray¹ in the history of fiction, the new and anonymous writer who in 1857 stepped suddenly into fame, and a resplendent place in contemporary literature, remains even more remarkable than they in the perspective of the time. Her art is not in the least like theirs; it is in one

1 Charles Dickens (1812–70) and William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–63), great Victorian novelists.

sense deeper, free of the vulgarities and commonplaces of the one, and of the limitations imposed upon himself by the other. Both of these greatest novelists of our time were Londoners, and devoted to the elucidation, one of the lower, and the other of the upper region of the human society which gathers there as in a centre. Ladies and gentlemen were out of Dickens sphere altogether, and though the greater part of his life as a successful and famous man were spent in their society he never learnt how to draw them. On the other hand, it was ladies and gentlemen chiefly whom Thackeray understood, though his lightning glance penetrated a bourgeois group here and there, and all the servants, dependents and hangers-on of the great people, with that swift and sudden illumination which is more apt to betray the grotesque attitudes of the crowd than its better ordinary of patience, kindness and humanity. But George Eliot's inspiration came from the country where nature is less shaped and trained, and where the conventionalities which are even more rigid than in the most artificial society, are so patent to the seeing eye, that the satirist need be no sharper than the humourist, and may almost fulfil his office lovingly. Another question which has been constantly put to this age, and which is pushed with greater zeal every day, as to the position of women in literature and the height which it is in their power to attain, was solved by this remarkable woman, in a way most flattering to all who were and are fighting the question of equality between the two halves of mankind; for here was visibly a woman who was to be kept out by no barriers, who sat down quietly from the beginning of her career in the highest place, and if she did not absolutely excel all her contemporaries in the revelation of the human mind and the creation of new human beings, at least was second to none in those distinguishing characteristics of genius. Even that gift of humour, in which it had been so often confidently asserted the whole female sex was deficient, was seen to shine out in the individual with all the warmest suffusion of light and insight. She put all theories to flight and extinguished all fallacies on that subject without a word said. No man, no critic could condescend to her, or treat her with that courteous (or uncourteous) superiority which has been the ordinary lot of women; no one indeed, so far as we know, ever attempted to do so; her position was established from the moment when she first found her natural utterance.

The way in which she did so was in itself highly interesting, though her story lies under a cloud which it is unfortunately impossible to dissipate, and which throughout makes her life much less desirable to dwell upon than her work or her fame. She was the daughter of a very modest, respectable, commonplace family in the country, and from her childhood brought up in the unlovely straitness of a narrow little religious community, to whom it was apparent that they alone were secure of salvation, and all the world lay in wickedness. From this unfounded and conventional (as far as she was concerned) faith, she fell in a moment at the touch of the first assault, without difficulty and without regret, among people pretty much of the same mental attitude, though entirely contrary in point of belief, people still profoundly conscious that the whole world lay in folly, and that they alone were wise. The young and aspiring girl thus trans-

ported, as appeared, to a height of intellectual illumination, detached herself from all the traditions as well as all the tenets of Christianity, and when in mature life she become the so-called wife of George Henry Lewes, she was, no doubt, in her own eyes and according to the lights of nature, blameless, and only subject to a conventional censure to which she assumed, as well as she could, that she attached no importance. What was more extraordinary was that society after a while took her at her word, and instead of finding in her another example of the wickedness of genius, as was done in such cases as those of Byron and Shelley,¹ condoned the offence which strikes at the root of all law, and relaxed its standards for the sake of that genius which was too great to be doubted. This result was as unlooked for as it will remain, we hope, unparalleled and unique.

