

The History of a Writer

George Eliot and Biographies

She believed that her husband was one of those men whose memoirs should be written when they died.

(*Middlemarch* 326; ch. 36)

Toward the end of her life, George Eliot wrote: “The best history of a writer is contained in his writings – these are his chief actions.” In the same 1879 letter to Mrs Thomas Adolphus Trollope, she further and more emphatically declared that biographies “generally are a disease of English literature” (*GEL* 7:230). These assertions were prompted by the death in 1878 of her companion of twenty-four years, George Henry Lewes, himself a writer of biographies including *The Life and Works of Goethe* (1855). She declined to write her autobiography, or to cooperate with would-be biographers of herself or Lewes. She did not want details of her personal life to affect evaluations of her writing or to overshadow her own and Lewes’s posthumous reputations. The care of those reputations was centrally important to her in a way that is consistent with questions about history and individual lives that her novels raise. All of her novels implicitly ask how the past influences the present, and how the present, as she put it in the Finale to *Middlemarch* (1871–2), “prepares” the future: “we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas . . .” (785; Finale). But George Eliot was not an insignificant person. She was someone whose memoirs would be written. As far as she could, she wanted to prepare the conditions of how she would be remembered after her death.

Eliot’s preoccupation with the writings that survive the writer is evident from her first published fiction, “Poetry and Prose from the Notebook of an Eccentric” (1846–7).

Borrowing a convention used by Sir Walter Scott and others, she introduces a narrator who has decided to publish the notebooks of his recently deceased friend Macarthy. In her last book, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), her narrator Theophrastus introduces his character sketches by imagining that he will leave his manuscripts to a friend, whom he asks “to use his judgment in insuring me against posthumous mistake” (13; ch. 1). She had originally thought of titling that work “Characters and Characteristics by Theophrastus Such, edited by George Eliot” (GEL7:119). In between Macarthy and Theophrastus, Latimer in her short story, “The Lifted Veil” (1859), writes the story of his life as he approaches what he preternaturally knows will be the moment of his death. Edward Casaubon in *Middlemarch* asks his wife Dorothea to labor on with his “Key to All Mythologies,” and Eliot herself completed and published the last two volumes of Lewes’s *Problems of Life and Mind* (1879) after his death. With the combination of hindsight and foresight characteristic of her fictional narrators, she was deeply interested in the “history of a writer” – whether looking back to the origins of the writing, as in her journal entry, “How I Came to Write Fiction” (1857) – or looking forward to the inevitability of posterity’s judgment in an age when biographies were popular enough to merit being called a disease of literature. Her condemnation of biographies seems to have been a reflex of her anxiety about the representation of her own history as it would be written and live on – along with her published writings – after her death. As it happened (or as she designed), her widower John Walter Cross was the first to “edit” her papers, including her letters and journals, to produce his *George Eliot’s Life as Related in her Letters and Journals* (1885).

I will be drawing on Eliot’s own views about telling life stories because her novels, essays, poetry, and letters provide insights into the possibilities for constructing such narratives with a self-consciousness associated with later, post-modernist assumptions about the fluid boundaries between fact and fiction. Her insights are particularly relevant for a biography that seeks to explore connections between the author’s life and writings. In a section on “Story-Telling” in her posthumously published “Leaves from a Notebook” (1884) she writes:

The only stories life presents to us in an orderly way are those of our autobiography, or the career of our companions from our childhood upwards, or perhaps of our own children. But it is a great art to make a connected strictly relevant narrative of such careers as we can recount from the beginning. (*Poetry* 2:203)

She made this statement about the art of ordering narratives in the 1870s when she was experimenting with narrative structure – first in *Middlemarch* and then more radically in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) – and it has implications for the biographer as well as the novelist. She chose to narrate the “careers” of her characters in *Daniel Deronda* out of sequence, questioning the notion that beginnings are inevitable, and

intentionally altering the established bildungsroman formula epitomized in the first chapter of *David Copperfield* (1849–50), “I am Born.” In contrast, the first chapter of *Daniel Deronda* begins with an epigraph (written by Eliot): “Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning.” The story proceeds *in medias res* before flashing back to illustrative anecdotes from the childhoods of its major characters, Daniel Deronda and Gwendolen Harleth. The form of story-telling in her last novel initiated a transformation in narrative that would be adopted and developed by Henry James, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and others.

