

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

David Walsh
4 January 2010

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 townsmen, 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)

“The Hidden Dread”

Certain episodes in *Adam Bede* and the manner in which Eliot treats them are especially striking. The novel has many compelling aspects in its first two thirds—the remarkable recreation of rural life; distinct, lively characters such as Mrs. Poyser; the evolution of the relations between Adam and Arthur; the sequences of Dinah’s preaching; and more. However, certain readers may suddenly sit up and even experience a shiver down their spine on reaching Chapter XXXV, “The Hidden Dread,” which treats Hetty’s looming tragedy.

The novel takes a sharp turn here, toward something harsher and more troubling, toward painful aspects of life that few novelists of Eliot’s time thought or were capable of confronting. The imagery shifts, correspondingly. We are no longer in “this pleasant land,” whose natural beauty Eliot describes earlier in the book, with its “swelling hills, muffled with hedgerows and long meadow-grass and thick corn,” where at every turn the traveler comes upon “some fine old country-seat nestled in the valley or crowning the slope, some homestead with its long length of barn and its cluster of golden ricks.”

Suddenly, Hetty is seated by a “dark shrouded pool” under a great oak. “She has thought of this pool often in the nights of the month that has just gone by, and now at last she is come to see it. She clasps her hands round her knees and leans forward, and looks earnestly at it, as if trying to guess what sort of bed it would make for her young round limbs.” This may be a new figure in English fiction, this young, pregnant farm girl, a humble “butter-maker,” seated by the “dark, cold water,” considering suicide.

Later, after her failure to find Arthur, in “The Journey in Despair” (Chapter XXXVII), the tone is even bleaker, more menacing. Hetty reaches a decision, “she would wander out of sight, and drown herself where her body would never be found, and no one should know what had become of her.” She searches for and finds a pond, “black under the darkening sky: no motion, no sound near.” It is noteworthy that Eliot’s normally elaborate “Victorian” prose becomes much simpler, more matter of fact in these passages.

“The pool had its wintry depth now: by the time it got shallow, as she remembered the pools did at Hayslope, in the summer, no one could find out that it was her body. But then there was her basket—she must hide that too: she must throw it into the water—make it heavy with stones first, and then throw it in. She got up to look about for stones, and soon brought five or six, which she laid down beside her basket, and then sat down again. There was no need to hurry—there was all the night to drown herself in.”

Eliot’s ability to put herself in Hetty’s shoes in these chapters is enormously convincing, intimate, frightful. It brings to mind Theodore Dreiser’s treatment of Clyde Griffiths’ preparations for murder on the lake, and the latter episode itself, in *An American Tragedy*. (Dreiser rather condescendingly acknowledged that the group of authors in whose works he had been “schooled” included Eliot.) (3)

Like Dreiser 60 years later in his masterpiece (and Georg Büchner in *Woyzeck*, incomplete at the time of his death in 1837), Eliot loosely based herself on an actual murder case as the inspiration for Hetty’s sad fate. The “germ of *Adam Bede*,” Eliot later explained, was an anecdote recounted decades earlier by her Methodist aunt, who had visited a “condemned criminal—a very ignorant girl [one Mary Voce], who had murdered her child,” in prison on the eve of the latter’s death in 1802. Eliot’s aunt stayed with the girl all night and “afterwards went with her in the cart to the place of execution.” The story, the novelist wrote, affected her “deeply” and she never forgot it.

These sequences—and later, the devastating scenes of Hetty’s trial ()—are the strongest in the book. Critics who see petty bourgeois moralizing in Eliot’s attitude toward Hetty, as even the brief passages cited should indicate, are deeply misguided, in my view. (British critic Terry Eagleton, for instance, sees Hetty as being “deported” or “transported” from the novel by Eliot, who, he suggests, treats her unfortunate character “so superiorly and externally.” One wants to “spread one’s hands in helplessness.”) On the contrary, although the author has emphasized Hetty’s self-absorption and emotional hardness, these scenes are enormously sympathetic to the desperate girl.

Eliot, of course, could not jump out of her skin. She was in the process of becoming, despite her unmarried state, a prominent public figure in Victorian England (her work came to be admired by the queen herself, and especially by her daughter, Princess Louise), with ostensibly respectable, if liberal and “humanist,” political views. Again, the issue is not how limited her explicit social conclusions—and the novel’s denouement (a happy marriage, a new life, reconciliation of all the social elements, more or less)—may have been, but the degree to which those scenes by the “dark pool” (and in court) in particular stand out, with their background of class and sexual exploitation, and their disruptive, unsettling, and psychologically violent quality.