Whatever may be said in the point of view of morality, nothing could have been better for literature than the union thus formed. George Henry Lewes was not himself in any respect a man of genius, but he was one of the most typical of literary men, knowing everybody and known of everybody, not very successful as a writer, but a good critic; and thoroughly able to secure a hearing for a new writer, and to guide the steps of the neophyte in every way, both to fame and profit. It was he who suggested to the partner of his life that she should attempt fiction, and this at a moment when their fortunes were low, and when a new beginning, one way or another, was of the greatest importance to their joint comfort. Such reasons, alas! do not confer power, but they are good to stimulate it where it exists. Miss Evans, up to this time, had been a very mediocre writer in the “*Westminster*,”² an essayist quite unremarkable, and a translator—though even her translations do not seem to have been worthy of any special notice; and when she was left alone one morning, undisturbed, to make her first attempt at a story, herself deprecating the possibility of doing so, and only attempting it because it was urged upon her, the situation is one which might easily have been rendered ridiculous or painful in the telling, had the attempt ended, as seemed so likely, in some labourious nothing. One can understand something of the feeling of the excited man who had set this dutiful but cumbersome machinery to work, with high hopes indeed, but no knowledge whether the result would be a mass of chopped hay, straw, or stubble, or some great work which the world would not willingly let die. He is neither a sympathetic nor a delightful character in himself, yet a certain excitement of feeling is generated within us, half against our will, as we think of his return, of the woman coming to meet him, pale with the day’s seclusion and hard work, with the thrill of production about her, and the still stronger thrill of half despairing alarm lest her critic should think nothing of it, putting the sheets of manuscript into his hand. What George Lewes read was a portion at least of the “*Sad Fortunes of the*

1 George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), leading Romantic poets.

2 *The Westminster Review* (1824–1914), a journal founded by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) to represent “radical” opinion (in contrast to the conservative *Edinburgh Review* and *Quarterly Review*), to which GE contributed numerous articles and reviews and for which she served as assistant editor for a brief time starting in 1851.

Reverend Amos Barton," a piece of work which in all her after life, George Eliot never surpassed. It was probably only the humourous *mise en scène*,¹ the delightful picture of the village and the surrounding farms and their inhabitants, Mrs Hackett, and her neighbours, which he read in that tremendous moment while the author stood by, not the least aware that her faltering essay was in fact, in its brevity and humility, as perfect a work of genius as ever was given to the world....

[*Romola*] was perhaps the beginning of the new influence, the labourious elaboration of her later style, which has made *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* a class by themselves in fictitious literature. And yet the *mise en scène* of *Middlemarch*, the country landscape, and the bustling old squire, Mr Brooke, are admirable and full of life and power; while the story of Gwendoline in *Deronda*, up to the moment of her marriage, is one of the most masterly of impersonations. When, however, a female perfection comes in in the shape of Dorothea, and still more a male perfection in the form of Daniel Deronda, this admirable genius fails and sinks into morasses of fictitious imagination, and laboured utterance. Her true inspiration had nothing to do with these artificial and fantastic embodiments of new philosophy and a conventional ideal. It has been generally believed that George Eliot was influenced by her surroundings, and by the strain of excessive applause seldom tempered by criticism, to these efforts to transcend herself. It is very likely that it was a most sincere attempt on her part to improve upon the greater simplicity of the earlier method, in which the natural humility of genius had some share, as well as the increasing profundity of metaphysical studies, and the narrowing out of all true contact of life from the curious society of worshippers which had gathered round her, and kept her closely encircled, apart from the free air and natural atmosphere to which she had been born.

This society was, while it lasted, one of the most curious features in the history of contemporary literature. A close circle where nothing was heard but adoration of the divine figure in the midst, where strangers were charily admitted to gaze with awe over the shoulders of the initiated, and await in reverence the possibility of a word; where never jarring sound was permitted, nor breath of criticism, nor even a suggestion that the standard of perfect excellence was not always there. This state of affairs was generally believed to be the expedient of Mr Lewes, to keep in the finest condition and happiest circumstances the companion of his later life, whose genius he had discovered and fostered, and of whom he was always the first worshipper. The world perhaps has not done him sufficient credit for having made this great discovery and gently forced and led into utterance a power which had been between thirty and forty years in the world without discovering itself—but it has, on the other hand, remorselessly laid on his shoulders the obscuration of that genius in the more labourious efforts of her latest style....