A biography may seem to have a natural beginning – the birth of its subject – but how we choose to select and relate the sequence of events that follows, especially with the benefit of hindsight and an abundance of factual material pre-ordered by past biographies, must be determined by narrative interest. In her novel of Renaissance Florence, *Romola* (1862–3), the narrator observes, “as in the tree that bears a myriad of blossoms, each single bud with its fruit is dependent on the primary circulation of the sap, so the fortunes of Tito and Romola were dependent on certain grand political and social conditions which made an epoch in the history of Italy” (21; ch. 2). The goal of biography is to provide the most accurate account possible of the author’s history, including not only a chronology of what she wrote but the circumstances and events that are contexts for those writings.

Biographical facts about the author may not be discoverable in fiction, but the author’s “character” is there to be read. Eliot was intensely aware of the sense in which “the history of a writer is contained in his writings.” In committing his words to paper and publishing them, the writer reveals himself and his life in intimate if not always ordered ways. This is why her most self-conscious reflections on the relationship between life and writing in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* take the form of chapters entitled “Looking Inward,” and more temporally, “Looking Backward.” Theophrastus takes the example of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) when observing that “half our impressions of his character come not from what he means to convey, but from what he unconsciously enables us to discern” (5; ch. 1), and applying this observation to himself. The biographer of a writer must look backward to the historical record and inward to the character or persona of the author that is “contained,” as Eliot said, in her writings. Through such a reconstruction of the author using the historical record and the writings, we have at least as good a chance of knowing Mary Anne Evans/Marian Lewes/George Eliot/Mary Ann Cross today as those who knew her only in childhood, or those who knew her only as admiring visitors at her Sunday afternoons at the Priory.¹

It is tempting to take Eliot’s criticism of biographies as a “disease” of English literature – made after she had become one of England’s most famous novelists and therefore the object of biographical speculation and invasive inquiries – as her definitive opinion on the subject. Her views about biographies, however, were not always so negative. In 1839, after reading J. G. Lockhart’s *Memoirs of the Life of*

Sir Walter Scott (1837–8), she commented to her friend Maria Lewis: “All biography is interesting and instructive” (GEL 1:24). Her first major publication was the translation of a work that is an interrogation of biographical sources, David Strauss’s *Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1846). She was devoted to the truth exposed in the biblical scholar’s account, but she lamented the harsh light of historical inquiry that seemed to spoil the poetry in the life of Jesus. The story of a life (miracles and all) is more satisfying than the dissection of that story. At the beginning of her authorial career, Eliot defended Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) against the objections of her publisher, John Blackwood, who referred to it disdainfully as “this bookmaking out of the remains of the dead. . .” (GEL 2:323). She told Blackwood that while some might find what she called “the life of Currer Bell” in bad taste and “making money out of the dead,” she and Lewes found it “admirable – cried over it – and felt the better for it” (GEL 2:330).

Some Victorians viewed biography as “making money out of the dead” because biographies were so prevalent and popular, read even by those who did not wish to become the subject of biographies themselves. Eliot specified that it was “the system of *contemporary* biography” that she disliked and that had “perverted” the form. As far as she was concerned, “my works and the order in which they appeared is what the part of the public which cares about me may most usefully know” (GEL 6:67–8). In his *Eminent Victorians* (1918), credited with initiating modern biography, Lytton Strachey referred disparagingly to the Victorian form: “Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead – who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design” (6).² But if the two-volume memorial seemed a static, moribund object by the time Strachey was writing, it is important to remember that debates about the nature of biography, and (in the case of authors’ biographies) its relationship to literary criticism, were very much alive in the Victorian period.³ In 1841, when Lewes was contemplating a biography of Percy Bysshe Shelley and had published an article on the poet in the *Westminster Review*, J. S. Mill wrote to him with criticism of the piece that is prescient of future debates up to the present:

I think you should have begun by determining whether you were writing for those who required a *vindication* of Shelley or for those who wanted a *criticism* of his poems or for those who wanted a biographic Carlylian analysis of him as a *man*. I doubt if it is possible to combine all these things but I am sure at all events that the unity necessary in an essay of any kind as a work of art requires at least that one of these should be the predominant purpose & the others only incidental to it. (qtd. in Kitchel 28)

Mill expresses the now-familiar view that the work of the critic and the biographer are separate and cannot be successfully combined. Thomas Carlyle’s biographies defined the great man theory of history rather than the kind of literary criticism that

Lewes wanted to put into his biographies. It was a view that Lewes, who never wrote the biography of Shelley, nonetheless ignored in his *Life and Works of Goethe*.

