

In praise of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* on its 150th anniversary

Part 1

David Walsh
30 December 2009

This year marked the 150th anniversary, widely and deservedly celebrated, of the publication of Charles Darwin's groundbreaking *On the Origin of Species*.

Marx, who immediately recognized the significance of Darwin's work, published his own *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that same year. Its preface contains the famous summation of the materialist conception of history (which, decades later, the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky would memorize and be able to recite by heart) that begins, "In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production...." (1)

A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens appeared in 1859, as did Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov*. Gustave Courbet was the acknowledged, if embattled, leader of the Realist current in painting. He held a *Grand fête du Réalisme* at his studio in Paris in October, writing a friend two months later that "Realism is very much under attack at the moment...we must marshal new forces and do everything we can."

Before 2009 comes to an end, the publication of George Eliot's novel *Adam Bede* early in 1859 also deserves to be noted.

There are numerous biographies of Eliot, and *Adam Bede* is easy enough to obtain, but certain details about the author and her first novel are worth commenting upon.

Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Commissar of Education following the Russian Revolution and a literary critic of note, once recommended, "be born a genius by all means—but the most important thing is to be born at the right time," adding Goethe's observation, "Had I been born 20 years earlier or later, I would have been quite a different person."

Eliot's life, 1819-1880, coincides almost exactly with Marx's (1818-1883). Important developments at the material base of society, in industry and technology, in the natural sciences, as well as in art and culture, influenced their lives—in different ways and under different conditions, of course.

Eliot (whose real name was Mary Ann or Marian Evans) was born in Warwickshire in England's West Midlands region, the daughter of an estate manager known for his conscientious work habits and staunchly conservative political views. Recognized at an early age for her intelligence, Evans gained access to the estate's library. At school, as an

adolescent, she was allowed considerable freedom in what she read; she devoured books, including Sir Walter Scott's novels.

Evans was strongly touched by Evangelicalism in her later teenage years, and devoted several years to taking religion and religious study seriously. During that time, she disapproved of frivolities such as the theater and novels. However, her theological ardor eventually cooled and she found herself reading all of Byron, Shelley, Coleridge, Southey and, especially, Wordsworth, among others.

In 1841, she and her father moved to a house near Coventry where Mary Ann came under different intellectual influences. There was clearly something in the social air as well, including no doubt the impact of the Chartist movement and the depression of 1841-1842, that made her susceptible to new ideas, among them those advanced by Charles and Caroline Bray, who became her close friends. Charles Bray was a ribbon manufacturer and a free thinker. He was an acquaintance of, among other figures, Robert Owen, the utopian socialist, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American philosopher, to both of whom he introduced Mary Ann, who had by now stopped attending church. She "was quickly brought," as biographer Gordon S. Haight writes, "from provincial isolation into touch with the world of ideas."

Her intellectual development was rapid and extraordinary. An assiduous student of foreign languages, Evans began translating David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (*The Life of Jesus*), originally published in 1835, from German into English in 1843. This pioneering "left Hegelian" work, which denied the supernatural and miraculous elements of the Christian gospels and treated the latter as mythology, helped lead Friedrich Engels (another contemporary of Eliot's, 1820-1895) to abandon his Christian faith and provided "the first impulse," in his expression, for the modern philosophical struggle against religion.

"For two years," writes Haight, "Mary Ann laboured, translating the fifteen hundred pages of German, with quotations in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.... For her work she was paid £20. Few books of the nineteenth century have had a profounder influence on religious thought in England."

By now she read everything, including French writers—such as Rousseau, the utopian socialist Saint-Simon, and the "scandalous" novelist George Sand—who shocked even some of her new progressive friends. In March 1848, she welcomed the outbreak of the French Revolution and expressed contempt for the overthrown ruler, Louis-Philippe. She declined to sentimentalize over "a pampered old man when the earth has its millions of unfed souls and bodies."

However, she had no hope for any English revolution. Here, she wrote a correspondent, "a revolutionary movement would be simply destructive—not constructive. Besides, it would be put down.... [T]here is

nothing in our constitution to obstruct the slow progress of *political* reform. This is all we are fit for at present.... We English are slow crawlers.”

She moved to London in early 1851, with the aim of becoming a professional writer, as Marian Evans. She became involved personally and professionally with John Chapman, soon-to-be owner of the *Westminster Review*, a leading cultural and political journal. In effect, Evans eventually became editor of the publication, both revising articles and contributing many of her own essays and reviews. The journal published significant pieces on social and political reform, world and British politics, history, philosophy, science, and literature. Each of the 10 numbers of the *Westminster Review* edited by Evans reviewed approximately 100 books.