This combination of “objective,” relatively cool, and unsentimental description of popular experience—under which lies profound emotion—and sharp social understanding introduces a new, or altered, element into English-language literature. (Hetty’s full name is Hester, a probable reference to Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, a story of adultery and unwanted pregnancy, published earlier in the decade.)

One would have to turn to Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, to folk tales and songs, to *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, perhaps (one of the few literary works mentioned by name in *Adam Bede*—Eliot’s novel is set the year after the publication of that poetry collection, which includes Wordsworth’s “The Thorn,” (5) a poem about a probable child murder), to Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian* (with its apparent infanticide), for such realistic imagery and ferocity. But, by 1859, despite the earlier time frame Eliot bestowed on *Adam Bede*, new social interests and conflicts had arisen.

“German influences”

There is one final point of a primarily artistic character, bound up with Eliot’s innovations: her “German influences.” As we have already noted, she translated Strauss and Feuerbach, helped introduce Heine to the English-speaking world, lived with a man researching the life of Goethe, traveled numerous times to Germany, and engaged there with leading intellectual figures. In fact, she wrote considerable portions of *Adam Bede* while visiting Germany, and noted that one of the important scenes in the novel came to her “as a necessity” while attending a performance of Rossini’s *Guillaume Tell* (*William Tell*), based on Schiller’s play, at the Munich Opera.

Scholars have devoted books to the subject of Eliot and Goethe, Eliot and Schiller. It is difficult to read the Hetty Sorrel “dark pool” and murder trial passages without thinking of another German writer, already referred to, Georg Büchner, one of the most extraordinary literary figures of the nineteenth century, who died of typhus at the age of 23. Büchner published a revolutionary tract in 1834, and was forced to flee Germany after being charged with treason, before writing three annihilating works, *Danton’s Death*, *Lenz*, and *Woyzeck*. (6)

In an intriguing article published in *Modern Language Review* in 2001

(“Truth so difficult: George Eliot and Georg Büchner, a shared time”), Sheila Stern argues that Eliot might have been aware of Büchner’s work, possibly through her and Lewes’s acquaintance with Justus Liebig, a renowned German chemist (and onetime political dissident), who had been a professor at the University of Giessen during the time Büchner was a student there. (Stern might have mentioned that Lewes and Eliot also became quite friendly with Jacob Moleschott, the Dutch-born physiologist, often bracketed as a “vulgar materialist” with Georg’s younger brother, Ludwig Büchner.

Stern points to passages in Büchner’s *Lenz* (1836) as circumstantial evidence of Eliot’s possible familiarity with his writings. This brilliant novella is a fictionalized version of events in the life of J. M. R. Lenz (1751-1792), the “Sturm und Drang” playwright (*The Tutor* and *The Soldiers*, in particular), as he stumbles into madness while staying in Alsace in 1778 with a renowned philanthropist and clergyman.

For Lenz, in Büchner’s piece, who suffers religious-ideological torments, “The universe was an open wound; it caused him deep nameless pain.” After the half-mad writer’s failure to revive a dead child through prayer, he flees into the mountains. Büchner writes that Lenz “felt as if he could thrust a colossal fist up into the heavens and grab God and drag him down through his clouds; as if he could grind up the world between his teeth and spit it into the Creator’s face.... Lenz had to laugh, and as he laughed atheism crept over him and held him fast in its firm and quiet grasp” (translated by Richard Sieburth, 2004).

The scene Stern specifically points to, and suggests might have helped inspire Eliot’s Realist credo in Chapter XVII of *Adam Bede*, involves a discussion between Lenz and his friend Kaufmann, who comes to visit the remote mountain village. The talk turns to literature. Lenz speaks out against idealization in art: “What I demand in all things is life, the potentiality of existence, and that’s that; we need not then ask whether it be beautiful or ugly, the feeling that whatever’s been created possesses life outweighs these two and should be the sole criterion in matters of art. As it is, we encounter it rarely, we find it in Shakespeare and it rings forth fully in folk songs, now and then in Goethe. Everything else can be tossed into the fire.”