A critical biography of George Eliot in the twenty-first century has the opportunity to reflect on the contradictory attitudes toward biography from the nineteenth century to the present, using them to ask broad historical and critical questions. In particular, what is the relationship between an author's lived experience and the imaginative literature that she produced? This question has been asked and answered in many ways over the past two centuries as literary biography emerged simultaneously with realist novels, which often took their form from the shape of fictional characters' lives, so that the two genres seem to influence and inform each other. The problem of which, if any, historical context is helpful – even essential – to interpreting works of literature has divided later critics and authors, who seem as conflicted as their Victorian predecessors about the importance of biography in relation to literary criticism.⁴

Twentieth-century trends in literary criticism tended to deny the relevance of the author's life to the understanding of literary texts. New Criticism was a dominant interpretive methodology, separating and privileging the Arnoldian Victorian strain of criticism of "the thing itself" from the more popular strain of Victorian biography. It further derived from Modernist assumptions articulated by T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) and honed by professional critics within the academy into the 1960s. William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954) and Cleanth Brooks in *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947) explicitly disavowed connections between the author's life and his writing while seeking to judge the quality of a work according to a set of formal criteria.⁵

This impulse to appreciation was challenged and virtually eliminated by various forms of politicized literary studies in the 1970s to 1980s.⁶ In its various manifestations in the 1970s and 1980s, post-structuralist theory also reacted against New Criticism's elevation of the work of art to argue that all writing constituted a "discourse," which must be read as part of a broader "intertext" – a nightmare scenario for the New Critics. Yet, post-structuralism shared with New Criticism the isolation of the text from its biographical contexts. The polemical positions of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault perpetuated the anti-biographical bias that had been ingrained by New Criticism.⁷ Biographies of authors or literary lives continued to be popular, but biographical criticism did not have a place in the theoretical approaches to literary texts that dominated the 1980s and 1990s. The exclusion of biography, first from formalism and then from densely theoretical discourse analysis, perpetuated an opposition that Eliot identified when she wrote to the American historian George Bancroft in 1874 about her objection to the "system of *contemporary* biography," complaining that "the mass of the public will read any quantity of trivial details about a writer with whose works they are very imperfectly, if at all, acquainted" (GEL 6:67).

Eliot's association and denigration of biography and "the public" looks forward to the elitism that characterized later dismissals of biographical criticism. New Critics continued a Modernist agenda of elevating art above more popular forms of writing. The early signs of what became a concerted effort to separate the popular from the good are evident in Eliot's writing beginning with her disregard for popular tastes when writing *Romola*. Her experiences with readers who insisted on finding "originals" for her characters, as well as those who attributed her anonymous fictions to someone else, disillusioned her. The belief that most readers misunderstood her work led her to write primarily for the few who would understand, so that her later work became more complex, challenging, and allusive. Just as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot had made poetry more difficult for ordinary readers to understand, so New Critics helped to distinguish great art from popular writing. Eliot's observations in the 1870s, firstly that the mass of readers care more about the trivial details of the author's life than about her writings, and secondly that the history of the writer is to be found in his writings, are consistent with two trends that would develop in the twentieth century: the insistence that what is popular is low and the separation of the author from his or her work. In other words, George Eliot's attitudes late in her career anticipate the exclusion of biography from literary criticism.⁸

