George Eliot


Better, perhaps, than any of George Eliot’s novels does “Felix Holt” illustrate her closely wedded talent and foibles. Her plots have always been artificial—clumsily artificial—the conduct of her story slow, and her style diffuse. Her conclusions have been signally weak, as the reader will admit who recalls Hetty’s reprieve in “Adam Bede,” the inundation of the Floss, and, worse than either, the comfortable reconciliation of Romola and Tessa. The plot of “Felix Holt” is essentially made up, and its development is forced. The style is the same lingering, slow-moving, expanding instrument which we already know. The termination is hasty, inconsiderate, and unsatisfactory—is, in fact, almost an anti-climax. It is a good instance of a certain sagacious tendency to compromise which pervades the author’s spirit, and to which her novels owe that disproportion between the meagre effect of the whole and the vigorous character of the different parts, which stamp them as the works of a secondary thinker and an incomplete artist. But if such are the faults of “Felix Holt,” or some of them, we hasten to add that its merits are immense, and that the critic finds it no easy task to disengage himself from the spell of so much power, so much brilliancy, and so much discretion. In what other writer than George Eliot could we forgive so rusty a plot, and such _langueurs_ of exposition, such a disparity of outline and detail? or, we may even say, of outline and outline—of general outline and of particular? so much drawing and so little composition? In compensation for these defects we have the broad array of those rich accomplishments to which we owe “Adam Bede” and “Romola.” First in order comes the firm and elaborate delineation of individual character, of which Tito, in “Romola,” is a better example than the present work affords us. Then comes that extensive human sympathy, that easy understanding of character at large, that familiarity with man, from which a novelist draws his real inspiration, from which he borrows all his ideal lines and hues, to which he appeals for a blessing on his fictitious process, and to which he owes it that, firm locked in the tissue of the most rigid prose, he is still more or less of a poet. George Eliot’s humanity colors all her other gifts—her humor, her morality, and her exquisite rhetoric. Of all her qualities her humor is apparently most generally relished. Its popularity may, perhaps, be partially accounted for by a natural reaction against the dogma, so long maintained, that a woman has no humor. Still, there is no doubt that what passes for such among the admirers of Mrs. Poyser and Mrs. Glegg really rests upon a much broader perception of human incongruities than belongs to many a masculine humorist. As for our author’s morality, each of our readers has felt its influence for himself. We hardly know how to qualify it. It is not bold, nor passionate, nor aggressive, nor uncompromising—it is constant, genial, and discreet. It is apparently the fruit of a great deal of culture, experience, and resignation. It carries with it that charm and that authority which will always attend the assertions of a mind enriched by researches, when it declares that wisdom and affection are better than science. We speak of the author’s intellectual culture of course only as we see it reflected in her style—a style the secret of whose force is in the union of the tenderest and most abundant sympathies with a body of knowledge so ample and so active as to be absolutely free from pedantry.

As a story “Felix Holt” is singularly inartistic. The promise of the title is only half kept. The history of the hero’s opinions is made subordinate to so many other considerations, to so many sketches of secondary figures, to so many discursive amplifications of incidental points, to so much that is clear and brilliant and entertaining, but that, compared with this central object, is not serious, that when the reader finds the book drawing to a close without having, as it were, brought Felix Holt’s passions to a head, he feels tempted to pronounce it a failure and a mistake. As a novel with a hero there is no doubt that it is a failure. Felix is a fragment. We find him a Radical and we leave him what?—only “utterly married;” which is all very well in its place, but which by itself makes no conclusion. He tells his mistress at the outset that he was “converted by six weeks’ debauchery.” These very dramatic antecedents demanded somehow a group of conse-
QUENTS equally dramatic. But that quality of discretion which we have mentioned as belonging to the author, that tendency to avoid extreme deductions which has in some way muffled the crisis in each of her novels, and which, reflected in her style, always mitigates the generosity of her eloquence—these things appear to have shackled the freedom of her hand in drawing a figure which she wished and yet feared to make consistently heroic. It is not that Felix acts at variance with his high principles, but that, considering their importance, he and his principles play so brief a part and are so often absent from the scene. He is distinguished for his excellent good sense. He is uncompromising yet moderate, eager yet patient, earnest yet unimpassioned. He is indeed a thorough young Englishman, and, in spite of his sincerity, his integrity, his intelligence, and his broad shoulders, there is nothing in his figure to thrill the reader. There is another great novelist who has often dealt with men and women moved by exceptional opinions. Whatever these opinions may be, the reader shares them for the time with the writer; he is thrilled by the contact of her passionate earnestness, and he is borne rapidly along upon the floods of feeling which rush through her pages. The Radicalism of “Felix Holt” is strangely remote from the reader; we do not say as Radicalism, which we may have overtopped or undermined, but simply as a feeling entertained. In fact, after the singular eclipse or extinction which it appears to undergo on the occasion of his marriage, the reader feels tempted to rejoice that he, personally, has not worked himself nearer to it. There is, to our perception, but little genuine passion in George Eliot’s men and women. With the exception of Maggie Tulliver in “The Mill on the Floss,” her heroines are all marked by a singular spiritual tenacity. In two of her novels she has introduced seductions; but in both these cases the heroines—Hetty, in “Adam Bede,” and Tessa, in “Romola”—are of so light a character as to reduce to a minimum the dramatic interest of the episode. We nevertheless think Hetty the best drawn of her young women. Esther Lyon, the heroine of the present tale, has great merits of intention, but the action subsides without having given her a chance.