1 Arrangement of performers and properties on stage (French).

**7. From Sir John Emerich Edward Dalberg, first Baron Acton,
 “George Eliot’s Life,” *Nineteenth Century* 17 (March 1885): 464–85**

[In this review of John Cross’s *Life of George Eliot*, Lord Acton discusses GE’s intellectual development and literary achievement, her interest in leading disputes of the age, and the impact of her elopement to Germany in 1854. Acton also notes that in her secularization of theology GE is moving towards a kind of anthropology of nineteenth-century England.]

... George Eliot was no spontaneous genius, singing unbidden with unpremeditated art. Her talents ripened successively and slowly. No literary reputation of this century has risen so high after having begun so late. The even maturity of her powers, original and acquired, lasted only thirteen years, and the native imagination was fading when observation and reflection were in the fulness of their prime....

Marian Evans spent the first thirty years of her life in a rural shire, and received her earliest and most enduring impressions in a region of social stability, among inert forces, away from the changing scenes that attend the making of history. Isolation, the recurring note of her existence, set in early, for her urgent craving for love and praise was repelled by the relations around her, and her childhood was unhappy. We are assured that she was affectionate, proud, and sensitive in the highest degree; and the words are significant, because they bear the concurrent testimony of her brother and her husband....

Evangelical and Baptist teachers had imbued her with practical religion, and she enjoyed the writings proper to the school.... Respect for the logic of Calvinism survived most of her theology, and it was attended originally by a corresponding aversion for what pertains to Rome. She reads the Oxford tracts,¹ and unconsciously applying a noted saying of St. Thomas,² detects the Satanic canker amidst so much learning and devotion.

This seriousness is the most constant element which early education supplied to her after career. She knew, not from hearsay or habit, but from the impress of inward experience, what is meant by conversion, grace, and prayer. Her change was not from external conformity to avowed indifference, but from earnest piety to explicit negation, and the knowledge of many secrets of a devout life accom-

-
- 1 The passage of the First Reform Bill of 1832 was a wake-up call for religious conservatives. The publication of *Tracts for the Times* (1833), featuring contributions by John Henry Newman (1801–90) and R.H. Froude (1803–36), launched the Oxford Tractarian Movement, which sought to defend the Church of England against the encroachments of modern life. Reviving High Church traditions of the 17th century was seen as one remedy for creeping secularization. Acton suggests that GE rejected the affinity of the Tractarians for Roman Catholicism.
 - 2 St. Thomas Aquinas (?1225–74), greatest of medieval Scholastic philosophers and reconciler of Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy. Will Ladislav’s friend, the German painter Adolf Naumann, asks Casaubon to pose for the head of the “Doctor Angelicus” in Chapter 22 of *Middlemarch*.

panied her through all vicissitudes. Writers of equal celebrity and partly analogous career, such as Strauss and Renan,¹ have made the same claim, somewhat confounding theological training with religious insight, and deliberate conviction or devotional feeling with faith. But George Eliot continued to draw the best of her knowledge from her own spiritual memories, not from a library of local divinity, and she treated religion neither with learned analysis nor with a gracious and flexible curiosity, but with a certain grave sympathy and gratitude. Her acquaintance with books had been restricted by the taste or scruples of teachers who could not estimate the true proportions or needs of her mind, and the defect was not remedied by contact with any intelligent divine. Such instruction as she obtained has supported thousands faithfully in the trials of life, but for an inquisitive and ambitious spirit, gifted with exceptional capacity for acquiring knowledge, it was no adequate protection under the wear and tear of study.

In the summer of 1841 the thought quickens, the style improves, and a new interest is awakened in disputed questions. She already aspired after that reconciliation of Locke with Kant which was to be the special boast of one of her most distinguished friends, and she was impressed by Isaac Taylor's *Ancient Christianity*².... At this point, while still a trusted member of the Church, Miss Evans was introduced at Coventry to a family of busy and strenuous free-thinkers [the Brays].... The revolution was sudden, but it was complete. For a time she continued to speak of eternal hope and a beneficent Creator; in deference to her father she even consented, uneasily, to go to church. But from that momentous November until her death it would appear that no misgiving favourable to Christianity ever penetrated her mind, or shook for an instant its settled unbelief. There was no wavering and no regret. And when George Eliot had become a consummate expert in the pathology of conscience, she abstained from displaying the tortures of doubt and the struggles of expiring faith....