Even in the 1990s when New Historicism made the "turn" back to history, its advocates did so with a post-structuralist lack of interest in the author. Critics pursued historical connections between literary and non-literary historical discourses, but continued to discount the relevance of the author.⁹ While the "death of the author" hypothesis has been counter-productive to thinking about the importance of the author's life to his or her writing, the concept of the "intertext" is useful in "deconstructing" the boundaries, for example, between the literary artifacts canonized as art and other forms of writing. Critical biography may benefit from the fundamental insights of post-structuralism to offer fresh approaches to the relationship between the historical material (letters, journals, legal documents, etc.) – by which we know and reconstruct history – and the imaginative works produced by the writers of the past. It is time to rethink how the experiences of the author factor into larger questions about whether and how historical contexts explain the production and aid the interpretation of literary works. Mary Ann Evans/Marian Lewes/George Eliot, the person of many names, voices, and performances, was something more than a site of ideology. We may appreciate her writing more fully by recognizing its author as a person whose history can be told, in her words, "in a strictly relevant narrative." We may learn from the Modernist Strachey, who argued that "Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past" (5), and from the young Mary Ann Evans who wrote: "All biography is interesting and instructive" (*GEL* 1:24).

Within George Eliot studies, Rosemarie Bodenheimer's *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans* (1994) broke new ground through its close, attentive reading of Eliot's letters and the astute connections that it makes between the language of her

letters, fiction, and poetry. Bodenheimer recognizes that Eliot's letters should count among the writings that are the best history of her life.¹⁰ Though Bodenheimer does not adopt any single theoretical approach, she deconstructs fundamental oppositions, including fact and fiction, author and character, literature and history. She also establishes that the author must inevitably be reconstructed from her fictional and non-fictional textual "performances." Letters, like novels, assume an audience. The author who published under the name George Eliot signed her letters in many ways over the course of her life, and she was always highly conscious of both the person she was addressing and her own identity as the writer of letters. Without denying or forgetting the real person, Bodenheimer nonetheless recognizes "the impossibility of knowing anything that is not somebody's fiction of the self in the guise of a story about another" (*Real Life* xiv). The writer, in short, is inevitably a character in the biographer's narrative of her life.

I will reconsider existing narratives about Eliot's life, focusing on some unresolved problems in those narratives, such as why she was silent about her mother, why she and Lewes could not marry, and the importance of Agnes Lewes as the "other woman" in her married life. In addition, I will draw on George Eliot's own thinking about the shape of individual lives – articulated by the narrator of her "political" novel, *Felix Holt* (1866) who contends that "there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life" (43; ch. 3). I will also engage literary critical traditions of interpreting her work within the broader context of theoretical approaches to studying literary texts generally. By questioning some unsupported claims that have been repeated in previous biographies, I hope to offer a new way to think about how the narrative of Eliot's life as reconstructed from the available evidence – itself a fascinating story often inflected or even conflated with aspects of her fiction – may profitably be read along with the literary works that continue to entertain, engage, and enlighten us. Her writings were in fact her "chief actions," and it is their enduring power that makes her a worthy subject of critical biography.

George Eliot and Biography

When Eliot read biographies of authors she admired, or incorporated biography into her criticism of literary works, she was particularly mindful of the moral judgments on personal actions that might cloud the appreciation of the literary texts. She therefore protested against a notion that is still being debated today – that immoral acts (or even opinions) on the part of the author somehow invalidate the importance of his writing. In a letter to her friend Sara Hennell in 1849, she argued:

it would signify nothing to me if a very wise person were to stun me with proofs that Rousseau's views of life, religion, and government are mistakenly erroneous – that he

was guilty of some of the worst bas[ne]sses that have degraded civilized man. I might admit all this – and it would be not the less true that Rousseau’s genius has sent that electric thrill through my intellectual and moral frame which has awakened me to new perceptions, which has made man and nature a fresh world of thought and feeling to me – and this not by teaching me any new belief. (GEL 1:277)

The genius of Rousseau, whose autobiographical *Confessions* (1782–9) so moved her, transcended anything additional she might (with skepticism) learn about his personal beliefs or actions. To her, his beliefs are less relevant than his perceptions and ability to convey them in ways that thrilled his readers.

Eliot’s strong views about the superiority of genius and art to petty considerations of personal (especially sexual) behavior ironically foreshadowed controversies about her own conduct in relation to the moral and aesthetic value of her fiction. A high-minded few thought her relations with Lewes compromised her artistic achievements, as when Elizabeth Gaskell refused to believe such a noble book as *Adam Bede* (1859) could have been written by one whose life did so “jar against it” (qtd. in Haight, *Biography* 312). Lewes had declared in his *Life and Works of Goethe* that as a biographer, he would “neither deny, nor attempt to slur over, points which tell against him”: “The man is too great and too good to forfeit our love, because on some points he may incur our blame” (xi). Eliot and Lewes display an intriguingly proto-Modernist willingness to separate the author’s artistic achievements from his conduct, his actions from his writing, even while admitting that biographies of great authors are important and that drawing out the author’s character from his writing is a crucially, historically valuable endeavor.

In essays published before she began writing fiction, Eliot includes biographical sketches of her subjects. In “German Wit: Heinrich Heine” (1856), for example, she provides an account of the poet’s life. Her willingness to judge (or not judge) Heine’s beliefs and acts reflects her conviction about separating art from the artist, while still finding the artist’s life relevant enough to discuss in a consideration of his writing. Of Heine’s sick-room conversion to Theism, she writes: “It is not for us to condemn, who have never had the same burthen laid on us; it is not for pygmies at their ease to criticize the writings of the Titan chained to the rock” (“German Wit” 224). In reviewing editions of Edward Young’s poetry, as well as treatments of his life in “Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young” (1857), however, her role is to “recall the incidents of his biography with as much particularity as we may, without trenching on the space we shall need for our main purpose – the reconsideration of his character as a moral and religious poet” (“Worldliness” 166). She suggests that Young’s character is “distinctly traceable in the well-attested facts of his life, and yet more in the self-betrayal that runs through all his works” (“Worldliness” 184). Her ultimately devastating critique of a poet she once loved associates the moral qualities of the man and his writing. She argues that “the religious

and moral spirit of Young's poetry is low and false" and "*Night Thoughts* are the reflex of a mind in which the higher human sympathies were inactive" ("Worldliness" 185). Despite resisting moral judgments of the authors she admires, she is nonetheless prone to criticize the character of a poet to whose art she objects. Young's poetry is deficient because his mind was deficient, and this is a greater aesthetic, intellectual, even moral sin than any physical "baseness" Rousseau might have committed or any "erroneous" opinion he might have held.

Here we begin to see how morality and artistic representation become associated. If the author's writings are his chief actions, his behavior and beliefs are irrelevant to the value of his writing. Good writing is good character. Truth in writing is a form of moral truth, as she argued in her essay, "The Natural History of German Life" (1856):

Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. Falsification here is more pernicious than in the more artificial aspects of life. ("Natural History" 264)

Eliot included versions of this aesthetic credo in her early works when establishing the moral imperative of realism, and she remained consistent in her basic beliefs – perhaps influenced by her own sensitivity to criticism about her relationship with Lewes – though her emphasis and terms of expressing them altered as she grew more disdainful of the mass reading public. Her early works are committed to truthful, realistic representations of ordinary people. By the time she wrote *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, she was dedicated to exploring the morality of writing, broadly conceived as the literary archive that reflects and preserves national character. Her work shows this transformation from a belief in writing as a means of amplifying experience for immediate sympathy to writing as a means of passing on truth to posterity in the form of superior literature.

In her essays, such as those on Young, Dr Cumming, and Heine, Eliot invokes biographical details to enhance her analyses of literature. When reviewing biographies, she is self-conscious about the genre. For example, she writes of Thomas Carlyle's *Life of John Sterling* (1851): "We have often wished that genius would incline itself more frequently to the task of the biographer. . . a real 'Life', setting forth briefly and vividly the man's inward and outward struggles, aims, and achievements, so as to make clear the meaning which his experience has for his fellows" ("Thomas Carlyle" 299). Before she became a famous novelist worthy of a biography, and before her disavowals of biography, she felt great enthusiasm about the meaning that a man's "experience has for his fellows" and she learned from the art of biography, applying it to future novels in which she set forth the "inward and outward struggles" of her fictional men and women. She also believed that the author's writing was a "reflex of the mind" ("Worldliness" 185), concluding that the

art and the life might profitably be studied together, the one illuminating the other. These critical reviews show that biography was central to her thinking as she was preparing to write fiction. Some of her opinions remained consistent, while others were transformed by her experiences as a novelist.

Eliot's authorial career began with a biography, her translation of Strauss's *Life of Jesus*, which, as the scrutiny of a life narrative pieced together from the testimonials of the Gospels, differed from other works of the German Higher Criticism such as Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1841). Ideas about biography were heavily influenced in the first half of the nineteenth century by Carlyle's biographical writing from *Sartor Resartus* (1831) and *Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841) to his biographies of John Sterling and Frederick II of Prussia (1858). The distinctive role assigned to men and women of genius was foremost in Eliot's thinking about biography, even as she focused on ordinary lives in her fiction. How does the life of the genius differ from that of the ordinary man? *Middlemarch* encapsulates this opposition, which is central to its structure and our understanding of Dorothea's fate. Without the Prelude about St Theresa and latter-day St Theresas, our reading of Dorothea's failures and our experience of the novel would be completely altered. Eliot was able to read the autobiographies of the sixteenth-century saint (1515–82), *Life, The Way of Perfection* (both before 1567) and *The Interior Castle* (1577), only because St Theresa was a heroine of history whose writings survived and were passed on to the future. In contrast, Dorothea's unhistoric life is summed up in a manner frightening to anyone contemplating his or her place in posterity: "a fine girl who married a sickly clergyman, old enough to be her father, and in a little more than a year after his death gave up her estate to marry his cousin – young enough to have been his son, with no property, and not well-born" (*Middlemarch* 784; Finale). The narrator further summarizes the painful, reductive opinion of the ignorant and provincial judges of Dorothea's life: "Those who had not seen anything of Dorothea usually observed that she could not have been 'a nice woman,' else she would not have married either the one or the other" (784; Finale). In telling her story, the narrator rectifies history and mitigates the harsh struggle for existence in which only the lives of the great are written and remembered. But the optimism and idealism of telling ordinary lives that shone through even the darker moments in her earlier novels is subdued. She tells the story of the ordinary in contrast to the great with a melancholy image of unvisited tombs. Milly Barton's grave is visited, as is Maggie Tulliver's at the end of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860); but in *Middlemarch*, Dorothea's tomb may be among the unvisited.¹¹

Eliot's assumptions and statements about the importance of biography in the 1850s may have been influenced by her deepening relationship with Lewes and her participation in the research and writing of his *Life and Works of Goethe*. Lewes's multi-faceted career began with biographical work. He never wrote his biography of Shelley, but he wrote *A Biographical History of Philosophy* (first pub. 1845–6), a work that assumes the lives of the philosophers are relevant to an understanding of their

ideas. It constructed a narrative of the history of philosophy through a series of discrete narratives about the lives of the philosophers, all in the service of making the history of philosophy interesting and accessible. It was one of Lewes's many publications in which he sought to popularize difficult and specialized forms of knowledge such as philosophy and science. He was very successful in these efforts, so it is interesting to see how this volume changed as it was repeatedly revised through the 1850s and 1860s. Eventually, he dropped the title of "biographical," thereby suggesting that he, along with Eliot, grew increasingly skeptical about the biographical mode of explaining an author's writings. Lewes, like Eliot, eventually became disillusioned with the tastes of the general reading public, and his late scientific work was aimed at an elite, educated audience. At least in the years prior to her writing fiction, however, Eliot and Lewes shared a belief in the intimate relationship between art and the life of the artist – the reason why Lewes devoted much of his biography of Goethe to literary analyses, making the analogy: "In the life of a great Captain, much space is necessarily occupied by his campaigns" (xi). In this respect, the practice and art of biography were essential to Eliot's career and intellectual life. Biography is one of the literary genres that influenced how she thought about fiction and chose to trace the lives of her fictional characters, whether or not those characters were also writers.

