Poetry: The Unappreciated Eliot

Opportune Anomaly

Nobody appreciates George Eliot's poetry. It's a shame, but it's a fact. It's also one of those embarrassing bumps in the road of literary history that can precipitate fresh recognitions. Making good on this potential will not come easy just now. Anyone who sets out to champion the substantial body of verse that Eliot produced, nearly all of it during the decade between 1865 and 1875 when her reputation as a novelist advanced from strength to strength, risks stepping forward as a crank: a whistle-blower in the decorous house of fiction, if not a saboteur in the prosperous industry of Eliot scholarship. For several generations now it has been possible to publish acclaimed books on the novels that drop no hint about the poetry; it has become normal practice to allude in passing to "Armgart," say, or *The Spanish Gypsy* as a handy biographical voucher, or a resonator furnishing harmonic background for a thesis in gender or race. At most the critic cuts and pastes, without further comment, a bit from "O May I Join the Choir Invisible" or "A College Breakfast-Party," to sweeten an argument that has been cinched already by scrutiny of the fiction – a gesture unruffled by Eliot's own practice of auto-epigraphy (see Price) and undeterred by the irony cast on such practice by chapter 1 of *Middlemarch*.

It's one thing when a failure to appreciate Eliot's poetry stems from authentically experienced distaste, as surely it does for some among us now, and as demonstrably it did among outspoken critics in her day. I am about to commend to notice the grounds such critics gave for disliking poems that they had in good faith read. But first let me highlight what makes such articulate evaluation commendable: the rarity with which critical evaluation as such plays even a cameo role in the way we read Eliot now. Nowadays our

failure to appreciate her poetry is precisely that: a failure to go so far as *appreciate* it, assess its worth, take its measure by taking our own stand for or against it and so declaring ourselves in the process. What may it mean that Eliot the poet goes unappreciated even in this root sense? Candor obliges me to raise a possibility which optimism hastens to downplay: namely, that the academic cultivation of niche expertise has reached a point where specialists in fiction are, ipso facto and in their own professional judgment, disqualified to hold opinions about poetry. Readers caught in that snare will presumably skip this chapter anyway, which can by definition address nothing they acknowledge a stake in. And yet our quaint-sounding topic of poetry-appreciation opens to view an issue in which they, like the rest of us, are crucially involved if seldom aware: the academic decline of evaluative reading, whether in its own right or as a critical heuristic.

This is an enormous issue, of which George Eliot's case offers pointed illustration. When did eminent criticism last trouble itself centrally with how good Eliot's writing was, good at what, and with what arc of rise or fall? If it seems beside the point to put such questions to "Janet's Repentance" or *Romola,* much less *The Mill on the Floss*, then so much the worse for the quality of our engagement with those works. Take the excellence of *Adam Bede* for granted long enough, and your grasp of that excellence as a vital property of the book, locally actualized page by page, will slacken. Admittedly it's impossible to imagine these days, except as a stunt or joke, a direct inquiry into the literary worth of *Middlemarch*. It and *Daniel Deronda* are by now too big to fail. With the author's unappreciated poetry, however, it is another story: the fact that nobody adores or analyzes it opens a rare opportunity, within the negligently received canon of a writer indubitably canonical, to appreciate Eliot's writing as if for the first time, and with consequences for the larger oeuvre that look, from here, intriguingly hard to predict.

As if for the first time, because precedents do exist for frontal evaluation of the poems. The most of it, and the best, occurs in review essays that appeared shortly after