Later in the conversation, Lenz adds: “One has to love mankind in order to penetrate into the unique existence of each being, nobody can be too humble, too ugly, only then can you understand them; the most insignificant face makes a deeper impression than the mere sensation of beauty and one can allow the figures to emerge without copying anything into them from the outside where no life, no muscle, no pulse surges or swells.” (7)

It’s possible that Eliot came across Büchner’s writings. However, would she have needed to in order to reach the conclusions she did? As we have indicated, the conception that art should represent life as fully and truthfully as possible and that, moreover, the existence of the poor and oppressed had to be taken and treated seriously, had been advanced by numerous artists and critics. At any rate, Eliot’s debt to German writers and intellectuals, who took the Shakespeare tradition more seriously than anybody else in Europe at the time, is considerable. (8)

I will leave the final word on George Eliot to another of the sincerest and most deeply feeling and thinking artists of the nineteenth century, painter Vincent van Gogh, perhaps an unexpected source for such a comment.

Van Gogh read Eliot in translation and wrote a friend in March 1884: “My strongest sympathies in the literary as well as in the artistic field are with those artists in whom I see the soul at work most strongly.... What I am driving at, among other things, is that while Eliot is masterly in her execution, above and beyond that she also has a genius all of her own, about which I would say, perhaps one improves through reading these books, or perhaps these books have the power to make one sit up and take notice.... There are not many writers as utterly sincere and good as Eliot.”

* * * * *

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)

(3) As for novelist Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), Eliot’s influence was so obvious that when his first work, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, was published anonymously in serial form in 1874, she was assumed by numerous critics to be the author. (back)

(4) In Chapter XLIII, “The Verdict,” two witnesses appear at Hetty’s trial. Eliot presents their terrible testimony—offering the facts surrounding the birth of Hetty’s baby and her subsequent abandonment of it in a field—in understated, objective tones. The first witness starts off by explaining: “My name is Sarah Stone. I am a widow, and keep a small shop licensed to sell tobacco, snuff, and tea in Church Lane, Stoniton. The prisoner at the bar is the same young woman who came, looking ill and tired, with a basket on her arm, and asked for a lodging at my house on Saturday evening, the 27th of February....”

Later, Eliot writes simply: “The witness then stated that in the night a child was born, and she identified the baby-clothes then shown to her as those in which she had herself dressed the child.”

The second witness begins like this: “My name is John Olding. I am a labourer, and live at Tedd’s Hole, two miles out of Stoniton. A week last Monday, towards one o’clock in the afternoon, I was going towards Hetton Coppice, and about a quarter of a mile from the coppice I saw the prisoner, in a red cloak, sitting under a bit of a haystack not far off the stile. She got up when she saw me, and seemed as if she’d be walking on the other way. It was a regular road through the fields, and nothing very uncommon to see a young woman there, but I took notice of her because she looked white and scared....” And so forth.

The artistic treatment of Hetty’s trial is worthy of Büchner, Bertolt Brecht, or Alfred Döblin (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*). (back)

(5) From William Wordsworth’s “The Thorn”:

“XI

...’Tis now some two and twenty years,

Since she (her name is Martha Ray)

Gave with a maiden’s true good will

Her company to Stephen Hill;

And she was blithe and gay,

And she was happy, happy still

Whene’er she thought of Stephen Hill.

“XII

And they had fix'd the wedding-day,
 The morning that must wed them both;
 But Stephen to another maid
 Had sworn another oath;
 And with this other maid to church
 Unthinking Stephen went—
 Poor Martha! on that woful day
 A cruel, cruel fire, they say,
 Into her bones was sent:
 It dried her body like a cinder,
 And almost turn'd her brain to tinder.

“XIII

They say, full six months after this,
 While yet the summer leaves were green,
 She to the mountain-top would go,
 And there was often seen.
 'Tis said, a child was in her womb,
 As now to any eye was plain;
 She was with child, and she was mad,
 Yet often she was sober sad
 From her exceeding pain.
 Oh me! ten thousand times I'd rather,
 That he had died, that cruel father!”

From the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, by Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Coleridge (1772-1834), published in 1798:

“The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure. Readers accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.” (back)

(6) Georg Lukács, writing in 1937, on the 100th anniversary of Büchner's death, commented that the writer was “a plebeian revolutionary, who starts to perceive with clarity the economic foundations of a liberation of the working masses. He is an important figure in the sequence that leads from Gracchus Babeuf to Blanqui (in the June Uprising of 1848).”

