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Dickens, George Eliot and George Henry Lewes

Professor Rosemary Ashton

Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture 1991



Hilda M Hulme

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University of London

The Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture 1991

Dickens, George Eliot
and George Henry Lewes

Professor Rosemary Ashton

(Professor of English at University College London)

Chairman: Professor Michael Slater

Chairman's Introduction

VICE-CHANCELLOR, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I am delighted to have the honour of welcoming you to the sixth Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture in English Literature and introducing to you our speaker, Professor Rosemary Ashton, Professor of English at University College. These lectures commemorate a distinguished teacher and scholar of this University, Dr. Hilda Hulme, and were instituted as a result of a generous initiative by her husband, Dr. Muhamed Aslam, whom we warmly welcome here this evening. Dr. Aslam, it is clear from the Preface to Dr. Hulme's classic study of Shakespeare's Language, is the kind of coadjutor every scholar engaged on a large-scale enterprise should pray for: 'I am grateful to my husband', Dr. Hulme wrote, 'For advice on the form and structure of the book, for useful criticism on many points of detail, and, above all, for urging me to make an end.'

Tonight's lecture is the first in the series to be given by someone actually teaching in Dr. Hulme's old Department, one with which she had a long association, first as a student (she took her London University BA. in 1935, her M.A. in 1937 and her Ph.D., in 1947) and then, successively, as Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and Reader in the Department until, sadly, ill-health compelled her early retirement in 1976.

Unlike many of you here this evening, I did not have the pleasure of knowing Dr. Hulme personally but I remember poring over the fascinating pages of her *Explorations in Shakespeare's Language* which appeared the year that I first became a member of this University, and I remember grieving that this book hadn't been available to me two years earlier when I had had to wrestle with a certain obligatory B.A. English paper at Oxford called 'A4 - Modern English'. The Shakespeare question on the paper had clearly been set by someone eagerly following Dr. Hulme's work in progress: 'Define and illustrate such elements of Shakespeare's English as either belong to "the diction of common life" or represent standard Elizabethan usage'. Happily, since 1962 the results of Dr. Hulme's formidable researches into this crucially interesting question have

been readily available to us all; and, as has been noted by previous chairpersons, one of the most valuable and rewarding aspects of her work on lexical meaning in Shakespeare is her constant vivid and subtle awareness that he was writing as a poet and a dramatist so that our response to his work as literature has been permanently enriched by her studies. This applies also to her study of the language of other writers, notably a substantial essay on George Eliot's use of imagery contributed to her friend and former student Professor Barbara Hardy's 1967 symposium on *Middlemarch* (and it is a great pleasure that we have Professor Hardy, who was the inaugural Hilda Hulme Lecturer, here with us this evening).

Bearing this essay in mind, as well as Professor Ashton's affiliation to University College, and the information she has recently brought to light, that George Henry Lewes seems for a while to have attended lectures at University College, the speaker and topic for tonight's lecture, the third in the series to deal with 19th-century literature, could hardly be more appropriate.

Professor Ashton came to University College as a Lecturer in 1974 so was for two years a colleague of Dr. Hulme's. She came by way of Aberdeen where she took a joint degree in English and German, and Cambridge where she wrote a doctoral thesis on the reception of German literature in early 19th century periodicals. Her first book, *The German Idea*, appeared in 1980 and included studies of the major part played both by Lewes and by George Eliot in spreading knowledge of German culture in Britain. This was followed by a critical study of George Eliot in 1983 and in 1986 by *Little Germany*, an absorbing, ground-breaking study of German exiles in Victorian England. In 1986 also the University conferred on her the title of Reader in English. This year has seen the conferment on her of the title of Professor and the publication, to much critical acclaim, of her very much needed scholarly biography of George Henry Lewes. Now that, at last, this extraordinary man who touched the life of his age at so many points has a whole fine book to himself – two or three years ago one entitled Mr George Eliot deservedly sank without trace – he can afford once again to share the limelight (he would have liked the theatrical metaphor, I think) not only with the great writer whose genius he nurtured so devotedly but even with the soi-disant 'Sparkler of Albion' himself. Ladies and gentlemen, it is with the greatest pleasure that I now invite Professor Ashton to deliver the Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture for 1991 on 'Dickens, George Eliot and George Henry Lewes'. Professor Ashton.

Dickens, George Eliot and George Henry Lewes

I SHOULD BEGIN MY LECTURE with a word or two in explanation of my title. Of the three writers I am bringing together for discussion the only one who needs an introduction is G.H. Lewes. As Professor Slater, has said, I have recently been engaged in writing a biography of Lewes, and he is naturally of great interest to me. As well as being a man of great intellect, wit, variety, and therefore interesting in himself, he is also important for an understanding of the Victorian period generally, and in particular he sheds illumination on the lives and writings of greater contemporaries. This is particularly true in the cases of Dickens and George Eliot, with whom Lewes had interesting personal relations. Indeed, my lecture will be divided between biographical and critical concerns, in the hope that a discussion of the personal relations between the three writers may provide a useful angle of vision on their literary relations. And here I have to warn many distinguished Dickensians in the audience – not least Professor Slater sitting beside me here – that in talking about Dickens I am going to be sticking my head above the parapet, since I am not the expert in Dickens studies I might have a claim to being in George Eliot and Lewes studies. Still, I hope that even Dickens experts will find something interesting in what follows, that it will throw fresh light on the chief subject of their critical interest by looking at Dickens specifically in his connections with George Eliot and Lewes.