To the *Westminster*’s London office came all sorts of intellectual and cultural figures, including scientists such as Thomas Huxley, biologist and later staunch advocate of Darwin, biologist and paleontologist Richard Owen, and naturalist Edward Forbes. Newspaperman Horace Greeley and poet William Cullen Bryant were among the American visitors.

Furthermore, Haight notes, “London was swarming with refugees from the 1848 revolutions [on the Continent], many of whom gravitated toward this centre of enlightened radicalism. Karl Marx was brought by Chapman’s friend Andrew Johnson.... We have no record of Marian’s meeting Marx. But she did see another friend of Johnson, Ferdinand Freiligrath, the revolutionary poet, who came to join Marx in London.” Evans conversed as well with the exiled French reformist socialist Louis Blanc and Italian nationalist leader Giuseppe Mazzini. She also came into contact with Charles Dickens, Herbert Spencer, and Wilkie Collins, among others.

The future “George Eliot” had the good fortune to meet George Henry Lewes (1817-1878) in the early 1850s. A literary critic, a one-time medical student, an occasional actor, an amateur natural scientist, a Comtean positivist, writes Haight, “None of his contemporaries was more versatile. By 1850 he had published a popular history of philosophy, two novels, a life of Robespierre [aimed at rehabilitating the French revolutionary leader], a tragedy in blank verse...besides scores of successful periodical articles on a wide variety of subjects, which he had been writing since he was seventeen.” In 1855, Lewes’s biography of Goethe appeared, which obtained a wide audience in Germany, and remains in print. His writings on science were also considered valuable; some of his suggestions were later accepted by physiologists.

Lewes was married, and for various legal reasons could not get a divorce. He and Marian lived together for 24 years in an unmarried state (until his death in 1878), considering themselves husband and wife. It was by all accounts an extraordinary union, despite the degree of ostracism from respectable society it cost them.

In 1854, they traveled to Germany on a kind of honeymoon (where they paid a visit to Franz Liszt, along with scientists and intellectuals of various sorts). In fact, they made frequent trips to Germany and that country’s intellectual influence plays a considerable role in the eventual development of George Eliot as an important novelist.

Around this time, Evans began translating another landmark German work, Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Das Wesen des Christentums* (*The Essence of Christianity*), originally published in 1841. (Her translation remains the standard in English.) Several decades later, Engels observed that the work “placed materialism on the throne again.... Nothing exists outside nature and man, and the higher beings our religious fantasies have created are only the fantastic reflection of our own essence.... One must himself have experienced the liberating effect of this book to get an idea of it. Enthusiasm was general; we all became at once Feuerbachians.”

During her 1854 trip to Germany, Marian also set about translating Spinoza’s *Ethics*, although that work was never published during her lifetime. Two years later, she published a long and insightful piece on the great German poet and political radical Heinrich Heine (whom she termed “one of the most remarkable men of this age”), which, a twentieth century commentator asserted, “probably did more than any other single work in introducing to English-speaking peoples the genius that was Heine’s.”

We are clearly confronted in Evans-Eliot with an extraordinary mind, but one associated as well with a great depth of human sympathy and compassion. Physically relatively unprepossessing, “the quiet-voiced Miss Evans” (who by the mid-1850s went by the name of Mrs. Lewes) impressed and won over most of those who met her by the force of her intelligence and by her kindness. She could speak the unvarnished, sometimes unpleasant truth, according to contemporaries, but never with the intention of wounding. An acquaintance commented, “The odd mixture of truth and fondness in Marian is so great. She never spares, but expresses every opinion, good and bad, with the most unflinching plainness, and yet she seems able to see faults without losing tenderness.”

Forgiving and kind she may have been in her personal relations, but Evans was far from gentle in her comments on artists whose work she felt was false or empty. In a scathing essay entitled “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” which appeared in the *Westminster Review* in October 1856, Evans offered this comment about the vacuous authors and their absurd creations: “If their peers and peeresses are improbable, their literary men, tradespeople, and cottagers are impossible; and their intellect seems to have the peculiar impartiality of reproducing both what they have seen and heard, and what they have not seen and heard, with equal unfaithfulness.”

Evans began her career as a fiction writer in 1856-1857 with *Scenes of Clerical Life*, a collection of three short stories, first published in *Blackwood’s Magazine* over the course of 1857. The work attracted considerable attention. Among its admirers was Dickens, who wrote “George Eliot” (the first name was chosen in honor of Lewes) a laudatory letter: “The exquisite truth and delicacy both of the humor and the pathos of these stories, I have never seen the like of; and they have impressed me in a manner that I should find it very difficult to describe to you.” Dickens was not fooled by the masculine name on the title-page, commenting that if the stories “originated with no woman, I believe that no man ever before had the art of making himself mentally so like a woman since the world began.”