Strauss himself never made so important a proselyte.... She was more thorough in her rejection of the Gospels, and she at once rejected far more than the Gospels. For some years her mind travelled in search of rest, and, like most students of German thought before the middle of the century, she paid a passing tribute to pantheism. But from Jonathan Edwards³ to Spinoza⁴ she went over at

-
- 1 David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74), German biblical critic, whose greatest work, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1835–36) GE translated in 1846. Ernest Renan (1823–92), French philosopher and historian, who combined an imaginative reconstruction of the person of Christ with a scientific and historical critique of the Gospel narratives in his multi-volume *Histoire des origines du Christianisme* [*History of the Origins of Christianity*] (1863–81).
 - 2 Isaac Taylor (1821–1901), English clergyman, antiquarian, philologist, and pamphleteer.
 - 3 Jonathan Edwards (1703–58), American theologian and philosopher, renowned for his preaching and credited with instigating the religious revival known as the “Great Awakening” that started in 1734 and swept over the American colonies for a decade.
 - 4 Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza (1632–77), Dutch philosopher of Jewish extraction who countered Descartes’ dualism of spirit and matter with a form of pantheistic unity that was much admired by Goethe, the German Romantics, and GE, who started translating Spinoza’s *Ethics* (published in 1677) during her sojourn in Weimar (1854).

one step. The abrupt transition may be accounted for by the probable action of Kant,¹ who had not then become a buttress of Christianity.

Miss Evans translated the *Leben Jesu* from the fourth edition,² in which Strauss betrayed the feeling roused by the violence of the conflict, and withdrew the concessions which his ablest opponents had wrung from him. It was not a labour of love to the translator. In her judgment the problem was exhausted. She had her own more radical solution, which the author did not reach for twenty years, and she shared neither his contentious fervour, his asperity, nor his irresolution. The task was accomplished under a sense of growing repulsion. One of her friends even says that she gathered strength to write on the Crucifixion by gazing on the crucifix, and we may infer from this remark that some confusion of thought prevailed at Coventry.... In the life of George Eliot, Strauss is an episode, not an epoch. She did not take him up to satisfy doubts or to complete an appointed course. These studies were carried no further, and she was not curious regarding the future of the famous school whose influence extended from Newman and Ritschl³ to Renan and Keim.⁴ But there is no writer on whom she bestowed so large a share of the incessant labour of her life. Two years spent in uncongenial contact with such a mind were an effectual lesson to a woman of twenty-six, unused to strict prosaic method and averse from the material drudgery of research. She could learn from Strauss to distrust the royal road of cleverness and wit, to neglect no tedious detail, to write so that what is written shall withstand hostile scrutiny....

Beyond the pleasures of literature arose the sterner demand for a certain rule of life in place of the rejected creeds. The sleepless sense that a new code of duty and motive needed to be restored in the midst of the void left by lost sanctions and banished hopes never ceased to stimulate her faculties and to oppress her spirits. After the interrupted development and the breach with the entire past, only her own energy could avail in the pursuit that imparted unity to her remaining life. It was the problem of her age to reconcile the practical ethics of unbelief and of belief, to save virtue and happiness when dogmas and authorities decay. To solve it she swept the realm of knowledge and stored up that large and serious erudition which sustains all her work, and in reality far exceeded what appears on the surface of the novels or in the record of daily reading. For an attentive observer there are many surprises like that of the mathematician who came to give her lessons and found that she was already in the differential calculus. It is her supreme characteristic in literature that her original genius

-
- 1 Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), revolutionary German philosopher and the most influential thinker since antiquity, whose attack on British empirical philosophy made him a favorite of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle.
 - 2 The only work GE published under her birth name.
 - 3 Albert Ritschl (1822-89), influential German theologian, whose anti-rationalistic teaching stressed ethics and the community of man.
 - 4 Karl Theodor Keim (1825-78), controversial German scholar of early Christianity, whose research focused on what he called "the struggle between the old and new beliefs" in the Roman Empire during the first century CE.