publication of *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868) and then *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems* (1874, expanded 1878). These volumes engrossed the attention of superior writers who knew they were reviewing a superior writer, and in whose reports the mingling of diplomatic reception with puzzled disappointment not only betrays the practical limitations of critical vocabulary from the nineteenth century but also underscores, in dispiriting retrospect, the worse curbs under which criticism has labored with Eliot's poetry across the twentieth. What is most bracing about the responses registered by Henry James, William Dean Howells, and John Morley among other contemporaries is not their careful praise but the frankness with which they censure Eliot's shortcomings, as gauged, on one hand, against cherished ideas about modern poetry and, on the other, against her own manifest achievement in the art of modern prose. On the whole these critics balk at the verse, which may abound in "grace and delicacy of phrase" (Morley 283) but also betrays prosodic missteps in its "hard, sharp, and galvanic" meter (Skelton 477; also Howells 381, Minto 514). Formal deficiencies on this order are outward signs of an inward flaw that is reckoned more damaging still. Because the poetry has been too long and too cerebrally incubated to wear "the shape spontaneously assumed by the writer's thought" (Morley 281), because it proffers so odd "a mixture of spontaneity of thought and excessive reflectiveness of expression" (James 485), it forfeits that "spiritual translucence" (Howells 381) and "high subtle transcendental mood of feeling" (Skelton 474) which mainstream Victorian poetics steadily looked forward – and up – to. Rose Elizabeth Cleveland's 1885 book on the poems, long the only study of its kind, took this transcendentalism to an orthodox extreme: the poetry fails because the agnostic poet lacks the true faith. Even for secular-minded reviewers of *The Spanish Gypsy*, a ponderous intellection cumbers Eliot's verse as it doesn't her prose, which, in a set passage from the induction to *Romola* that more than one reviewer cited for contrast, outsoars the verse "in imaginative breadth and force" and is "in the highest sense poetic" (Morley 281; Howells 383).

Clumsy or acute, here at least are critical judgments one can work with, for example by comparing in some detail the panoramic openings of *Romola* and of *The Spanish Gypsy*, book 1 or 3. Much less useful is the choir impalpable of latter-day response, in faint perfunctory rehearsal of ideas that for Eliot's first responders had been incisively fresh. Patronizing the poetry as "innocuous" (Hanson 268) or "pedestrian" (Lisle 263) and praising its "gracefully controlled" style for "deftness and economy" (Pinion 132, 156) are two sides of the same dispensation from scrutiny. There is a little more traction, but not much, in a recent summary judgment that Eliot's "inversions, archaisms, and monotonous smooth regularity are compounded by sentimental and lofty tones" (Hardy xxiv). Although Barbara Hardy doesn't pause a beat here over the syntactic, lexical, and prosodic features she patronizes from afar, we might find the "compound" strong stuff if we were to do so – might find it moving rather than sentimental, elevating rather than lofty – but then the whole point of this sentence, coming from a doyenne among critics of Eliot's fiction, is to excuse the student in advance from undertaking anything of the kind.

Eliot's "verse does not sing" (Ashton 64); it is too "epigrammatical, metaphorical" for that. (And never mind squaring these descriptors with that sentimental loftiness we just heard about.) Of course it doesn't sing, to ears that are busy not listening. Of course poems that are read as if their form in verse were an accident best ignored will look funny; and, since the literary mind's ear may doze but never really slumbers, they will sound funny too. "That the poems are so pedestrian, in fact, may tempt us to overlook their real importance," an importance which, for the exceptionally forthright critic here quoted, inheres uniquely in the themes they treat (Lisle 263). We need frame no case for George Eliot as an unsung lyric genius – and no such case will be forthcoming in this chapter – in order to agree that reading her or any poet's verse as wrong-footed prose, i. e. for its thematic content alone, means decreeing a pseudo equivalence between verse and prose that tilts the balance in prose's favor and handicaps verse just where it is strongest. A

nuanced appraisal of Eliot's varying power in both literary media entails respecting the difference between them, which is to say, at a minimum, respecting verse's charter to embody thought and enact emotion within the language that makes it up. Only thus may we hope to understand why this author committed some of the best years of her life to poetry and why, within the terms of that choice, she made the prosodic and generic choices she did. It's not over till the great lady sings; and she won't sing until we break prose's conspiracy of silence and listen.

Soundings

We had better reward with examples such attention as the foregoing plea may have captured. Turning to Eliot's first public trial of the resources of verse, *The Spanish Gypsy*, consider for starters the street-performer Pepíta,

> Who stands in front with little tapping feet,
> And baby-dimpled hands that hide enclosed
> Those sleeping crickets, the dark castanets. (1.58)

The first two lines tap a kitschy vein that no Victorian poet did without. But then the phonemes of "enclosed" scatter across the next line a life of their own: "crickets" makes a nice if obvious onomatopoeia, and nicer still is the resumption of its click in the clack of "dark castanets," redoubling the double *k* from "crickets" within a fourth-foot spondee long enough to open up the space between adjective and noun for a syncopated flamenco staccato. Or revisit the same Plaça Santiago when, tragedy swelling towards its catastrophe, the massed Zíncali gypsies swear fealty to Fedalma as her assassinated father breathes his last:

The shout unanimous, the concurrent rush
Of many voices, quiring shook the air
With multitudinous wave: now rose, now fell,
Then rose again, the echoes following slow,
As if the scattered brethren of the tribe
Had caught afar and joined the ready vow. (4.350)

A novelist may set out to describe waves of echoing sound; a poet gets to graph them on the oscilloscope of the blank-verse line. This may be seen, better yet heard, by tracking the long *o* from line 3 down to line 6, in its gradually blunted recurrence from the exactly echoed "rose" into "slow," across the reverberant cross-current of unstressed *o* syllables from "echoes" and "following," until the distant return of "vow" two lines later makes no more than an eye-rhyme with "slow," even as it faintly revoices the diphthong from the initiating "shout" back in line 1. The effect is as grandiloquent here as our first passage was racy, and in each case with good reason. Turn the page of Eliot's book for a third example conjoining tragic pathos with subtlety of touch, as the now apostate renegade Don Silva walks out of his beloved's life forever, cursed with the safe-conduct of a Cain:

Slowly he walked, reluctant to be safe
And bear dishonoured life which none assailed;
Walked hesitatingly, all his frame instinct
With high-born spirit. (4.353)

The reader who fails to hesitate over "hesitatingly" has not been paying attention to the iambic pentameter. Steadied on either side with metered stateliness, the rhythm all but crumbles in line 3 into a trochee, an iamb, and then a caesura-spavined anapest enacting

the footing of a broken hidalgo whose constitutional inability *not* to walk tall forms half the tragedy of Eliot's relentless plot.

Each of the above passages enacts a performativity in which Eliot's adroit versification abounds, through the wielding of meter as through the deployment of "vowels turned / Caressingly between the consonants, / Persuasive, willing" (1.19). Eliot seems less to plume herself up in such passages than delightedly to honor the capacities of a medium that she not only has studied to master (see the prosodic analyses in her notebooks [Pratt and Neufeldt]) but moreover finds to be a regular source of unexpected prompts to fresh expression. Verse maximizes the writerly inspiration that form incites: "thought-teaching form" is how *The Spanish Gypsy* puts it (1.53) – not, as theme-driven criticism supposes, "thought, teaching form." That technique is ingredient in creativity, that inspiration flows both ways between the artist's intention and instrument, constitutes the credo of Eliot's surrogate craftsman of "perfect violins, the needed paths / For inspiration and high mastery" ("Stradivarius" 24-25). There is a remarkable passage in "The Legend of Jubal" – title piece of Eliot's two poetic collections and arguably her signature essay in practical poetics (but see Solie 117-18) – in which, as the idea of music dawns on its antediluvian inventor, the word "form" resounds over and over. The din of laboring humanity graduates from noise to music only when it is "Wrought into solid form" (321). While "Jubal must dare as great beginners dare, / Strike form's first way in matter rude and bare" (340-41), music repays the investment "With form-begotten sound" (335). The fecundating agency of form within the musical arts (including song or poetry) recapitulates for Jubal what his blacksmith brother Tubal-Cain has earlier learned in forging the technical crafts:

> Each day he wrought and better than he planned,
> Shape breeding shape beneath his restless hand.
> (The soul without still helps the soul within,
> And its deft magic ends what we begin.) (204-7)

A poetic celebration of origins, "The Legend of Jubal" keeps inaugurations and aims in mutual play through the verbal starts and stops of rhyming couplets like the parenthesis here, where the end-rhyme "begin" illustrates in miniature the thought-teaching power of a form-begotten sound, its formally punning paradox a brief token of poetry's inner need for that seeming outsider, the verbal framework. Thus the narrative couplets of "How Lisa Loved the King" establish medieval Spanish chivalry as instinct "With beauteous response, like minstrelsy / Afresh fulfilling fresh expectancy" (24-25), a simile that earns its keep when the expectation-fulfilling rhyme realizes in form the idealism it speaks of.

Blank verse works from a subtler palette, but the metered line in itself also suffices for play on beginning and ending, as appears near the close of "A Minor Prophet": "Full souls are double mirrors, making still / An endless vista of fair things before / Repeating things behind" (295-97). A rearview mirror is not a pierglass; still, these lines if read off as prose resemble a *Middlemarch* style just enough to throw into relief the breaking and mending of sense that verse enjambment effects as prose cannot. Underscoring the temporality of articulation, the unfolding of Eliot's lineated sense throws into relief the difference between repetition and identity, a difference that gives meaning to time, holding open the space of even minor prophecy, and with it the poem's hedged but genuine utopianism. A few lines later in "A Minor Prophet" this difference emerges in the blank verse's sudden flirtation with rhyme: idealism burgeons

> At labours of the master-artist's hand
> Which, trembling, touches to a finer end,
> Trembling before an image seen within. (304-6)

"Hand" and "end" don't rhyme, quite, but the placement of "end" at line's end suggests that they might mate in an imperfect world, even as the image they convey brings home the

blessed discrepancy between what "Jubal" called the "soul within" and "soul without," between an inspiring "image seen within" and the executive explorativeness of the master-artist's refining hand.

The music and the motion for which we have thus far sampled Eliot's versification display a self-awareness that can boost consciousness of verbal phenomena across the board. Whatever we make, in *The Spanish Gypsy*, of the turmoil Don Silva suffers between love and duty, cosmopolitan reason and peninsular breeding, Gothic and Catholic makeup, we should note that Eliot set her anatomy of early-modern man to a lexical accompaniment that staged the ethnical-ethical contest in an arena of etymology. Watch the Saxon and Latin elements circle each other:

> Silva was both the lion and the man;
> First hesitating shrank, then fiercely sprang,
> Or having sprung, turned pallid at his deed
> And loosed the prize, paying his blood for nought. . . .
> Deliberating ever, till the sting
> Of a recurrent ardour made him rush
> Right against reasons that himself had drilled
> And marshalled painfully. A spirit framed
> Too proudly special for obedience,
> Too subtly pondering for mastery:
> Born of a goddess with a mortal sire,
> Heir of flesh-fettered, weak divinity,
> Doom-gifted with long resonant consciousness
> And perilous heightening of the sentient soul. (1.73)

Too systematically allotted, perhaps, and too coldly fused, to be mistaken for Shakespeare's or Milton's, this interleaving diction nevertheless evinces a way with words that is Shakespearean and Miltonic. It is, for that matter, Johnsonian; linguistic curiosity sharpened by such an anatomy of character in verse might nourish study of Eliot's prose as well, and might elicit fresh analyses that put formal and cultural reading in each other's neighborhood, and debt.