This brings us to *Adam Bede*, Eliot’s first novel. The book is set in 1799, in rural England. Eliot devotes considerable effort to the description of the countryside, which she obviously felt deeply about (and scrupulously researched prior to the writing). The title character is an honest, upright carpenter, who lives with his brother and mother. Adam loves Hetty Sorrel, an orphaned niece of the Poysers, who rent the leading farm on the Donnithorne estate. Dinah Morris, an itinerant Methodist preacher, is another niece of the Poysers.

The beautiful Hetty, somewhat selfish and desirous of leaving her drab farm existence behind, develops an attraction for Arthur Donnithorne, the young squire, who will soon inherit the estate from his aging grandfather. They begin to meet secretly in the woods, where Adam one evening comes upon them kissing. He and Arthur fight, and Adam forces the latter to write a message to Hetty breaking off their relations, thus shattering “her little dream-world.” After Arthur’s departure with his regiment, Hetty becomes engaged to Adam, but when she discovers she’s pregnant, sets off to find Arthur.

Unable to locate her former lover and terrified of the public disgrace she

faces at home, Hetty, with the help of a woman she meets, delivers the baby while on her travels. Overwhelmed by her situation, but incapable of committing suicide as she has contemplated, Hetty abandons the baby in a field, where it eventually dies. She is caught and tried for child murder, and sentenced to hang. Dinah comforts her in prison, where the anguished Adam also visits her. At the last moment, her sentence is commuted to transportation. Adam and Dinah, who slowly develop feelings for each other, marry and begin a life together.

The book should be read, but there are several aspects of it worth considering here. In the first place, *Adam Bede* needs to be defended against a species of “left” critics who refer condescendingly to Eliot’s “liberal humanism” and “traditional realism.” We don’t need to be told that a good deal of water has flowed under the bridge, socially and artistically, since the middle of the nineteenth century.

Artists do not create their works under conditions of their own choosing. Objective circumstances impose themselves, and the most searching artists must find a way in or around them. We value a novelist, for example, not by some abstract, ahistorical standard, but by how he or she responded to the specific challenges of the day and the medium.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, when Eliot began writing her novels, Britain was the “workshop of the world,” in the midst of an unparalleled industrial development. This vast expansion—and the unprecedented wealth accumulated—had its impact on intellectual and cultural life, and on every social layer.

Engels noted in 1885 that “during the period of England’s industrial monopoly the English working class have, to a certain extent, shared in the benefits of the monopoly. These benefits were very unequally parcelled out amongst them; the privileged minority pocketed most, but even the great mass had, at least, a temporary share now and then. And that is the reason why, since the dying-out of Owenism, there has been no Socialism in England.”

It was not likely that Eliot would have been a revolutionary opponent of capitalism at a time when the leading sections of the working class were not infected by such views. The extraordinary thing, on the contrary, is the degree to which her social outlook was penetrating and critical, given the generally conservative climate.

Realism

The question of realism is an enormous one that can only be touched on here. It seems reasonable to ask our “advanced” critics from what viewpoint they are criticizing Eliot’s “traditional” and “naïve” conceptions, especially as she outlines them in *Adam Bede*’s Chapter XVII (“In Which the Story Pauses a Little,” discussed below). Do they favor richer and closer approximations of life than Eliot was capable of creating, taking into account the artistic advances and social experiences of the past century and a half, or does their criticism represent a regression, bound up with a rejection of the very ability to reproduce the truth about the objective world in art?

Eliot’s views on realism were part of a radical reorientation of artists in line with new social and economic reality, philosophical-political theory, and scientific discovery. The rising of the working class in France in 1830 and 1848 in particular posed new challenges. Courbet’s paintings of peasants, petty bourgeois townsfolk, laborers and village girls were denounced as “the glorification of vulgar ugliness,” “democratic” and “tainted with materialism.” In 1851, the painter declared himself “a partisan of all the revolution and above all a Realist.... ‘Realist’ means a sincere lover of the truth.”

Lewes, in his article “Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction” (1858), argued that “Art is a representation of reality.” He wrote: “Realism is...the basis of all Art, and its antithesis is not Idealism, but *Falsism*. When our painters represent peasants with regular features and irreproachable linen... an attempt is made to idealize, but the result is simply falsification and bad art.... Either give us true peasants, or leave them untouched; either paint no drapery at all, or paint it with the utmost fidelity; either keep your people silent, or make them speak the idiom of their class.”

Writing in 1847, the Russian critic V. G. Belinsky observed that Gogol’s contribution to Russian literature could only have been achieved “by making art base itself exclusively on real life, eschewing all ideals. To do this it was necessary to make an exclusive study of the crowd, the mass, to depict ordinary people, and not only pleasant exceptions to the general rule which always lead poets to idealization and bear an alien stamp.” He suggested that another definition fit Gogol’s works: “art as the representation of reality in all its fidelity.”