Lewes was a literary critic of flair and insight, appraising the works of Tennyson, Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, Arnold, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, and others as they appeared. His status as an astute critic of contemporary literature is confirmed by the fact that he features prominently in the Critical Heritage volumes devoted to all the above-named authors, those collections of representative reviews with which you are probably familiar.

It was, for example, Lewes who first praised Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, corresponded with its shy author, and exhorted her to read Jane Austen's novels,

which – surprisingly, perhaps – she did not know. He was the correspondent who elicited from her those famous remarks about Jane Austen offering ‘an accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers but no glance of bright vivid physiognomy’.

It is worth noting from this example that Lewes, in holding up Jane Austen as a model for Charlotte Brontë, was arguing in the main for realism in fiction. (Indeed, he and Ruskin were the earliest English writers to use the term ‘realism’ to describe a literary mode; they did so in their essays of the mid-1850s.) Charlotte Brontë, in reply, robustly defended her own romantic, imaginative, sometimes downright unverisimilitudinous kind of writing. It was in these terms, broadly speaking, that Lewes, and others after him, discussed Dickens’s works, and from the time that George Eliot wrote her first work of fiction in 1858, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, her very different sort of novel.

Lewes is the biographical link between the two greatest novelists of the age; he invited Dickens to dine with him and George Eliot in 1859, when, as he wrote in anticipation to his sons, ‘two such novelists [would] gobble and gabble!’ He was also both one of Dickens’s best critics – though this is a controversial issue in Dickensian circles even today – and, famously, and less controversially, the man-midwife of George Eliot’s painfully brought forth works of fiction. In this lecture I will seek to situate all three writers both biographically and critically. I cannot hope to do full justice to all three in the space of fifty minutes, but I will try to throw light on the differences between Dickens and George Eliot by means of Lewes, who is the chief link between the other two, and as such, full of interest for us.

Two curiosities underlie my statement about Lewes being the enabler of George Eliot’s genius and one of Dickens’s best critics. The first is to do with his role as the man who was known to be living with George Eliot as her husband. He acted as her literary agent, the encourager of her diffident genius, the hard bargainer with publishers on her behalf, and, in the opinion of some observers, among them Mrs Oliphant and Henry James, the near-spoiler of her art by his keeping her in a kind of ‘mental greenhouse’, protected from adverse criticism. Because of this Lewes never actually wrote a public word of criticism specifically on George Eliot’s works. We know from her journals and letters that he contributed to the novels in progress by commenting on chapters as she read them out to him and by occasionally suggesting a scene – for example, the meeting in the wood between Adam Bede and Arthur Donnithorne and their subsequent fist-fight. But Lewes wrote no detailed appreciation of her work. Apart from reasons of propriety, he had, I believe, no need to, for she fulfilled

from the start his critical requirements for the writing of fiction. I will return to this point later.

The second curiosity relates to Lewes as a critic of Dickens. For he wrote only three detailed criticisms of Dickens's works, and these at lengthy intervals during a long reviewing career: on *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* in 1837, the first literary review he wrote, as it happens, at the age of twenty; on *Bleak House* in 1852–3; and on Dickens's work as a whole, in 1872, after the novelist's death. This last essay was, in fact, Lewes's very last piece of literary criticism, so that he began and ended his career as literary critic with articles on Dickens. The essay of 1872 is entitled 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism'. In what follows, I wish to look in some detail at the three articles of 1837, 1852–3, and 1872, as well as filling in the picture with attention to other moments in the relationship between Dickens and Lewes. I shall also highlight moments in the lives and writings of Lewes and George Eliot with the intention of pointing up the differences between her literary practice and that of Dickens.

I begin at the end, with Lewes's 1872 essay, 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism', which was written after the publication of volume one of John Forster's three-volume *Life of Dickens*. Lewes's article caused near-apoplexy in Forster, who attacked it with gusto in volume three of the *Life*, published in 1874. And Dickensians since then have tended to agree with Forster that Lewes's article was denigratory of Dickens's genius and damaging to his reputation. They have also accepted Forster's thinly veiled suggestion that Lewes dispraised Dickens in order to talk up by implication the merits of George Eliot, who was, at the time of Lewes's essay, engaged in the writing of *Middlemarch*. I think Forster and the rest are right to see the essay as pinpointing elements in Dickens which Lewes found weak, and that these were elements in which George Eliot was demonstrably strong, but I disagree with them when they accuse the article of being entirely negative towards Dickens. Indeed, I think Lewes puts his finger on something in Dickens that his contemporaries had not grasped, and that something lies close to the heart of the mystery of Dickens's genius.