And later: “With a clarity and vehemence reminiscent of Shakespeare, this problem is exposed in the very first scenes of the drama [*Danton's Death*].... Büchner is, in other words, completely consistent in artistic terms in that he portrays this plebeian scene with a grotesque, realistic form of bitter humour, a humour learned from Shakespeare....

“It is this that makes Büchner's realism, trained in the tradition of Shakespeare and Goethe, so significant. Politically, he longs for the ‘poor’ to attain consciousness, to be aroused to political activity. As a great realist, however, the literary figure he portrays is Woyzeck: helpless, exploited, ceaselessly hounded back and forth, kicked around by everyone—the greatest depiction of the German ‘poor’ of that time” (“The Real Georg Büchner and his Fascist Misrepresentation,” *German Realists in the Nineteenth Century*, The MIT Press, 1993).

This is Woyzeck speaking in Büchner's play: “Us poor people—you see, Captain: money, money. If a man has no money—just let him try to reproduce his kind in a moral sort of way! We're made of flesh and blood like other people. Our sort will always be unblessed in this world and the next. I think that if we went to heaven, we'd have to help make thunder.”

Woyzeck is the work that seems closest to *Adam Bede's* Hetty Sorrel sequences, with one of its final scenes set “by a pool of water,” into which Woyzeck tosses the murder weapon, a bloody knife: “It's sinking in the dark water like a stone!” But Eliot could not possibly have seen that work,

for it remained unpublished for decades after the German writer's death, until 1879. (back)

(7) From the introduction by William E. Yuill to an English-language edition of Lenz's *The Tutors* and *The Soldiers* (University of Chicago Press, 1972): “Talking of *The Soldiers* he [Lenz] went so far as to describe himself in a Shakespearean phrase as ‘the stinking breath of the people.’... His constant endeavor is to identify the abuses of the society in which he lives, ‘to represent the social classes as they really are, not as they appear to persons of the more elevated sphere, and to open up to the more compassionate, sensitive, benevolent, and charitable hearts among the latter fresh prospects and channels for their divinely inspired charity.’... Altogether, Lenz shows an informed interest in the life of the poorer classes and a sympathy for their problems that are unusual in his age. His admiration for the cheerfulness, industry, and common sense of working people is a feature of the unfinished drama *The Little Men* (*Die Kleinen*).” (back)

(8) There is this rough, unsentimental, “Shakespearean” element in Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) himself—see “Ein Weib” (“A Woman”), for example, about a prostitute and a thief. The last stanza, loosely translated:

“At six o'clock, he hung from a pole
 At seven, he was stuck in a hole;
 But by eight, or a little after,
 She gulped red wine and roared with laughter!”
 (“Um sechse des Morgens ward er gehenkt,
 Um sieben ward er ins Grab gesenkt;
 Sie aber schon um achte
 Trank roten Wein und lachte.”)

German playwright Bertolt Brecht identified (and identified with) this tradition in drama on a number of occasions. His early plays in particular (*Baal*, *Drums in the Night*, and *In the Jungle of Cities*, along with his adaptation of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*) show this influence.

In his “Notes on the Realist Mode of Writing” (1940), Brecht refers to the “German realists of the stage, Lenz, the young Schiller, Büchner, the [Heinrich von] Kleist who wrote [*Michael*] *Kohlhaas*...the young [Gerhart] Hauptmann, the [Frank] Wedekind of *Spring Awakening*...” (*Brecht on Theatre*, Hill and Wang, 1977).

And in a note from 1950 in his journal, Brecht comments that Lenz's *The Tutor* (which he staged in East Germany) “seems well chosen for the actors to practise the realistic, and simultaneously the grand style. This is the way to Shakespeare, the way back to him; this much is understood in Germany” (*Journals 1934-1955*, Routledge, 1995).

Brecht treated child murder movingly in his own “Of the infanticide Marie Farrar” [*Von der Kindesmörderin Marie Farrar*] (1920), which includes these final lines:

“Marie Farrar: month of birth, April
 Died in the Meissen penitentiary
 An unwed mother, judged by the law, she will
 Show you how all that lives, lives frailly.
 You who bear your sons in laundered linen sheets
 And call your pregnancies a ‘blessed’ state
 Should never damn the outcast and the weak:
 Her sin was heavy, but her suffering great.
 Therefore, I beg, make not your anger manifest
 For all that lives needs help from all the rest.”

Translated by Sidney H. Bremer, in *Poems, 1913-1956*, Methuen, 1976. (back)



To contact the WSWS and the
 Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

--