rested on so broad a foundation of other people's thoughts; and it would be hard to find in her maturer life any parallel to Mr Spencer's¹ historic inacquaintance with Comte,² or to the stranger ignorance of Mr Spencer's own existence avowed in 1881 by Michelet, the legendary mantle-bearer of Hegel.³

...The essential articles of George Eliot's creed were the fruit of so much preceding study that she impresses us less than some other writers by originality in the common sense of invention. She was anxious to make it known that her abiding opinions were formed before she settled in London. Mr Spencer confirms the claim, and it is proved by her first paper in the *Westminster Review*. The doctrine that neither contrition nor sacrifice can appease Nemesis, or avert the consequences of our wrongdoing from ourselves and others, filled a very large space indeed in her scheme of life and literature. From the bare diagram of Brother Jacob to the profound and finished picture of *Middlemarch*, retribution is the constant theme and motive for her art. It helped to determine her religious attitude, for it is only partly true that want of evidence was her only objection to Christianity. She was firmly persuaded that the postponement of the reckoning blunts the edge of remorse, and that repentance, which ought to be submission to just punishment, proved by the test of confession, means more commonly the endeavour to elude it. She thought that the world would be infinitely better and happier if men could be made to feel that there is no escape from the inexorable law that we reap what we have sown. When she began to write, this doctrine was of importance as a neutral space, as an altar of the Unknown God, from which she was able to preach her own beliefs without controversy or exposure. For whilst it is the basis of morals under the scientific reign, it is a stimulant and a consolation to many Christians....

...The same law, that evil ensues of necessity from evil deeds, is the pivot of Spinoza's ethics, and it was the belief of Strauss. George Eliot accepted it, and made it bright with the splendour of genius. Other portions of her system, such as altruism and the reign of the dead, exhibit her power of anticipating and of

1 Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), philosopher and close friend of GE before she became attached to Lewes in 1852–53. Spencer described GE as “the most admirable woman, mentally, I have met.”

2 Auguste Comte (1798–1857), French philosopher, highly admired by GE, and author of the influential *Cours de philosophie positive* [*Course of the Positive Philosophy*] (1830–42). “Positive” in Comte's system denotes the final stage in the development of humanity, which, in contrast to the earlier theological and metaphysical stages, conduced to the establishment of social and political systems appropriate to the industrial age.

3 Jules Michelet (1798–1874), French historian, whose chief work, *L'Histoire de France* [*History of France*] (1833–43, 1855–67), was much admired for its literary style and rich evocation of the past. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), the dominant German philosopher after Kant and author of the magisterial *Phänomenologie des Geistes* [*Phenomenology of the Spirit*] (1807). Hegel's central idea is that the search for unity in a world from which humanity is alienated may be achieved by applying the dialectic of thesis–antithesis–synthesis to the problem of historical evolution.

keeping abreast with the quicker movements of the age. In this she plainly followed, and she followed the lead of those who happened to be near....

George Eliot retired from the management of the *Westminster Review* without having found her vocation or struck a vein of ore. She employed herself in translating Spinoza and Feuerbach. *The Essence of Christianity*¹ had been published more than twelve years, and expressed neither a prevailing phase of philosophy nor the last views of the author. More than any other work it had contributed to the downfall of metaphysics, and it contained an ingenious theory of the rise and growth of religion and of the relation of the soul to God, while denying the existence of either. Feuerbach repudiated Christianity so decisively that Strauss was distanced and stranded for thirty years; and it would have been difficult to introduce to the British public any work of the same kind written with as much ability. It met no demand and was received with cold reserve.... The book appeared in July 1854, and immediately after she accepted Lewes, who was completing the *Life of Goethe*, and they started for Weimar and Berlin.

Mr Cross has judged it unnecessary to explain a step which is sufficiently intelligible from the whole tenor of George Eliot's life. The sanctions of religion were indifferent to her after rejecting its doctrines; and she meant to disregard not the moral obligation of marriage, but the social law of England. Neither the law which assigns the conditions of valid marriage, nor that which denied the remedy of divorce, was of absolute and universal authority. Both were unknown in some countries and inapplicable to certain cases; and she deemed that they were no more inwardly binding upon everybody than the royal edicts upon a Huguenot or the penal laws upon a Catholic.