The row revolves chiefly around Lewes's description of Dickens's imagination as hallucinatory. Dickens was gifted, says Lewes, 'with an imagination of marvellous vividness, and an emotional, sympathetic nature capable of furnishing that imagination with elements of universal power. Of him it may be said with less exaggeration than of most poets, that he was of "imagination all compact"'. He was 'a seer of visions'. 'When he imagined a street, a house, a room, a figure, he saw it not in the vague schematic way of ordinary imagination, but in the sharp definition of actual perception, all the salient details obtruding themselves on his attention. He, seeing it thus vividly, made

us also see it; and believing in its reality however fantastic, he communicated something of his belief to us.' This is most intelligent and suggestive, I think, and hardly unfair to Dickens, though there is a slight grudgingness in Lewes's remark that we are made to believe in Dickens's imaginings 'however fantastic', and perhaps, by implication, rather against our better judgment. Interestingly, Henry James was to use strikingly similar language in an article on Balzac in 1877. He compares Balzac and Dickens for their 'power of evoking visible objects and figures, seeing them themselves with the force of hallucination and making others see them all but just as vividly'. James relates Dickens and Balzac to Shakespeare in this respect, though he adds that the two nineteenth-century novelists 'treated their extraordinary imaginative force as a matter of business'; they worked it as a gold-mine, violently and brutally; overworked and ravaged it'. Both Lewes and the fastidious James appreciate the extraordinary intensity of Dickens's imaginative creations, but beg leave to think that some of these creations are failures despite the intensity of their conception. Lewes instances Rosa Dartle, Lady Dedlock, Esther Summerson, Mr Dick, Edith Dombey, and Mr Carker as 'monstrous failures', mere 'mechanisms' instead of 'minds'.

Here we glimpse Lewes's subtext (conscious or unconscious), for it was George Eliot, as D.H. Lawrence was famously to say, who 'started it all'. In Lawrence's robust phrase, 'It was she who started putting all the action inside.' Though one might argue that Jane Austen was an honourable forebear in this – and that is partly what Lewes valued and championed in her novels, both in his letters to Charlotte Brontë and in his literary journalism – it is clear that George Eliot got inside the heads and hearts of her characters more fully than any previous novelist. Whereas Dickens does this magnificently in relation to single characters, particularly his alter ego David Copperfield, as well as Pip in *Great Expectations*, both of whom tell their own stories in first person narrative, he does not render other characters with the same internal intensity. Thus, David Copperfield's unhappiness in his foolish marriage to the foolish Dora is wonderfully presented. He describes his futile (and egotistical) attempts to educate his child-wife to a standard which would make her a fit intellectual partner for him. 'I resolved', he says, 'to form Dora's mind'.

I began immediately. When Dora was very childish, and I would have infinitely preferred to humour her, I tried to be grave – and disconcerted her, and myself too. I talked to her on the subjects which occupied my thoughts; and I read Shakespeare to her – and fatigued her to the last degree. I accustomed myself to giving her, as it were quite casually,

little scraps of useful information, or sound opinion – and she started from them when I let them off, as if they had been crackers. No matter how incidentally or naturally I endeavoured to form my little wife's mind, I could not help seeing that she always had an instinctive perception of what I was about, and became a prey to the keenest apprehensions. In particular, it was clear to me, that she thought Shakespeare a terrible fellow. The formation went on very slowly.

I pressed Traddles into the service without his knowledge; and whenever he came to see us, exploded my mines upon him for the edification of Dora at second hand. The amount of practical wisdom I bestowed upon Traddles in this manner was immense, and of the very best quality; but it had no other effect upon Dora than to depress her spirits, and make her always nervous with dread that it would be her turn next. I found myself in the condition of a schoolmaster, a trap, a pitfall; of always playing spider to Dora's fly, and always pouncing out of my hole to her infinite disturbance.

Still, looking forward through this intermediate stage, to the time when there should be a perfect sympathy between Dora and me, and when I should have 'formed her mind' to my entire satisfaction, I persevered, even for months. Finding at last, however, that, although I had been all this time a very porcupine or hedgehog, bristling all over with determination, I had effected nothing, it began to occur to me that perhaps Dora's mind was already formed (chapter 48).

This is a marvellous and psychologically astute evocation of the state of David's mind, both at the time of the marriage and with wry hindsight. However, we have to take the state of Dora's mind, such as it is, on trust. She is seen only from the outside, from David's point of view. By contrast, in *Middlemarch* George Eliot gives us Dorothea's foolish marriage to Mr Casaubon, and she, too, renders it chiefly from Dorothea's point of view. She describes Dorothea weeping on her honeymoon in Rome, having found that she could hold no conversation with her husband which did not end in some dissatisfaction on both their parts. 'How was it', asks the narrator,

that in the weeks since her marriage, Dorothea had not distinctly observed but felt with a stifling depression, that

the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by ante-rooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither? I suppose it was that in courtship everything is regarded as provisional and preliminary, and the smallest sample of virtue or accomplishment is taken to guarantee delightful stores which the broad leisure of marriage will reveal. But the door-sill of marriage once crossed, expectation is concentrated on the present. Having once embarked on your marital voyage, it is impossible not to be aware that you make no way and that the sea is not within sight – that, in fact, you are exploring an enclosed basin (chapter 20).

But George Eliot also sees into Casaubon, whose sensitiveness about criticism of his never-to-be-completed work, 'The Key to All Mythologies', is chafed by Dorothea's professions of interest in it. 'This cruel outward accuser was there in the shape of a wife - nay, of a young bride, who, instead of observing his abundant pen scratches and amplitude of paper with the uncritical awe of an elegant-minded canary-bird, seemed to present herself as a spy watching everything with a malign power of inference' (chapter 20). The narrator reminds us that Casaubon's egotism is the badge of his kinship to general humanity, that he, too, has 'an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference' (chapter 21).

Of course, the very choice of the first person narrator in *David Copperfield* makes it inevitable that the narrator-protagonist will see others from his own 'centre of self'. And herein lies, I believe, the novel's emotional power; we see with the eyes of the narrating individual. This is Dickens at his best. In the novels written from a third person point of view he does not, I think, render relationships – mutual feelings, understandings and misunderstandings between his characters – from the inside out. If we think of the relationship between Arthur Clennam and Little Dorrit, or Mr and Mrs Dombey, or Florence Dombey and Walter, or many more, we must think more in terms of their being a part of an elaborate symbolic pattern than of their representation as interacting human beings. I shall say more on this subject later.

The critical issue here is psychological realism, and it is located by Lewes in his essay on Dickens. It is a question of character analysis as opposed to character presentation, of a conscious imaginative art versus an overflowing energy of creative imagination; in short of the essential differences between the genius of George Eliot and that of Dickens. When Lewes says in his 1872 essay that

there is 'a marked absence of the reflective tendency' in Dickens, that, 'keenly as he observes the objects before him, he never connects his observations into a general expression, never seems interested in general relations of things', he is giving something that reads, inside out, as it were, like the analysis of George Eliot's genius he would have written if he had ever put pen to paper directly on that subject.

This was not lost on Forster, even then midway through his biography of Dickens. He accuses Lewes, excessively though not without reason, of 'prodigious professions of candour' masking a 'trick of studied depreciation'. 'Since Trinculo and Caliban were under one cloak', he writes with witty indignation, 'there has surely been no such delicate monster with two voices. His forward voice, now, is to speak well of his friend; his backward voice is to utter foul speeches and to detract.' The protest was taken up by Swinburne, who wrote of Lewes as a 'pseudosophical quack' in his 1902 defence of Dickens. And as late as 1955 George Ford, author of a very interesting account of Dickens and his readers, added to Forster's Shakespearean analogy for Lewes's stance one taken from Lewis Carroll: 'Like the walrus and the carpenter, Lewes weeps over the oysters he is consuming, and he assures his victim and his audience that it is all for the best.'

Lewes's 'victim', being dead, could not reply. But there is reason to believe that he would have been less offended than Forster was on his behalf. For Dickens was beforehand in understanding – or rather in accepting as a given – his extraordinary intensity and facility in writing. As Lewes explains in his essay, Dickens always had vivid dreams, and enjoyed analysing them with friends. With Lewes he talked of the dream-like intensity of his creation of character. 'Dickens once declared to me', writes Lewes, 'that every word said by his characters was distinctly heard by him.' Forster objected to Lewes's appending the analogy of hallucination to this, even though Lewes was at pains to declare that he was not accusing Dickens of insanity, stating unequivocally, 'I have never observed any trace of the insane temperament in Dickens's works, or life.' Indeed, Forster in his answer to Lewes in volume three of the *Life of Dickens* quotes from a letter he received from Dickens at a time of personal sorrow a passage which, far from proving Lewes's criticism wrong, supports its aptness. 'May I not be forgiven', wrote Dickens to Forster in 1841, 'for thinking it a wonderful testimony to my being made for my art, that when, in the midst of this trouble and pain, I sit down to my book, some beneficent power shows it all to me, and tempts me to be interested, and I don't invent it – really do not – but see it, and write it down.' We may add to this letter to Forster another Dickens letter, written to Lewes himself in 1838 in reply to a query from Lewes

(now lost) about the genesis of a passage in *Oliver Twist*. Dickens's reply runs: 'I suppose like most authors I look over what I write with exceeding pleasure and think (to use the words of the elder Mr Weller) "in my innocence that it's all wery capital". I thought that passage a good one when I wrote it, certainly, and I felt it strongly (as I do almost every word I put on paper) while I wrote, but how it came I can't tell. It came like all my other ideas, such as they are, ready made to the point of the pen – and down it went.'

Perhaps Lewes remembered this description when he wrote in 1872 his appreciation of Dickens's imaginative power, while denying him powers of reflection. Dickens, for his part, might have responded that there is a danger in the reflective tendency, one not always avoided by George Eliot when she intermittently stands back from the action she is presenting to analyse, to demand that we shift our point of view. 'But why always Dorothea?' she famously asks at the beginning of chapter 29 of *Middlemarch*, going on to direct our attention to Mr Casaubon, who 'had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us'. The reflective tendency potentially carries within it the not always resisted tendency to buttonhole the reader.

Dickens, who seems to have said remarkably little on the subject of George Eliot's novels, other than writing some generous praise of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* to the authoress herself, did complain in 1860 of the analytical method of his friend Wilkie Collins in *The Woman in White*. He told Collins candidly that he objected to the latter's 'disposition to give an audience credit for nothing, which necessarily involves the forcing of points on their attention'. Of the three narrators of the novel he says they 'have a dissective property in common, which is essentially not theirs but yours.'

The term 'dissective' brings us to the distinctive quality of Lewes's critical thinking and George Eliot's literary practice, pointing up the difference of method between her and Dickens. At this point I shall temporarily leave the 1872 essay and go back to trace the relationship, biographical and critical, between Dickens and Lewes, and that between Lewes and George Eliot, dating from 1854.

Lewes was from an early age interested in psychology. His letter of 1838 to Dickens about *Oliver Twist* was obviously on the question of the psychology of fictional invention. It was written soon after Lewes had praised *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* in December 1837 in the short lived periodical, the *National Magazine* and *Monthly Critic*, in which he got his start in literary journalism. He wrote of Dickens's 'exquisite humour', his 'nicety of observation', his 'sympathy with all things good and beautiful in human nature', and his 'perception of character'. Dickens replied to his enthusiastic critic, and a friendship might

have ensued but for Lewes's going off on a trip to Germany in 1838.

The two men had much in common. Both were social outsiders, upstarts in the literary world, having obscure and even shaming backgrounds – Dickens had a debtor-father and Lewes's mother and stepfather lived a peripatetic life during his childhood. Neither man went to university; indeed, both had a patchy and unfinished schooling. Both were self-taught, and both sought an entrée into London's literary world by means of the pen: literary journalism in Lewes's case, parliamentary reporting in Dickens's. Both inhabited bohemian circles, and both held radical political views. Both aspired at one time to acting as a career, and indeed it was acting which brought them together again after the initial friendly correspondence of 1838.

In 1847 Dickens began getting together an amateur acting company – of which John Forster was a member – to raise money for the ageing and impecunious Leigh Hunt. Knowing that Lewes was a friend of Leigh Hunt (in fact, Hunt was at this time Lewes's mentor, and his son Thornton was Lewes's best friend), and knowing also that Lewes could act, Dickens invited him to join the company. Lewes duly took the part of Old Knowell in *Every Man in his Humour*. The distinguished set of amateurs, 'splendid strollers' as Forster called them, set off in July 1847 to play in the provinces, beginning with Manchester. A party of twenty-four people, including Forster, Daniel Maclise, Douglas Jerrold, George Cruikshank, two of Dickens's brothers, and several wives, among them Catherine Dickens and Agnes Lewes, met at Euston Station and proceeded to Manchester, which they took by storm. The performance was a great success, and was followed, in the words of one of the wives, by a 'tremendous supper', at which forty-six bottles of champagne were swallowed, and some of the company never got to bed that night. Some excitement had occurred at Euston Station itself, for John Leech's wife had gone into labour on the train, which was delayed from starting its journey while she was taken off and safely delivered of a daughter. 'What a tremendous chance', wrote Dickens later, 'that Leech's little girl was not born on the Railway!'

Lewes acted with the company again in 1848, when it toured the provinces in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to raise money to save Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford. Though Dickens lost patience from time to time with most of his fellow actors, his relations with Lewes were extremely cordial.

He did, however, have some difficulty in finding anything nice to say about Lewes's two attempts at novel writing at this time, *Ranthurpe*, published in 1847, and *Rose, Blanche, and Violet* (1848). This is hardly surprising, given the poor quality of Lewes's novels, the second being, in the brutal word of Jane Carlyle, 'execrable'. It is worth pausing briefly over Lewes's novels, however,

because they illustrate in their very failure the kind of novel Lewes thought he ought to write.

Ranthorpe is about a literary youth of no family or fortune who struggles to make his name through various adversities. There is conventional plotting of the circulating-library kind – murder, false accusation and imprisonment of the hero, deliverance, then exile – but these events are not integrated with the plentiful remarks on politics, society, aristocratic London, literary London, bohemian London, and so on, with which Lewes adorns the text.

Everywhere Lewes tells us what motivates his people, but he cannot show them acting according to their minutely dissected psychologies. *Ranthorpe* thus illustrates the dangers of the analytical method; it fails to mesh the telling with the showing.

Rose, Blanche, and Violet is an even greater failure, though it was Lewes's attempt to avoid the problems he saw he had failed to solve in *Ranthorpe*. As he explains in his preface to the new novel, he is uneasy about novels in which 'a distinct Moral presides over the composition' because of the danger that the story will be 'shaped to suit a purpose' (as the events in *Ranthorpe* were hung on a thread of didactic comment about society). This time, therefore, he leaves the moral 'to shift for itself', as he puts it. Unfortunately, this tactic does not guarantee the desired immediacy or naturalness of character and action. In the case of sisters Rose, Blanche, and Violet and their many suitors, confusion results from Lewes's attempt to illustrate the idea that people act impulsively, contrarily, out of complex motives, so that even a shrewd analysis of their characters is not proof against surprise at their actions.

It is an interesting idea, and one that George Eliot manages to embody when, for example, she has the narrow-minded Aunt Glegg stick up for Maggie Tulliver in her disgrace in *The Mill on the Floss*. Mrs Glegg's is an unexpected act of bravery and generosity, but George Eliot shows that, surprising though it is, it arises as naturally from Aunt Glegg's fierce feelings of family superiority as the opposite response – to shun Maggie and exclude her from the family, as her brother Tom does – would have done. George Eliot renders in indirect speech or thought process Aunt Glegg's reaction to the crisis: 'If you were not to stand by your "kin" as long as there was a shred of honour attributable to them, pray what were you to stand by?' It is an example of George Eliot's ability to explain motive but to avoid being schematic or simple-minded in her attribution of motive to her characters.

But Lewes fails to embody the theory in *Rose, Blanche, and Violet*. As Bulwer Lytton observed, Lewes had not yet written a novel worthy of his intelligence. He would only succeed in doing so, according to Bulwer, when, 'instead of

playing with your characters, you will hit upon one who will overmaster yourself, in whose life you will live, in whose heart your own heart will beat'. Lewes made no further attempt, realising that fiction was not his forte. But he later recognised in Marian Evans the gift he lacked, that of imaginatively embodying complex ideas.

After the acting adventures of 1847 and 1848, Lewes and Dickens went their separate ways. Lewes founded the radical paper, the *Leader*, with Thornton Hunt, by whom Agnes Lewes had four children between 1850 and 1857, at first with Lewes's sanction. (Lewes's condoning of the liaison was the cause of his being unable to sue for divorce later, and therefore of his being unable to marry Marian Evans.) In 1852 the two men came together again briefly on an occasion in which Marian Evans also played her part. They all joined forces to wage war on the Booksellers' Association. The issue, one which looms large in our own day, was that of price-fixing in the book trade. The Booksellers' Association was controlled by a cartel of London publishers who fixed the price of books. The battle for free trade in books was led by John Chapman. He was a radical bookseller and publisher, owner of the *Westminster Review*, whose editorial assistant was none other than Marian Evans, recently arrived in London from her native Midlands to earn a living in literary journalism. Chapman held a meeting on 4 May 1852 at his house, 142 Strand, where Marian Evans was a lodger. Dickens took the chair, and everyone from the radical publishing world was there: Chapman, Herbert Spencer, Wilkie Collins, Charles Babbage the inventor, Lewes, and – the only woman – Marian Evans. Marian reported to her Coventry friends on this momentous meeting: 'Dickens in the chair – a position he fills remarkably well, preserving a courteous neutrality of eyebrow, and speaking with clearness and precision'. The young woman from the provinces, not yet famous for her writing, for she had only recently begun her reviewing career and was not to try her hand at fiction until 1856, was already a striking figure in these circles, the only woman among so many men. She had been introduced to Lewes by Chapman in 1851; she was in the midst of an unrequited passion for Herbert Spencer; within a year she was intimate with Lewes, with whom she lived from 1854 until his death in 1878.

As for Dickens and Lewes, their relations became cool when Lewes reviewed *Bleak House* later that year, 1852. The novel was appearing in monthly instalments. At the end of Part Ten, published in December 1852, Dickens has the drunken Mr Krook, 'the Lord Chancellor of the Rag and Bottle shop', die of 'Spontaneous Combustion'. The scene is rendered in detail. Lewes, reviewing the novel so far in the *Leader* in December, objected to Dickens's use of a 'vulgar error' for the purposes of art. He lectured Dickens on physiological fact and

probability, rubbing the wound with the rather condescending remark that ‘as a novelist he is not to be called to the bar of science; he has doubtless picked up the idea among the curiosities of his reading from some credulous adherent to the old hypothesis, and has accepted it as not improbable.’ Lewes rightly concluded that spontaneous combustion was ‘only admissible as a metaphor’.

We can see that Dickens ought to have seized on this point and replied that a metaphor was indeed what the spontaneous combustion of Krook was, somewhat akin to the famous fog which presides over the antics of Chancery. But Dickens was always irritated by criticisms of his lack of verisimilitude in his novels. It is interesting that Dickens felt obliged to defend his novels against charges of lack of realism from contemporary critics instead of arguing for their imaginative inventiveness and their use of symbolic patterning. Modern critical attention to Dickens’s novels dwell almost exclusively on these elements, and Dickens’s star is all the higher because of recent critical theory’s attack on the whole notion of realism in fiction, a point to which I shall return in a moment.

There is another point to be made about the spontaneous combustion episode. Here we have one self-made man attacking another just where it hurts most. Beneath Lewes’s attack, and beneath Dickens’s high-pitched response to it, lies an insecurity in both men arising from their lack of formal education. Lewes was concerned to establish his own credentials as a man learned not only in literature but also in science. He was even then beginning to carry out animal experiments as part of his study of Goethe for the biography of Goethe he was researching, and he was also engaged in writing an exposition of Auguste Comte’s philosophy of the sciences. A few months after his argument about spontaneous combustion with Dickens, Lewes was himself being derided as a mere amateur by the rising star of the scientific establishment, Thomas Henry Huxley.

As for Dickens, he too was sensitive, not only about his realism, but also about his scientific learning, and he therefore took the unwise course of ignoring the let-out Lewes thus offered – of explaining the death of Krook in terms of metaphor – and going on the offensive in the very next chapter of the novel. Part Eleven, published in January 1853, opens with the inquest of Krook, and Dickens observes with aggressive sarcasm, born of uneasiness, that though some ‘men of science and philosophy’ deny the possibility of spontaneous combustion, there are a great many authorities to support it. He rather airily names a few out-of-date and discredited sources. Lewes replied in February 1853. He cited well known scientists such as Liebig, and poured scorn on the cases Dickens had adduced. In addition, he asked Dickens to ‘make some qualifying statement in the preface to *Bleak House*, so as to prevent the incident

of Krook's death from promulgating an error'. Though stern here, Lewes kept the tone of his letter friendly, observing that Dickens's genius 'has moved with beneficent power in so many other directions than that of Physiology', and that it would 'cost [Dickens] nothing to avow a mistake.'

However, the price was too great for Dickens's pride. He wrote a private letter, partly conciliatory, partly defiant, showing his annoyance that Lewes 'rather hastily assumed that I knew nothing at all about the question – and had taken no trouble to discriminate between truth and falsehood.' On the contrary, 'I looked into a number of books with great care, expressly to learn what the truth was. I examined the subject as a Judge might have done.' Finally:

...so far from making any qualifying statement in the Preface to *Bleak House* I can only say that I have read your ingenious letters with much pleasure [!] – that I champion no hypothetical explanation of the fact – but that I take the fact upon the testimony, which I considered quite impartially and with no preconceived opinion.

True to his word, Dickens published no retraction when the novel was brought out in a volume in September 1853. Indeed, he went out of his way in his preface to argue with his adversary, 'my good friend MR. LEWES', answering him with the same discredited sources he had used in Part Eleven of the novel. Lewes replied once more in the *Leader*, but briefly and with the obvious intention of closing the affair.

The argument was no doubt a storm in a teacup, though it has attracted a good deal of fairly recent criticism, much of it written in a spirit of defending Dickens as a kind of literary Cavalier, wrong but romantic, with Lewes cast in the unattractive role of Roundhead, right but revolting. To be fair to Lewes, he saw the romantic (ie. metaphorical) rightness of the episode, objecting only to Dickens's insistence on his scientific accuracy.

Here we touch the heart of Lewes's theory of literature as a reflection in some sort of reality. He was concerned that art, when not employing language symbolically, should use it correctly. Inasmuch as literature, especially the novel, reflects the world and has a wide influence on its readers, its practitioners should take care to be truthful and, where they claimed to inform, to inform accurately. We can see why it was that Lewes was soon to recognise and encourage George Eliot's writing. For Lewes and George Eliot it was an important element of the organic unity of human endeavour that the method of both literature and science be the scrupulous application of imagination and verisimilitude, a point I will return to in a moment.

Though Lewes and Dickens kept up a friendly, gentlemanly tone in their private and public letters during 1852–3, it seems that relations lapsed thereafter. Only when Dickens, generously admiring Adam Bede, sought in July 1859 to persuade the new novelist George Eliot to write a work of fiction to be serialised in his periodical *All the Year Round*, did the correspondence between the two men resume. Dickens, probably as part of his angling for George Eliot, asked Lewes to contribute a few light popularising articles on, of all subjects, science to both his papers, *Once a Week* and *All the Year Round*. From this time until Dickens's death in 1870, the two men met socially, but Lewes, moving away from literary criticism towards science and philosophy in the 1860s, did not review any more of Dickens's works as they appeared, and, probably as a peace gesture, omitted entirely the *Bleak House* controversy when he once more dealt with the spontaneous combustion question in an article in *Blackwood's Magazine* in April 1861.

Meanwhile, Lewes had left his wife, met Marian Evans, become intimate with her, and gone to Germany as her husband in 1854. During their seven months in Weimar and Berlin, Lewes finished years of research and completed the writing of his *Life of Goethe*, published in 1855, the work on which his reputation was chiefly to rest. Marian wrote thoughtful reviews for the *Westminster Review* of works of philosophy, social history, and literature. In their joint work on Goethe – for Marian helped Lewes with translations of extracts for his book, and they read and discussed Goethe together – and in her essays of 1855–6, we can see a convergence of their ideas about fiction. Indeed, when Lewes analyses Goethe's novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*) in the *Life*, he quotes 'a dear friend of mine' – thus in 1855, raised in subsequent editions, after Marian had achieved fame as George Eliot, to 'a great writer, and one very dear to me'. The point he makes through her is that Goethe takes some of the heat out of his sensational story of double adulterous love between the four main characters by interrupting the action with passages of slow, deliberate, digressive narrative. These, says Lewes, are 'artistic devices for impressing the reader with the slow movement of life'. In other words, art is employed in the interests of making the fiction seem 'real'.

This is what George Eliot also called for in her essays on literature in the *Westminster Review*. 'Art is the nearest thing to life', she wrote in 1856 in a review of von Riehl's social history of Germany; 'it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.' This plea for a heightened truth to life leads into George Eliot's only direct reference to Dickens's work. *Little Dorrit* was appearing in monthly parts in 1856, and George Eliot refers to it in terms half approving, half disapproving:

We have one great novelist who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population; and if he could give us their psychological character – their conception of life, and their emotions – with the same truth as their idiom and manners, his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to the awakening of social sympathies. But... while there is the same startling inspiration in his description of the gestures and phrases of 'Boots', as in the speeches of Shakespeare's mobs and numbskulls, he scarcely ever passes from the humorous and external to the emotional and tragic, without becoming as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness.

It is a complex assessment of Dickens's achievements and failures, arising out of her belief that novelists should find a way of moving their readers by means of psychologically realised character and action. It is not for her a question of either imaginative invention or accurate representation. Both her conception of realism, and Lewes's, is more sophisticated than that.

It is worth pausing for a moment to note that recent critical theory applied to the Victorian novel has tended to pour scorn on what its practitioners take to be a naive realism on the part of George Eliot and others. Dickens is exempted from such criticism because of his power of symbolic representation, his allusion to myth and fairy tale, the subordination of character analysis to archetypal representation (for example, in marrying Dora David Copperfield is, as it were, marrying his infantile mother – a point Dickens himself draws attention to; when he later marries his second wife, Agnes, he is marrying a sister-figure, an archetypal relationship over which Dickens, interestingly, wields less artistic control). But in defence of George Eliot it should be said that she is not so simply the theorist and practitioner of the 'classic realist text' as hostile critics like Colin MacCabe have suggested. Though I suppose not every reader would go all lengths with the remark quoted in the fine essay on imagery in *Middlemarch* by Hilda Hulme, in whose memory this lecture is given, that 'all novels would be Middlemarch if they could'; it is possible to answer the charge of naive realism. MacCabe's argument is that the narrator of the novel seeks to impose his version of reality on the whole, claiming to offer 'a window on reality' which he is patently unable to do, since all versions of reality are incomplete, subjective, and relative. In a recent reply to MacCabe, David Lodge shows that George Eliot's narrative voice is a much more flexible instrument

than this, since George Eliot is 'well aware of the indeterminacy that lurks in all efforts at human communication'. One could point out a passage from *The Mill on the Floss* in this connection. In describing Tom Tulliver's schooldays the narrator reaches for a metaphor to illustrate the schoolmaster's mistaken method of teaching, then turns round to look at the metaphor itself:

It is astonishing what a different result one gets by changing the metaphor! Once call the brain an intellectual stomach, and one's ingenious conception of the classics and geometry as ploughs and harrows seems to settle nothing. but then, it is open to someone else to follow great authorities and call the mind a sheet of white paper or a mirror, in which case one's knowledge of the digestive process becomes quite irrelevant ... O Aristotle! if you had had the advantage of being 'the freshest modern' instead of the greatest ancient, would you not have mingled your praise of metaphorical speech as a sign of high intelligence, with a lamentation that intelligence so rarely shows itself in speech without metaphor, – that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else? (Book Two, chapter one).

Lewes, too, was aware of the fatuousness of attempting to represent reality directly in art, of claiming to offer a window on the world. In a series of articles written in 1865, 'Principles of Success in Literature', he attacks the 'coat-and-waistcoat' kind of realism of those authors who try to become 'photographers', who confound realism with mere 'detailism'.

The most successful writing, in Lewes's view, is that which marries creativeness with accurate observation. As the 1850s went on, and as Marian took to writing fiction on the principles she had outlined in her essays, Lewes wrote less literary criticism and became more a scientific investigator. His concern as a scientist was to use his imagination in positing a hypothesis, and then to investigate whether the facts fitted the hypothesis. George Eliot's novels, as has often been noticed, sometimes with regret, increasingly employ scientific analogies to describe and dissect human character in action. *The Mill on the Floss* is full of such analogy. Mrs Tulliver, for example, is like the 'patriarchal goldfish' which 'retains to the last its youthful illusion that it can swim in a straight line beyond the encircling glass'. So Mrs Tulliver, despite ample experience of her husband's obstinacy, persists in nagging him to act as she wishes him to, and so pushes him into taking the opposite course. And the scientific analogy does more than provide George Eliot with a rich vocabulary for metaphor. It penetrates to the

heart of her method of writing. In *Middlemarch* the narrator occasionally lets us into the secret of his method of showing and telling, with references to 'the play of minute causes' which a strong lens in a microscope can show up (chapter six), and to the trick of holding a lighted candle to a 'surface of polished steel' with the result that a set of random scratches will arrange themselves in concentric circles (chapter twenty-seven).

As a method it combines imagination with observation, as well as being capable of being in uncertainty, as we have seen. It is, in these respects, different from Dickens's method, in which the observations are less self-conscious and self-exploring and the imaginative renderings more direct. George Eliot risks irritating readers with her minute analyses and cleverness about her characters; Dickens, conversely, often disappoints those who want character presented convincingly in terms of motive, presented from the inside, as Lawrence put it, presented in their interaction with other characters who are equally fully rendered.

Lewes, who valued the kind of realism he saw his wife adhering to, could not help finding Dickens lacking. To return finally to his 1872 essay, we can see why he talked of Dickens's inability to render what he calls, in a phrase borrowed from his scientific studies, the 'complexity of the organism'. In a passage which made Forster, if I may so put it, 'hopping mad', he compared a character such as Micawber in *David Copperfield* to a frog whose brain has been taken out for physiological purposes. What such frogs lose in losing their brains – and Lewes had performed this grisly operation often enough to know – is 'the distinctive peculiarity of organic action, that of fluctuating spontaneity'. The phrase 'fluctuating spontaneity' reminds us of Lewes's experiment in *Rose, Blanche, and Violet*, and of George Eliot's success with Aunt Glegg's reaction to Maggie's disgrace, in showing consistency of character sometimes through inconsistency of action. According to Lewes, Micawber, 'always presenting himself in the same situation, moved with the same springs, and uttering the same sounds, always confident of something turning up, always crushed and rebounding, always making punch', is like the mutilated frog which reacts merely mechanically, and without difference, to stimuli.

It is a clever, if provocative, comparison, though we might remember that Micawber, for all his mechanicalness, has been thought such a wonderful invention as to become naturalised in the English language as a term for a certain kind of observable human behaviour. In other words, Dickens unerringly apprehends real, observed human foibles; indeed, he observed Micawberism at first hand in his self-deluding, grandiloquent father, the model for Micawber. He hears his characters speak and sees them act with an intensity like that we experience in dreams.

And this was something that Lewes, for all his doubts about certain elements in Dickens's works, was the first to see and describe. He noted how Dickens's 'prodigious imagination' produced works of unparalleled power over the reader. To sum up: Dickens renders human nature in ways which cannot best be appreciated by the test of psychological realism. George Eliot, who passes that test with flying colours, can seem over-conscious, even over-conscientious, in her rendering of what Henry James called 'felt life'. Lewes, I believe, has much to say that is of value to our appreciation of both these novelists, though it has to be unravelled from the curious case of his being the husband of the one and the friendly but sometimes adversarial critic of the other.

HILDA HULME MEMORIAL
LECTURE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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