Eliot's later rejection of biography as a disease of English literature and her reluctance to cooperate with biographers followed from her notoriety as an adulterous woman and her fame as a novelist. She was scarred by readers of *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858) and *Adam Bede* – initially licensed by the anonymity of the author and later by the phenomenal success of the works – who attempted to find "originals" for her fictional characters. She reacted defensively, seeing such reductions of her work as an insult to her creative powers as an artist. It is here that we see the beginning of an idea, developed as a result of her personal experience, that life and writings should be kept separate from each other. This view about separating the author's life from his or her writings also influenced her fiction. After *The Mill on the Floss*, there are few one-to-one correspondences between her characters and people she knew, though people she knew claimed to be originals, and critics continue to identify them.

The very notion of "originals" – from the "keys" to *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* circulated after the publications of these works, to Gordon Haight's essays on "George Eliot's Originals" (1958) – raises a set of aesthetic and conceptual problems. If a real person, in Eliot's words, "suggested the groundwork" (*GEL* 3:85–6) for a fictional character, in what sense can they be an "original" unless their life story is told in the fiction? The simplistic notion of an "original" from which a fiction is copied ignores the distinction between character and plot. From Amos Barton to Tom Tulliver, the Dodson sisters and Mr Casaubon: even if a real person (Reverend Gwyther of Nuneaton, Isaac Evans, the Pearson sisters, Mark Pattison) inspired the characters, imagination takes over in placing those characters in a set of fictional circumstances and playing out the events of their lives in ways that depart

completely from the histories of the real people. Biography is not the identification of originals, although the critic is justified in exploring those notions of historical and literary “originals” with which Eliot played in her late work: Isaac Casaubon and Edward Casaubon; later St Theresas; Greek Theophrastus and English Theophrastus.

As the mid-Victorian period’s most intellectual and philosophical novelist, Eliot was more self-conscious about the aesthetic and moral dimensions of fiction generally – and her own realism in particular – than any of her contemporaries. The principles she articulated in her literary criticism and worked into her early fiction in the form of the narrator’s comments contributed to her well-deserved reputation as an innovator. She advocated a brand of realism that was to influence the novel at the height of its popularity and artistic achievement in the mid-nineteenth century, but she also tested the limits of that realism. Her work became more dense and allusive, less popular, and less autobiographical all at the same time as it moved in the direction of aestheticism and Modernism. Her insights into life, art, and the relationship between the two can be useful in understanding how her experiences – including her extensive reading – are in her writing and how that writing became the chief action of her life.

The Mill on the Floss is often called Eliot’s most autobiographical novel. This idea was encouraged by Cross, perhaps on Eliot’s own authority, since she wrote about the experience of writing the novel as mining the layers of her past (*GEL* 3:129). Her “Brother and Sister” sonnets (1869) treat some of the same events from her childhood. “Looking Inward” and “Looking Backward” in *Impressions* are autobiographical meditations on the notion of autobiography, but are written in the voice of a character/author unlike any other in her fiction. Outside of the letters and journals, we have few directly autobiographical writings by Eliot. “How I came to write Fiction,” an essay within her journal (November 30, 1858), is an exception. But other works do offer revelations about “originals” in relation to fiction, including especially *Romola*, in which the lives of the real historical figures become part of her art. What is the basis for recreating an historical figure like Savonarola and probing his psychology? The answer is his own extensive writings and generations of biographies about him, on which she drew heavily in writing her historical novel. As her only novel that inserts fictional characters into an historical tableau of characters who actually lived, *Romola* is a unique case, as will be discussed in the following chapters. Eliot’s letters reveal how mining her own past in *The Mill*, mining the historical record in *Romola*, and writing those recollections and researches into fiction also transformed her.

Like W. M. Thackeray’s *Pendennis* (1848–50) and Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, Eliot’s novels may count as fictional biographies – the record and detailed analyses of individual lives. These bildungsroman novels are actually also the portraits of the artist/author, as is E. B. Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856). Eliot resisted this particular sub-genre and her protagonists are never primarily authors. That she never modeled a female author/character on herself is consistent with the

belief, which grew as her career as a novelist progressed, that the author's experiences should not be confused with his writing and that her fiction should tell the stories of unexceptional, ordinary people.