George Eliot can neither be defended on the plea that every man must be tried by canons he assents to, nor censured on the plea that virtue consists in constant submission to variable opinion. The first would absolve fanatics and the other would supersede conscience. It is equally certain that she acted in conformity with that which, in 1854, she esteemed right, and in contradiction to that which was the dominant and enduring spirit of her own work. She did not feel that she was detracting from her authority by an act which gave countenance to the thesis that associates rigid ethics with rigid dogma, for she claimed no authority and did not dream of setting an example. The idea of her genius had not dawned. That she possessed boundless possibilities of doing good to men, and of touching hearts that no divine and no philosopher could reach, was still, at thirty-five, a secret to herself. At first she was astonished that anybody who was not superstitious could find fault with her. To deny herself to old friends, to earn with her pen an income for her whose place she took, to pass among strangers by a name which was not her due, all this did not seem too high a price for the happiness of a home. She urged with pathetic gravity that she knew what she

1 Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72), German philosopher, Biblical critic, and follower of Hegel, whose most famous work is *Das Wesen des Christentums* [*The Essence of Christianity*] (1841), which argues that Christianity is a mirror in which humanity gazes at itself. GE's translation of this work was published in 1854 and her entire fictional output is tinged with Feuerbach's religion of humanity.

was losing. She did not know it. Ostensibly she was resigning a small group of friends and an obscure position in literature. What she really sacrificed was liberty of speech, the foremost rank among the women of her time, and a tomb in Westminster Abbey....

The visit to Germany opened out wider horizons.... If Lessing was the favourite, Goethe¹ was the master. Life at Weimar, with the sublime tradition, closed for George Eliot the season of storm and strain. Although she never practised art for its own sake, or submitted to the canon that poetry is aimless song, Goethe's gospel of inviolate serenity was soothing to a spirit disabled by excess of sensibility, and taught her to be less passionately affected either by sympathy or sorrow. The contrast is great between the agonising tones of the earlier life and the self-restraint and composure that succeeded....

... She has said of herself that her function is that of the aesthetic, not the doctrinal teacher—the rousing of the nobler emotions which make mankind desire the social right, not the prescribing of special measures. The supreme purpose of all her work is ethical. Literary talent did not manifest itself until she was thirty-seven. In her later books the wit and the descriptive power diminish visibly, and the bare didactic granite shows through the cultivated surface. She began as an essayist, and ended as she had begun, having employed meanwhile the channel of fiction to enforce that which, propounded as philosophy, failed to convince. If the doctrine, separate from art, had no vitality, the art without the doctrine had no significance. There will be more perfect novels and truer systems. But she has little rivalry to apprehend until philosophy inspires finer novels, or novelists teach nobler lessons of duty to the masses of men. If ever science or religion reigns alone over an undivided empire, the books of George Eliot might lose their central and unique importance, but as the emblem of a generation distracted between the intense need of believing and the difficulty of belief, they will live to the last syllable of recorded time....

8. Virginia Woolf, “George Eliot,” *Times Literary Supplement* 18 (20 November 1919): 657-58

[In this encounter between the leading woman novelist of the nineteenth century and her successor in the first half of the twentieth century, Woolf provides

-
- 1 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81), the leading German critic and dramatist before the time of Goethe, renowned for his humanity and liberal views. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Germany's greatest man of letters—poet, critic, playwright, and novelist—and the last true polymath to walk the earth. GE could not, from Acton's perspective, be too closely associated with Goethe, who was a favorite target of conservative cultural critics because of his amorous adventures and apparent indifference to conventional morality. In Acton's mind her worthiness as a cultural icon depended on being free of Goethe's libertine and free-thinking taint. Nonetheless, GE, even more than Thomas Carlyle, the dean of Victorian Goethe fanatics, absorbed Goethe's sympathy for life's questers and transgressors, like Dorothea and Will. Indeed, Will is a doppelgänger of Goethe's eponymous heroes, Wil(helm) Meister and Werther.