Lexical analysis ratcheted up one order of magnitude becomes discourse analytics, of a Bakhtinian sort that despite its current vogue is too little practiced on an author whose stylistic accomplishment goes without saying. The overtness with which Eliot the poet switches among various registers of style may have things to teach us – questions to prompt us to ask again – about heteroglossia in her prose. Here follows a passage, from *The Spanish Gypsy*, framing a scene where Silva and some street performers in his employ visit the astrologer Sephardo:

> A room high up in Abderahman's tower,
> A window open to the still warm eve,
> And the bright disc of royal Jupiter.
> Lamps burning low make little atmospheres
> Of light amid the dimness; here and there
> Show books and phials, stones and instruments.
> In carved dark-oaken chair, unpillowed, sleeps
> Right in the rays of Jupiter a small man,
> In skull-cap bordered close with crisp gray curls,
> And loose black gown showing a neck and breast
> Protected by a dim-green amulet;
> Pale-faced, with finest nostril wont to breathe
> Ethereal passion in a world of thought;

Eyebrows jet-black and firm, yet delicate;
Beard scant and grizzled; mouth shut firm, with curves
So subtly turned to meanings exquisite,
You seem to read them as you read a word
Full-vowelled, long-descended, pregnant – rich
With legacies from long, laborious lives.
Close by him, like a genius of sleep,
Purrs the gray cat, bridling, with snowy breast.
A loud knock. "Forward!" in clear vocal ring.
Enter the Duke, Pablo, and Annibal.
Exit the cat, retreating toward the dark. (2.189)

I quote in full to show how often, and how easily, the multi-tasking style shifts back and forth among inventory and overview, listing and interpreting, immediate scenery and "pregnant" traditionary background, literal and figurative registers; and then how quickly, in the last three lines, the description these devices evoke folds up and slips into the pocket of plot. To make the eloquent abstraction of "Ethereal passion in a world of thought" consort with a flatfooted "Exit the cat" is a sort of trick in which Eliot's narrative prose excels, usually without awakening more than a passing recognition that she has woven "poetic" and "prosaic" elements together. Such commingling of styles emerges more diagrammatically, and so more strikingly, when it takes place on verse's premisses; and a study of the novels that bore the poems in mind should be impelled thereby to a nearer look and a finer appreciative vocabulary. "Right in the rays of Jupiter a small man": how uncanny the co-presence of the homely close-up with the interplanetary long shot; how oddly right that "Right."

Pulse Taking

None of the foregoing poetry-appreciation refutes the objections we heard earlier from Eliot's first critics, who were happy to temper critique by conceding that this or that passage shed transient luster on what remained a generally disappointing performance. Challenging these objections on their own ground requires correlating the general with the particular, and reasoning downwards from the leading themes of Eliot's poetry to their specific prosodic instantiation. These themes prove to be remarkably consistent, across the poetry and also with animating concerns of the fiction, under the sign of synecdoche, or the problem of the one and the many. Aspects of the problem just detained us in "The Astrologer's Study," where the reciprocal bearing of singularity and generality emerged in the enumeration of details soliciting interpretation ("to read them as you read a word"), and also in the strong association between a thing's meaning and its history. Writ large, this association is ubiquitous in the fiction, where the gravitas the past imposes on the present, and the bearing of broad systems on local nodes, are the silver and golden keys to Eliot's representational realism. Likewise her moral vision, in verse as in prose media, turns on the synecdochic relation between individual ego and social collectivity (see Krasner). At each point along the continuum from lyric to epic, subjectivity in Eliot's poems is destined to possess what the allegorically schematic dialogue "Self and Life" calls the knowledge, won through "anguish," of "fellowship more vast" (72). It is the surest commonplace in Eliot criticism that the novels bestow such knowledge on their protagonists through the access of sympathy, by an accretive process whose ultimate warrant lies in the reader's experience of sympathy with the sympathies those protagonists learn to feel. Among the poems only *The Spanish Gypsy* and "Armgart" are long enough to attempt this gradual moral adjustment of ego to other, and it is hard to resist the consensus that the dramatic hybrid form of these two works enjoys only indifferent success. Armgart and Fedalma seem brought to their

knees – or hoisted to their pedestal – by the force of sheer authorial conviction, rather too thinly clad as an abrupt twist in the story.

These results suggest we look elsewhere in the poetry for an equivalent to the narrative sympathy that sustains moral realism within the novels. We find it, I think, in a different experience of sympathy: the musically rhythmic sway that was George Eliot's pulse in verse (see Weliver, Picker, Solie). In *The Spanish Gypsy* the "large music rolling o'er the world" at times whelms what Zarca fanatically dismisses as "the round of personal loves," "A miserable, petty, low-roofed life" (3.270), and at other times it uplifts life's pettinesses into significant participation in the course of history, felt "Swift as the wings of sound yet seeming slow / Through multitudinous pulsing of stored sense / And spiritual space" (3.237: an elusive image, which swims into ken when we ponder how "stored sense" bides its time in the printed lines of a poetry book). Eliot's epic carriage declares itself again in a late passage on "the dire hours / Burthened with destiny," which

> sweep along
> In their aërial ocean measureless
> Myriads of little joys, that ripen sweet
> And soothe the sorrowful spirit of the world. (5.363)

The enjambed modifier "measureless" spans the synecdochic gap between whole and part. Syntactically the word hovers between the high "ocean" of heaven's immensity and the sheer proliferant "Myriads" of realia in the world; yet on either construction there is a soothing countercharm to enormity in the wavelike measure of verse, intimating an order that inheres in the ripening course of time. Multitudinousness has a pulse to it; take that pulse, and you apprehend the world's body.

Hence flows the affection with which Eliot's muse stoops to the quotidian region of "dull brown fact" (1.49), "the streets, the shops, the men at work, / The women, little

children – everything, / Just as it is when nobody looks on" (1.95). The prosaic poetic of such writing is in one sense familiar from Eliot's defense of Dutch realism in *Adam Bede*. Things change, though, when it is in verse that "The crones plait reeds, or shred the vivid herbs / Into the caldron" (3.239): objects seem denser, actions more deliberately outlined. Occasionally with Eliot, as with her admired Wordsworth, a piece of prose seems to have wandered into verse by accident:

> Within the prettiest hollow of these hills,
> Just as you enter it, upon the slope
> Stands a low cottage neighbored cheerily
> By running water, which, at farthest end
> Of the same hollow, turns a heavy mill,
> And feeds the pasture for the miller's cows. ("Agatha" 53-58)

Yet even here, where the poet aims at a modesty befitting her idyllic endorsement of a vital, frugal plainness, the enjambment that lineation creates in verse however prosy begins, almost in spite of itself, to trace the contoured Alpine landscape and embody its sloping flow. To think of a certain mill on the Floss – from the novel that has most signally elicited literary criticism tending, for worse (Freeman) and for better (Stewart), towards poetically-normed response – or to think of Dorothea Ladislaw's "incalculably diffusive" lot at the finale of *Middlemarch* – is to appreciate Eliot's wager that the acoustic sympathy verse bears would temper the loss of the part in the whole, would measure (if not, exactly, calculate) the diffusion of the individual into the collective. Hence her own cheerful audition for "the choir invisible / Whose music" gives promise "of a good diffused, / And in diffusion ever more intense" ("O May I Join the Choir Invisible" 40-43). Hence the enshrinement of her Moses, not in a tomb but "as Law," to the accompaniment of what sounds very much like the Lord's own poetry: "mysterious speech, / Invisible Will wrought clear in sculptured

sound" ("The Death of Moses" 118-22). And hence, alas, the reckless and reader-vexing insistence of *The Spanish Gypsy* on individual submission to world-historical imperatives of blood and tribe that are borne to the reader, as to Fedalma dancing in the public square, on the vibrancy of solo aria and not much else: a wing, we might say, and a prayer.

Indeed, the dismay that readers from the first have expressed at Fedalma's rendezvous with destiny may arise in response to a certain ambivalence in Eliot about poetic form. She revered it, and at the same time she mistrusted it. She worked it with so self-conscious an insistence because she wasn't quite sure that it worked. The air of calculation that her critics complain about arises from a virtually Stradivarian approach to the instrumentality of the verse medium, which she seems typically to *use*, like a power tool marvelously effective in the execution of a preconcerted design. (If only in this sense, the canard that Eliot wrote *The Spanish Gypsy* out fully in prose before translating it to verse – hardly credible in itself – has a certain *prima facie* plausibility. Beyond question it was at this same time she confessed to "the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me first in the flesh and not in the spirit": Haight 1955, 300). Eliot tasked poetry to do so much because she believed it could do anything, which is why in the poems she carried favorite theorems to extremes that in her prose were more prudently buffered and hedged (Armstrong 371, Reynolds 305). Yet at the same time, and by the same token, she seldom writes as if she has abandoned her agenda and taken the leap of poetic thinking for its own sake. It is therefore the more remarkable when, once in a great while, the musical flood of significant sympathy drains off, and she is stranded in spare random thoughtfulness, like her Fedalma here:

> the glow dies out, the trumpet strain
> That vibrated as strength through all my limbs
> Is heard no longer; over the wide scene
> There's nought but chill gray silence, or the hum

And fitful discord of a vulgar world. (3.279)

This passage anticipates the fine metaphysical zeroing-out in which the entire epic concludes, as Don Silva, yearning toward the horizon after Fedalma's unreturning ship, "knew not if he gazed / On aught but blackness overhung by stars" (1.375). Yet Fedalma's earlier passage is if anything more blank than this tragic fall of the curtain: the mind in its very disempowerment is delivered over to a poverty in which one wishes George Eliot the poet had known how to dwell.

This wish is met, and thereby whetted, by the survival of an exceptional verse sketch from Eliot's notebook that went unpublished for a century. "In a London Drawing-Room," anticipating the verse of another poet named Eliot yet unborn, stands comparison with the poetry of urban anomie at which Tennyson and Baudelaire had tried their hand not long before Eliot composed it – jotted it, rather, in a mode of unbespoken bricolage whose vitality differs signally from most of what she saw fit to print:

The sky is cloudy, yellowed by the smoke.
For view there are the houses opposite
Cutting the sky with one long line of wall
Like solid fog: far as the eye can stretch
Monotony of surface and of form
Without a break to hang a guess upon. (1-6)

The poem begun in these lines goes on for a dozen more, concluding with a speculative simile that compares the urban prospect to "one huge prison-house and court / Where men are punished at the slightest cost" (17-18). A conclusion well enough in its way; but in bending the poem into conformity with her habitual interpretive processing Eliot's conclusion sets off by contrast the rawer-minded impressionability of her speculative opening gambit.

The scholar who first published "In a London Drawing-Room" in 1959 aptly judged that it turns, almost uniquely within Eliot's work, "upon the nature of the world perceived" and not "upon the *way* in which consciousness perceives" (Paris 549; see also Stephen 171). For once, the images do the thinking rather than illustrate a thought. This preconceptual quality of suspended "guess" apparently caught the poet's appreciative eye as it still does ours, for she made of it a chapter epigraph in *Felix Holt*. A separate study of the verse epigraphs Eliot placed in her novels might well show that fragmentary shapes liberated her, as poems fully rendered for publication didn't, to engage in this species of impromptu "thought-teaching form." John Morley and Henry James were on to something: Eliot's poetry would probably have amounted to more had she taken such liberties more boldly.

Amateur Standing

Eliot's care to see into print only poems that were finished, nay accomplished, may be linked to a last noteworthy feature of her career in verse: its deliberate dilettantism. She made it a point to come before the public in the character of a minor poet, which in her special case meant a major novelist keeping her hand fresh in a sister art (see Tucker). The case this chapter has framed for the excellence of her handiwork, while it seems to contradict this appreciation, actually sustains it deep down. So does the remarkable fact that the portfolio of Eliot's published poems is so diversified in genre, whether we look to verse structures or larger poetic kinds. "The Legend of Jubal" and "How Lisa Loved the King," extended heroic-couplet narratives set in ancient days, display the closest resemblance anywhere in the corpus, yet in their narratorial manner and typical handling of the coupleted unit they are as distinctly different as the ages of the Patriarchs and of Chivalry that they respectively treat. Among the subgenres in blank verse "Agatha" is a pastoral idyll of Tennysonian stripe, "Armgart" a closet drama, "A Minor Prophet" a double-focussed elliptical monologue à la Browning, "Stradivarius" an anecdotal fable with one foot

in history, "A College Breakfast-Party" an academic eclogue, "The Death of Moses" an epyllion that feels lifted from the last book of some Miltonic *Mosiad*, and "O May I Join the Choir Invisible" a humanist hymn (see Vogeler). "Brother and Sister" with its eleven Shakespearean sonnets earns a decent corner in the Victorian tradition of themed lyric sequences. The other poems in rhyme include a Shelleyan allegory ("Self and Life"), one love song with a refrain and one without ("Two Lovers," "Sweet evenings come and go, love"), and a parable on the fortunes of poetry ("Arion"), written in the form of Marvell's Horatian ode. We glanced above at discursive heteroglossia within the strenuous *Spanish Gypsy*; that poem's bid for epic standing is formally pronounced in the encyclopedic diversity of its generic constituents: verse but occasionally prose, narrative but more often dramatic dialogue, and into the bargain a respectable chapbook's worth of highly various lyrical songs.

The sheer versatility within this poetic output is so remarkable that we should reckon it an important part of the performance. Eliot appears on purpose to have avoided repeating herself. The overall effect is that of a virtuoso recital, undertaken as if to show, with each genre and mode on exhibit, how very well she could carry it off and then, dusting off her hands, to go on and excel at something else. A passing exchange from "Armgart" offers a virtual gloss on this phenomenon:

> I have known
> A man so versatile, he tried all arts,
> But when in each by turns he had achieved
> Just so much mastery as made men say,
> "He could be king here if he would," he threw
> The lauded skill aside. ("Armgart" 242-47)

This cool dabbler, the worldly Graf Dornberg goes on to relate, held that it was the fate of "excellence" to wind up "Huddled in the mart of mediocrities" (255-59). That Armgart unequivocally pooh-poohs this idea does not mean George Eliot did. At all events it is quite suggestive that she should have both thought it up and then subjected it to scorn, on the part moreover of a diva heroine whose tragedy will be entailed by precisely what it cautions against, putting all your eggs in one basket.

As the exchange from "Armgart" shows she suspected, Eliot's versatility while praiseworthy invited a negative appreciation as well. There is a sense, especially within the Romantic climate that governed most Victorian poetry, in which excellence as such is not the mark of genius but its muzzle, the snaffle in Pegasus' teeth. In this sense we may regard Eliot's versatility as betokening the declining of an option, the renunciation of a pioneer's major stake in any one mode of poetic art, a shying away from the glory that was to be won, if at all, at a higher risk of inspired failure than she stood ready to assume. Reluctant to embrace poetry as an exploratory medium, she remained content to practice it illustriously, which is to say, by and large, as an illustrative medium instead. A number of interlocking reasons no doubt underwrote this reluctance: an abashed veneration (in which most of her contemporaries participated) for the greatness of poetry; a compensatory corollary suspicion (likewise widely shared) that poetry's grandeur was not compatible with modern life; the belittling gravamen of Victorian gender politics as it bore on an art historically dominated by men (see LaPorte, Hadjiafxendi); even the cruel ageism that made poetry a young writer's game, a slippery slope for the middle-aged adventurer. These obstacles notwithstanding, suffice it to observe at last that, within the select circle of modern authors who have cultivated both novels and poems with signal distinction – Goethe, Scott, Hugo, Hardy, Lawrence, Updike – she remains, pending a candidate or two alive at this writing, and with all respect to that scintillating flash in the pan Emily Brontë, a woman without peer.

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