In *Adam Bede*’s Chapter XVII, Eliot makes the case for truthfully representing an imperfect and fallible humanity. Our “fellow mortals,” she notes, “every one, must be accepted as they are.” The artists must pay attention to “the real breathing men and women, who can be chilled by your indifference or injured by your prejudice; who can be cheered and helped onward by your fellow-feeling, your forbearance, your outspoken, brave justice.”

Eliot writes, “Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult.... Examine your words well, and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings—much harder than to say something fine about them which is NOT the exact truth.” (Tolstoy would make the same point in *War and Peace* a few years later: “It is very difficult to tell the truth.”)

Adam Bede’s author praises seventeenth century Dutch genre painting in particular, with its treatment of ordinary people and those “cheap common things which are the precious necessities of life.” She goes on to urge that “common coarse people” not be banished “from the region of Art,” “those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house, those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world—those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs, and their clusters of onions.”

In another 1856 piece in the *Westminster Review*, Eliot had made clear how seriously she took the accurate depiction of “our more heavily-laden fellow-men,” the working classes: “Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the people. Falsification here is far more pernicious than in the more artificial aspects of life” (“The Natural History of German Life”).

It would be unthinkable, of course, even if it were possible, to simply return, a century and a half later, to Eliot’s version of realism. After the dramatic and earthshaking events (and intellectual developments) of the twentieth century, after Cubism, Imagism, Surrealism, Expressionism, Futurism and other trends, we have no means of viewing the world and art as a mid-nineteenth century novelist did. The photograph and cinema, to mention only two important technological developments, have transformed image-making forever.

Moreover, despite the difficulties and setbacks of the past century, the artists have introduced all manner of fresh, spontaneous, rapid means of representing life. In any case, the relative stability of English society at the time of *Adam Bede*’s creation is a thing entirely of the past. We need an art today attuned to dramatic and abrupt changes, mass movement, disaster and victory on a grand scale, even if all this is only represented in the life of the individual, or in lyricism.

However, the positions taken by Eliot, Lewes, Belinsky, Courbet and others counted as intellectual conquests that are, so to speak, “absolute grains of truth,” as objectively true as the achievements of science. Darwin’s work could and had to be advanced, but there was no going back to the days before *On the Origin of Species* without catastrophic results. So, too, there is no going back to a period in art in which idealization of the past or of human beings, an emphasis on the lofty and sentimental, treatment only of the elite, the beautiful and articulate, and delicacy and coyness about the “vulgar” facts of life, held sway. The notion that art must faithfully and fully represent reality, whatever the particular style or approach adopted, is something that cannot be gone back on.

Intriguingly, Marx and Engels made comments to the same effect in 1859, in letters to German socialist leader Ferdinand Lassalle, who had written the tragedy *Franz von Sickingen*, about a sixteenth century revolt by Swabian and Rhineland knights. Engels politely, but pointedly, expressed his preference for realism over idealism in art: “In my view of drama, the realistic should not be neglected in favour of the intellectual elements, nor Shakespeare in favour of Schiller.... What wonderfully expressive characters are to be found during this period of the breakdown of feudalism—penniless ruling kings, impoverished hireling soldiers and adventurers of all sorts—a Falstaffian background....”

In his letter to Lassalle, Marx too framed his preferences in terms of Shakespeare versus Schiller: “As to particular points of criticism, you sometimes allow your characters much too much self-reflection—which is due to your preference for Schiller.” (2)

To be continued

* * * * *

Footnotes:

(1) See: “Marx and Darwin: Two great revolutionary thinkers of the nineteenth century” (back)

(2) The attitudes of Soviet critic (and victim of Stalin) Aleksandr Voronsky and Leon Trotsky find their place in this tradition.

Voronsky called on the artist to “finally break with a style in which he gives us his impressions of reality rather than reality itself. The world must be present in his work as it is in itself, so that the beautiful and ugly, the kind and repulsive, the joyful and sorrowful appear to be so, not because that’s the way the artist wants it, but because they are contained in real life” (“The Art of Seeing the World”).

Trotsky, in *Literature and Revolution*, defined “realism” as a “definite and important feeling for the world. It consists in a feeling for life as it is, in an artistic acceptance of reality, and not in a shrinking from it, in an active interest in the concrete stability and mobility of life.” Trotsky emphasized this type of art’s “preoccupation with our life of three dimensions.... In this large philosophic sense, and not in the narrow sense of a literary school, one may say with certainty that the new art will be realistic.” (back)



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact