How could she have written them? Henry James, reading John Cross’s biography of George Eliot in 1885, decided that it failed to explain how “this quiet, anxious, sedentary, serious, invalidical English lady, without animal spirits, without adventures or sensations, should have made us believe that nothing in the world was alien to her; should have produced such rich, deep, masterly pictures of the multiform life of man.” It was, he thought, an illustration of the final curse of all literary biography—that there is never more than the most misleading connection between a work of the imagination and the life of its maker: “It is certain that George Eliot had this characteristic of a mind possessed: that the creations which brought her renown were of the incalculable kind, shaped themselves in mystery, in some intellectual back-shop or secret crucible, and were as little as possible implied in the aspect of her life.”

James’s disillusion with biography was greater than it needed to be. Cross, who had been married to Eliot for eight months before she died, had left out a good deal in the story he cobbled together from her letters and journals—and the woman who wrote the novels was quite invisible. Gladstone called the Life “a Reticence in three volumes.” Oscar Browning, who wrote another early biography of her, said, “Some day, perhaps, George Eliot will undergo the fate of Goethe. We shall know how she spent every week of her existence, and how far the scenes of her novels, even the most sensational, are records of her own trials and experiences.” But it was not until 1968 that Gordon Haight’s biography drew on a mass of unpublished sources, including her letters, which Cross had protectively selected and mutilated with deletions. Haight, who also edited seven volumes of the letters, filled in most of the gaps so well that there have been few accounts since his that have added much.

Now we have Frederick Karl, whose very big book offers itself as a replacement for Haight with the advantage of some materials that have since emerged. Thanks to letters Haight did not know about when he wrote his biography—though some of them have since been published in supplementary volumes of his edition of the Letters—Karl is able to provide a more detailed picture of the period when she was the assistant editor of the Westminster Review, responsible for reinventing it as the leading radical organ of the day while she lived in what Karl calls “a viper’s nest of rumors, infidelities, philandering.” He also tells the story of Eliot’s love for Herbert Spencer—in which she desperately begged him to love her back. The series of letters making this apparent was not released by the British Museum until 1975, and Haight had been misled by Spencer’s guarded Autobiography, which portrayed his relation with Eliot in 1852 as a triumph of serene friendship between two Victorian giants of the mind.

Cross, it must be noted in all fairness, was not entirely responsible for James’s view of Eliot’s personality. She had already prepared her own posthumous monument. Meeting her in her last years James saw her as an immensely dignified, conservative woman. The impulsive passion and speculative daring, the country-girl humor early friends remembered, were gone, and Cross’s Life confirmed James’s impressions. Those who had known her longer and better must have agreed with William Hale White (the writer “Mark Rutherford”):
I do hope that in some future edition, or in some future work, the salt and spice will be restored to the records of George Eliot’s entirely unconventional life. As the matter now stands she has not had full justice done to her, and she has been removed from the class—the great and noble church, if I may so call it—of the Insurgents, to one more genteel, but certainly not so interesting.

But after Thackeray died in 1863 and Dickens in 1870, the popularity of her novels established her, in her fifties, as the queen of letters, whose books were read by Victoria herself. She was still fearful of snubs. Her brother, representing ordinary opinion at its most censorious, refused communication with her during her twenty-four years of unlegalized marriage to George Henry Lewes; he would not break his silence until she told him she was finally married at a church altar—to Cross. But to her and Lewes’s London house, a former priory (Lewes fell into the habit of calling her “Madonna”), came her most distinguished literary contemporaries—Browning, Tennyson, Ruskin, Trollope, Arnold, Clough, Rossetti, and others. To all she showed a melancholy, low-voiced calm. Frederic W. H. Myers wrote a famous description: “I listened, and night fell; her grave, majestic countenance turned toward me like a sibyl’s in the gloom.”

She seemed to her visitors remote from the turbulence of her times. She displayed little visible interest in the vast changes in British society that followed the war with Napoleon—as factories grew and small farmers suffered. The industrial unrest had begun the year she was born, 1819, with the famous Peterloo massacre of Corn Laws protesters in Manchester. Her youth coincided with the Chartist movement of the 1830s and 1840s, and the ever-mounting political pressure for extending the suffrage. But when the second Reform Bill was passed in 1867, she declared that she was “no believer in Salvation by Ballot.” She hardly mentioned in her letters and her work the “vital questions” raised in her Westminster prospectus of 1850—universal suffrage, a Bill of Civil Rights, school and university education for all, a balance of power between England and its colonies. She stressed the ethical tradition that must survive all revolutions.

This impression has persisted, and White’s “future work” about Eliot is still unwritten. Haight’s study does not offer any large conclusions about her relation to her times, and avoids drawing conclusions about the different phases of her life he finely describes. The idea that she was “the spirit and mind of the nineteenth century” causes Karl, on the other hand, to search for too many vague analogies between his subject and a vast and disordered period about which one can generalize only by saying that no generalization is possible. He arrives at the judgment, finally, that she was essentially “conservative and, to some limited extent, regressive.”

Yet perhaps she remade only her outer persona when she became the sibyl of the Priory. It served to keep her inside the pale while technically outside it, and was useful for the acceptance of her books. In the beginning they seemed dangerous messages from a dangerous source. Swinburne, shocked by the sexual element in The Mill on the Floss, felt that “the last abyss of cynicism [had] surely been sounded and laid bare.” Later, it was read as a sermon on conformity because it looked back to more peaceful times and acquiesced in the persistence of old habits.

In fact, Eliot’s pessimistic but profoundly searching art is never complacent. As Walter Allen says, “only a radical freethinker, cut off from her roots, could have had so intense a nostalgia for the traditional past.” As recent critics have shown, too, her novels do not settle for a resignation to things as they are—as their bare stories may suggest; they are full of subversion beneath the surface. George Eliot became a very quiet person, but she remained to the end a member of the church of the Insurgents. Her covert personality probably requires the insight of someone with her own wisdom and curiosity—and few have so qualified. Even Haight, whose scholarship and grace as a chronicler made him the ideal traditional biographer, refrained from asking difficult questions.
Karl, on the other hand, is injudiciously interpretative. One wants to remind him sometimes that simple explanations would be better than attempts at profundity, as when he makes much of the different names she used—Mary Anne (or Mary Ann or Pollian or Marian) Evans, Mary Ann Lewes, George Eliot, Mrs. John Walter Cross. He seems either to regard her use of different names as evidence of a compulsively “self-deconstructing” nature or of one given temperamentally to secrecy and duplicity. Yet her changes of name are less or more important, as the case may be. It was just youthful assertiveness when she dropped the “e” from her baptismal “Anne,” but it was a solemn declaration in the face of censure when she insisted, although she was not married, on being addressed as Mrs. Lewes. Her male pen name was chiefly a practical disguise, a device that had been useful to other women writers. That she never discarded the pseudonym is not so much a proof that she wanted to assume a male selfhood as connected with the problems created by her desire to claim Lewes’s name. To revert to Miss Evans would deny the sanctity of their union, but to call herself Lewes on her title pages when the name belonged to a living wife would have been impossible. Nor could she, on the other hand, become everywhere George Eliot; she was no more ready to be called “George,” like George Sand, than she was ready to wear a man’s clothes and take masculine liberties of behavior.

Karl sometimes manages to make his great subject boring. He provides a narrative of her sixty-one years that is full of details but indiscriminate. The most trivial are given disproportionate weight, thus undermining whatever drama his account could have. Its pace is slowed by wads of political, economic, and social history which are rarely directly related to Eliot. It is no help when his prose—barely functional most of the time—breaks into a reductive and unpleasant jocularity—e.g.: Eliot’s hesitations are a “holding action”; she was “squirreling away” her disappointments until she “traded in” Herbert Spencer for Lewes; Lewes “torpedoed” his chance to divorce his wife, whose lover, a “baby-making machine,” is “planting a good deal of seed”; otherwise, Lewes is effective at “damage control.” Haight’s well-written book should have been succeeded by something superior to this.

Nevertheless, picking one’s way through the heap, one can see someone different from James’s “invalidical” lady. Eliot did get headaches from eyestrain owing to lack of adequate glasses—who ever read more, and more constantly?—and toothaches and gum infections, only relieved by extractions, but these are hardly remarkable, and she was never seriously ill until, at fifty-five, she had her first attack of kidney stones, the disease that killed her. Haight cautions against taking the litany of minor discomforts in her letters too seriously; her symptoms generally vanished as soon as a book was finished. Karl, attempting, again, one of his dubious connections between the person and the cosmos, says that by means of illness she “recognized the major divisions of the age because she recognized them in herself.” In fact, as a writer she was unflagging and she was physically energetic, more frequently the nurse of others—her father, Lewes, Lewes’s ailing son—than someone to be nursed. Some visitors to the Priory (though not Henry James) had glimpsed the sibyl playing badminton, a favorite sport. The view of her as weak and repining is suspect, possibly the consequence of a desire to reduce her to the Victorian stereotype of the “delicate” lady, to make her body suggest the character attributed to her by her friend Charles Bray when he said, “She was not fitted to stand alone.”

Contrary to Henry James’s impression, she had more “adventures and sensations” than most women of her time, and her “animal spirits” persisted to the end. Her life, finally, deserves to be called “entirely unconventional.” It started out conventionally enough in a seven-bedroom house called Griff, in the heart of Warwickshire, where her father, Robert Evans, was the estate administrator of the prominent Newdigate family and
Mary Anne was his pet and the playmate of her older brother Isaac. But if this was Eden she was soon cast out when she was sent to boarding school at the age of five. One can guess that she accepted exile as many children do under such circumstances, feeling it a punishment that was deserved. For what? Ruby Redinger, in her George Eliot: The Emergent Self (1975), suggests that the prosaic but adored Isaac—from whom she was now separated—had condemned her propensity to daydream. Imagination was her greatest power, but it was forbidden to exercise it. There is a story that when she had started to read someone’s copy of Scott’s Waverley and was forced to surrender it before she finished, she wrote out her own ending.

But she was prepared to adopt a self-chastising view of such acts. When she was fourteen, she abandoned the dry Anglicanism of her father and came under the influence of an Evangelical teacher, to whom she admitted, “My imagination is an enemy that must be cut down ere I can enjoy peace or exhibit uniformity of character.” Novels had been a “pernicious” influence: “I am I confess not an impartial member of a jury in this case for I owe the culprits a grudge for injuries inflicted on myself. I shall carry to my grave the mental disease with which they have contaminated me.”

Was the girl who wrote this just a prig or was she afraid of the surge of feeling within herself, a force that art both expresses and arouses? Her fear of dreaming and of reading fiction may have been connected, too, with sexual fear. At this time, a friend’s marriage made her say, “I do not deny that there may be many who can partake with a high degree of zest of all the lawful enjoyments the world can offer and yet live in near communion with their God ... but I confess that in my short experience and narrow sphere of action I have never been able to attain this.” When she was sixteen her mother died, and she took over the responsibilities of her father’s household, even declining his offer to hire help. Serving as his comfort and aide was enjoined upon the unmarried daughter by the gospel of Duty. She would never deny this imperative. But she would cast off the Evangelical creed and all established religion.

One may see this change as a common Victorian experience, the crisis of faith provoked by the growth of positivist philosophy and rationalist science. When her father moved with her to a smaller house in Coventry in 1841, Mary Ann discovered a group of freethinkers in her neighborhood. They were reading Comte and the new Biblical scholarship called the “Higher Criticism.” Charles Bray was a dabbler in new thought, including phrenology, a secular humanist who had just written a book to prove that mental faculties result from the shape of the brain. Charles Hennell, the brother of Bray’s wife, Cara, wrote An Inquiry into the Origin of Christianity, which discussed the gospels as mythology. Rufa Brabant, whom Charles Hennell married, was translating Strauss’s Life of Jesus (she abandoned the project and Mary Ann took it over, producing the standard English version of this influential secular and historical analysis of the Biblical text). Mary Ann would go further than the others. Eight years later she would translate Feuerbach’s Essence of Christianity, and adopt his view that the only God is “the divinity of human nature.” It is not surprising that Cara’s sister, Sara, already gave Mary Ann the nickname, Pollian—a recondite pun on Apollyon, the Angel of Destruction in Revelation.

But the loss of the faith of her fathers, and of her father, was also connected with a crisis in the Evans family and her feeling that she had been displaced from her niche. Isaac had married, taken charge of the ailing Robert Evans’s business, and taken over Griff—this had been the reason for the move to Coventry. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer points out in The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans, the situation in which Eliot “played the role of the unmarried—possibly unmarriageable—daughter devoted to the best interests of the father was a painful confrontation with questions of her own future and her own authority.” It took only a few months as a member of the Bray-Hennell circle for her to show herself a rebel by refusing to accompany her father to Sunday worship. She told him that the superstition
preached by the churches was “pernicious” (the same word she had previously used for novels), and it would be dishonorable to the God she still believed in and the moral teachings of Jesus to pretend to subscribe to it. By way of response Robert Evans threatened to move to a still more modest cottage. Her behavior made it pointless for him to provide her with a setting. For what decent man would marry her now?

The ‘Holy War,” as she called it, soon came to an end, and Mr. Evans’s daughter was again seen at church, having made him understand that this was a formal compliance for his sake. She then tried to retain the ethical core of religion without the “opiates,” as she called the promises of eternal life and salvation. But the crisis over her father’s religion was not only ideological. Bodenheimer sees in it the source of a story Eliot “was never to cease telling: the story of a ‘wide’ idealistic mind coming into collision with the intractable prejudices around it and finding its heroism in bending to that narrowness in the name of common humanity.” We can observe that “widening of sympathy” which derives, Bodenheimer thinks, from Eliot’s lifelong yearning for reconciliation, when the heroine of Romola is literally turned about by Savonarola in her flight from the treacherous Tito; when the idealist hero of Felix Holt, The Radical turns homeward to take charge of his mother; when Maggie Tulliver goes back to St. Ogg’s after her flight with her almost-lover Stephen in The Mill on the Floss; and even when in Middlemarch Dorothea Brooke drops her anger at Casaubon and Will Ladislaw to see them forgivingly. Yet these recoveries of attachment tend to be melancholic. Maggie’s final reunion with her brother—who embodies all her society’s restrictions—occurs, but only when they are locked in the embrace of death in the flood waters of the Floss.

Though she chose to remain a devoted daughter, Mary Ann Evans had found a second home. She had been adopted into the Bray-Hennell family as an intimate and a frequent visitor to Bray’s Rosehill, a house with exciting visitors and talk she had never heard before. A great bearskin rug would be spread under an acacia tree out on the lawn and she would find herself seated on it in conversation with Robert Owen about the abolition of the Corn Laws, with John Conolly, the pioneer in humane treatment of the insane, with James Simpson, a champion of free public education, with the phrenologist and criminologist George Combe, among others. Some of her new women friends were feminists. At Rosehill, also she discovered the existence of a Victorian lunar phase, the shadowed life into which conventional society often rotated. Sexual “irregularity” was common, whether hidden behind the pretenses of propriety or open and sustained by libertarianism.

The repressed young visitor was magnetized by the “Don Juan of Coventry,” as someone called her handsome host. Bray and his wife had agreed to maintain an “open marriage.” He had formed a liaison with the family cook, who bore him six children. In the place of her Byronic husband, Cara found Edward Noel, a relative of Byron and an inheritor, perhaps, of the poet’s unfettered libido. Quite possibly Mary Ann joined Bray’s harem—though there is no clear evidence for this, unless it is evidence that all her letters to him written before 1848 have vanished, while the rest of a lifelong correspondence survives. She did form some sort of amorous relation with Rufa’s father, a dusty sixty-three-year-old scholar. After Rufa’s marriage he persuaded her to make a long visit to his home in Wiltshire. He called her his “deutera,” his second daughter. Brabant’s wife, who was medically blind but not unperceptive, showed the door to the future author of Middlemarch and creator of Casaubon and Dorothea.

In 1849, Robert Evans died, and Marian (as she now called herself) moved from the Bray circle to that of John Chapman, who had published her Strauss book. Chapman had taken over the direction of the Westminster Review, founded a quarter of a century earlier by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, which had declined into dullness and was about to go under. To save it was probably beyond his abilities, but Marian, his underpaid assistant, composed the new prospectus, solicited articles and
reviews from the most interesting authors of the day, wrote many pieces herself, and edited the entire journal. She moved into the lodging house Chapman ran in the Strand—where he also lived and where the Review offices were. Here, as at the Brays’, there were interesting visitors—contributors to the magazine like John Stuart Mill, Harriet Martineau, and Herbert Spencer, and foreigners stopping in London, such as Emerson and Mazzini. Marian began a lifelong friendship with Barbara Leigh Smith, later Barbara Bodichon, a future leader in the movement for female higher education and suffrage. Chapman’s marriage was as free-form as Bray’s. Besides his wife, fourteen years his senior, there was also his children’s governess, his acknowledged mistress. Marian became the third woman under this roof who was an object of his erotic interest. Wife and mistress complained that Chapman and his assistant editor were “completely in love with each other.” There were scenes. Marian was expelled, left in tears, and then came back because Chapman needed her on the magazine. As his next lover, he recruited Marian’s friend Barbara.

There is no doubt about Marian’s feelings for Herbert Spencer. Of all the men to whom she was attracted he was her only intellectual equal. He was a polymath and an original thinker who, with Huxley, was to be the great champion of Darwin (he coined the phrase “the survival of the fittest”). For his part, he would always regard Eliot as “the most admirable woman, mentally, I have ever met.” But his feelings stopped there. “The lack of physical attraction was fatal,” he recalled thirty years later, though his life had proved by then that he was incapable of responding physically to any woman. But no one except themselves knew how intense the struggle between them had been. Marian wrote Cara, “We have agreed that we are not in love with each other, and that there is no reason why we should not have as much of each other’s society as we like.” But soon after she wrote Spencer:

I want to know if you can assure me that you will not forsake me, that you will always be with me as much as you can and share your thoughts and feelings with me. If you become attached to someone else, then I must die, but until then I could gather courage to work and make life valuable, if only I had you near me. I do not ask you to sacrifice anything—I would be very glad and cheerful and never annoy you. But I find it impossible to contemplate life under any other conditions.

Lewes, who then moved into her life, was a literary jack-of-all-trades who could write about virtually anything and had founded a new journal, The Leader, in collaboration with Thornton Hunt. To Marian, he must have seemed at first another English pasha like Bray and Chapman. He was already the father of four children when Agnes Lewes bore a fifth, who was not his but Hunt’s. It was a situation he did not protest, so forgoing, under English law, the right to divorce. Hunt, like Edward Noel, was another second-generation inheritor of the Romantic style of life, the son of Shelley’s and Byron’s friend, Leigh Hunt. He seems content to have played the cuckoo in Lewes’s nest, continuing his own marriage and giving Mrs. Hunt, eventually, ten children while adding four children to the Lewes household by 1857. By this time, Lewes had left Agnes, and had been living with Marian for three years.

From Germany, where the pair went on a romantic flight from England in 1854, she wrote back to Bray chiefly to refute gossip that Lewes had “run away” from his wife and children, mentioning, incidentally, the “simple fact that I am attached to [Lewes] and that I am living with him.” Unlike the liaisons of Chapman or Bray, her new state was not covert—which was what shocked the most. The phrenologist Combe, who had once felt her cranial bumps, said, “I should like to know whether there is insanity in Miss Evans’s family; for her conduct, with her brain, seems to me like morbid mental aberration.” But upon their return to England, the conscientious, middle-aged couple settled down to the task of meeting their considerable responsibilities, which included support of Agnes
Lewes and all her children, legitimate and illegitimate—Hunt already having too many mouths to feed at home.

Lewes’s suggestion that Marian try writing fiction had an economic motive; however much journalism paid them, it would not suffice, but fiction made money. Hers would do so spectacularly. In little more than a dozen years she wrote *Scenes of Clerical Life* and six successful novels—all multi-volumed with the exception of *Silas Marner*—leaving only *Daniel Deronda* to come. Despite her increasing reclusiveness, she understood her market value, surprising her publisher by her “most deep seated anxiety to get a large price” after the triumph of *Adam Bede*. The income from her writing would make a life of comfort possible for herself and for Lewes and all his dependents. When he died, in 1878, their joint estate included £50,000 derived from her earnings, equivalent to two million dollars today. Lewes had been Eliot’s secretary, agent and business manager, editorial adviser, shield against the world, emotional nurse—the sort of spouse “without whom,” as book dedications say, many male writers would not have done their work.

We gather from her letters and the impressions of her friends that their relation was a sexual success. At last the hunger that had ravaged her young womanhood was fed by the experienced Lewes, who had the reputation of a womanizer despite his lack of good looks (Jane Carlyle and her friends called him Ape). At his death Eliot was wild with grief. Her marriage to the young, handsome, adoring Cross, two years later, seemed to rescue her from the grave. Again, she disturbed the conventions—this time about the desires of older women. She told Edith Simcox (who offered her own love) that “the love of men and women for each other must always be more and better than any other.” Then, on their honeymoon in Venice, Cross attempted suicide by throwing himself out of the hotel window into the Grand Canal. Had the bachelor of forty whose closest attachment until then had been his mother panicked at the discovery of what he had taken on? Had his sixty-year-old wife shown him she was prepared to be more than maternal?

3.

George Eliot said that “the best history of a writer is contained in his writings—these are his chief actions.” Rosemarie Bodenheimer apparently agrees and has declined the formal biographer’s task of retrieving the circumstantial from all sources. For her, Eliot’s fiction, poetry, and letters constitute the “real life,” and her writings on these writings make up a “life,” in the sense of a biography, that is more “real” than Karl’s; her search for the secrets of personality in these essential documents is more penetrating than his. Bodenheimer discovers, among other things, that letters written at crucial moments of Eliot’s life show a complex awareness of the reader before whom the writer presents her own drama of daring, regret, placation. Consider, she says, this orotund sentence in a letter written by the young Eliot to her former teacher:

> You will think me interminably loquacious, and still worse you will be ready to compare my scribbled sheet to the walls of an Egyptian tomb for mystery, and determine not to imitate certain wise antiquaries … who “waste their precious years, how soon to fail?” in deciphering information which has only the lichen and moss of age to make it more valuable than the facts graphically portrayed by an upholsterer’s pattern book.

The reader, winding through the maze of Mary Ann Evans’s syntax, would have found in its shifts and reversals the very opposite of the apology pretended. Self-deprecation invites denial. There is studied irony in the equation of ancient hieroglyphics and mundane fabric patterns, and she really asks whether the difficult style—hers—is not best. As Bodenheimer suggests, the future novelist is practicing a characteristic game with her reader, projecting her own doubts upon this “you.” An example of this in her fiction occurs in the chapter in *Adam Bede* in which the narrator imagines the protest of a woman reader against the “pagan” character of the Reverend Irvine,
who has so far been allowed to charm us, despite his weaknesses. The writer is arguing with herself.

Like some other modern critics Bodenheimer detects that the serene narrative voice of Eliot’s mature fiction is not so immune as we might suppose to the desperate hopes and passions, the confusions rather than the illuminations, of her characters. She analyzes the chapter in *Middlemarch* which describes Dorothea on her honeymoon in Rome. Eliot’s description of her heroine’s surroundings—“the weight of unintelligible Rome”—comes close, says Bodenheimer, to “exposing the narrator’s overwrought subjectivity.” There is, for an example, the brilliant image of the red Christmas draperies hung everywhere in the Holy City “like a disease of the retina,” a phrase that expresses, Bodenheimer says, “the anguish of uncontrolled hallucination [and] makes a sinister commentary on Wordsworth’s ‘inward eye/Which is the bliss of solitude.’” The frightening image is suggestive of Eliot’s “intimacy with madness or hysteria.” But “having written it, George Eliot suddenly feels the power of other retinas focused disapprovingly on that display of morbidity. Her next sentence, dropping a thousand watts of intensity, begins the work of placating and then reconstructing those squeamish readers” by assuring us that Dorothea’s feelings were not “anything very exceptional.”

Still, those feelings are not the less tragic for that—though to think otherwise is almost necessary, so unbearable is the truth. After this comes the most famous sentence in *Middlemarch*: “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.”

In her own time Eliot received criticism from the left as well as from the right. *Adam Bede* had been attacked for its tolerance of Evangelicalism—which she herself had rejected—and she had written Bray, “Freethinkers are scarcely wider than the orthodox in this matter—they all want to see themselves and their own opinions held up as the true and the lovely.... If Art does not enlarge men’s sympathies, it does nothing morally.” This would probably be her reply to our own radical critics—Marxists like Terry Eagleton or “first wave” feminists like Kate Millett—who have complained that she betrays the hopes she raises, particularly for women. None of her heroines who resemble her—Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*, Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, Romola in *Romola*, Esther Lyon in *Felix Holt, The Radical*, or *Middlemarch*’s Dorothea—is granted her own liberation and achievement. Eliot’s realist pessimism insisted on her sense of what was probable, though she did not glorify renunciation and wrote, “Let the whole field of reality be laid open to woman as well as to man.” Her suggestion of potentiality in her characters is what makes them more interesting than their fates. They are given credit for their dreams, for what they might have been. We admire Dorothea despite her willing surrender of her youthful dreams. But Eliot’s most remarkable female conception may be her last heroine, Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda*, who is aware of her own emptiness and craves to fill it by the mastery and personal power reserved for men.

Perhaps, as Nina Auerbach and Gillian Beer have argued, it was the sustained relationship that Lewes and George Eliot maintained against the odds that kept her in touch with the courage and independence of her youth. To Barbara Bodichon she observed, “I am a very blessed woman, am I not? to have all this reason for being glad that I have lived, in spite of my sins and sorrows—or rather, by reason of my sins and sorrows.”

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3 Source: https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1996/04/18/george-eliot-radical/#fnr-1