It is as a broad picture of midland country life in England, thirty years ago, that “Felix Holt” is, to our taste, most interesting. On this subject the author writes from a full mind, with a wealth of fancy, of suggestion, of illustration, at the command of no other English writer, bearing you along on the broad and placid rises of her speech, with a kind of retarding persuasiveness which allows her conjured images to sink slowly into your very brain. She has written no pages of this kind of discursive, comprehensive, sympathetic description more powerful or more exquisite than the introductory chapter of the present work. Against the solid and deep-colored background offered by this chapter, in connection with a hundred other passages and touches, she has placed a vast number of rustic figures. We have no space to discriminate them; we can only say that in their aggregate they leave a vivid sense of that multiplicity of eccentricities, and humors, and quaintnesses, and simple bizarries, which appears to belong of right to old English villages. There are particular scenes here—scenes among common people—miners, tinkers, butchers, saddlers, and undertakers—as good as anything that the author has written. Nothing can be better than the scene in which Felix interrupts Johnson’s canvass in the tavern, or that of the speech-making at Duffield. In general, we prefer George Eliot’s low-life to her high-life. She seems carefully to have studied the one from without, and the other she seems merely to have glanced at from the midst of it. Mrs. Tranquill’s, seems to us an unnatural, or rather, we should say, a superfluous figure. Her sorrows and trials occupy a space disproportionate to any part that she plays. She is intensely drawn, and yet dramatically she stands idle. She is, nevertheless, made the occasion like all of her fellow-actors, however shadowy they may be, of a number of deep and brilliant touches. The character of her son, the well-born, cold-blooded, and moneyed Liberal, who divides the hero-ship with Felix, is delicately and firmly conceived; but like the great Tito even, like Mr. Lyon, the Dissenting preacher in the present work, like Esther Lyon herself, he is too long-drawn, too placid; he lacks dramatic compactness and rapidity. Tito is presented to us with some degree of com-
pleteness, only because “Romola” is very long, and because, for his sake, the reader is very patient.

A great deal of high praise has been given to “Felix Holt,” and a great deal more will be given still; a great many strong words will be used about the author. But we think it of considerable importance that these should at least go no further than they have already gone. It is so new a phenomenon for an English novelist to exhibit mental resources which may avail him in other walks of literature; to have powers of thought at all commensurate with his powers of imagination, that when a writer unites these conditions he is likely to receive excessive homage. There is in George Eliot’s writings a tone of sagacity, of easy penetration, which leads us to believe that she would be the last to form a false estimate of her works, together with a serious respect for truth which convinces us that she would lament the publication of such an estimate. In our opinion, then, neither “Felix Holt,” nor “Adam Bede,” nor “Romola,” is a master-piece. They have none of the inspiration, the heat, nor the essential simplicity of such a work. They belong to a kind of writing in which the English tongue has the good fortune to abound—that clever, voluble, bright-colored novel of manners which began with the present century under the auspices of Miss Edgeworth and Miss Austen. George Eliot is stronger in degree than either of these writers, but she is not different in kind. She brings to her task a richer mind, but she uses it in very much the same way. With a certain masculine comprehensiveness which they lack, she is eventually a feminine—a delightfully feminine—writer. She has the microscopic observation, not a myriad of whose keen notations are worth a single one of those great synthetic guesses with which a real master attacks the truth, and which, by their occasional occurrence in the stories of Mr. Charles Reade (the much abused “Griffith Gaunt” included), make him, to our mind, the most readable of living English novelists, and prove him a distant kinsman of Shakespeare. George Eliot has the exquisitely good taste on a small scale, the absence of taste on a large (the vulgar plot of “Felix Holt” exemplifies this deficiency),

the unbroken current of feeling and, we may add, of expression, which distinguish the feminine mind. That she should be offered a higher place than she has earned, is easily explained by the charm which such gifts as hers in such abundance are sure to exercise.

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