From her first short fiction, "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton" (1857), Eliot used the shape of human lives to give form to her narratives. In *Middlemarch* the narrator invokes the eighteenth-century novelist Henry Fielding, a "great historian, as he insisted on calling himself, who had the happiness to be dead a hundred and twenty years ago" (132; ch. 15). In contrast, she identifies herself among the "belated historians" telling a tale of modern life at a modern pace. As an historian/novelist, like Fielding in *Tom Jones* (1749), she was also an implicit if fictional biographer. In *Daniel Deronda*, she wrote of perhaps her most villainous character:

Grandcourt's importance as a subject of this realm was of the grandly passive kind which consists in the inheritance of land. Political and social movements touched him only through the wire of his rental, and his most careful biographer need not have read up on Schleswig-Holstein, the policy of Bismarck, trade-unions, household suffrage, or even the last commercial panic. (499; ch. 48)

In imagining the biographer of the character whose story she is telling, she comments on what kind of information such a biographer would need. In this case, it is not knowledge of broad social movements, references to which she ingeniously slips into her novel to provide the reader with context of the time about which she was writing (ten years prior to the novel's composition).

The French Revolutionary Wars are a backdrop to *Adam Bede's* 1799 setting, but they touch the characters' lives only when Adam spends his savings to keep his brother from becoming a soldier. In the late fifteenth-century Florence of *Romola*, everyone is affected by political events. While some lives, like that of Felix Holt, are touched by political movements, such as the Reform Act of 1832, other people (especially women) live remote from the national or international political scene. In *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen does not understand the "last commercial panic" that impoverishes her family, and in marrying Grandcourt, as the narrator explicitly tells us, she marries a man thoroughly removed from the social upheavals of his age unless they affect the rents he collects from his tenants. This is the case with most of her characters, and she prefers to tell their life stories through details that reveal a psychological perspective on character formation that was ahead of its time.

Her narrators' selection of details (chosen as though from innumerable possibilities) contributes to the realism of Eliot's novels. The narrators give a selective history of domestic events in the characters' lives with the intention of shedding light on their moral development. Adam Bede leaves home but returns from a sense of duty; Maggie is misunderstood by her family; Silas is betrayed by his closest friends; Mrs Transome is unhappy in her marriage; Lydgate has a predilection for beautiful, dangerous women; Daniel believes himself to be illegitimate; and Gwendolen

strangles a canary. What we know, and therefore how we judge, is tightly controlled by the narrator, and what she chooses not to tell may be as significant as what she does. What kind of childhood did Hetty have? Who were Tito's biological parents? What really happened between Gwendolen and her stepfather?

None of these characters is based on someone Eliot knew; none is wholly autobiographical; none is an author. Consistent with her earliest statements about realism, she wrote in an unpublished fragment: "The fundamental power, the basis of the best preeminence, is that of seeing and observing things as they are in the ordinary experience of our kind" (*Impressions* 168; Appendix). The point of view is Wordsworthian. Ordinary life makes great art, ironically, since ordinary people are not equipped to appreciate that art. Ordinary people would rather read vulgar biographies. Eliot did not write the story of St Theresa but rather wrote the story of Dorothea, a later St Theresa whose potential was never realized. In the anecdote from St Theresa's childhood, the "national ideal" is specifically contrasted to "domestic reality." A chapter epigraph in *Daniel Deronda* conjures the shadow of life not lived: "Men, like planets, have both a visible and an invisible history" (139; ch. 16). On the one hand, this alludes to the invisible, internal life of a person, and on the other hand, it seems to invoke a parallel, counter-factual, experience. For Dorothea, this was the life of a modern saint, which eluded her. In the chapter introduced by this epigraph, Daniel first considers the life he might have led as Sir Hugo's acknowledged son. But that is a false shadow because the real alternative life he might have led is that of a Jew. Eventually, Daniel realizes and recovers his un-lived Jewish life. In resuming that parallel life *in medias res*, he becomes part of a cultural identity larger than himself, giving his individual life a greater, corporate purpose. Eliot signals political events of the 1860s, as when Daniel awaits his mother in Italy, "the very air of Italy seemed to carry the consciousness that war had been declared against Austria, and every day was a hurrying march of crowded Time towards the world-changing battle of Sadowa" (533; ch. 50). And yet the Austro-Prussian War does not change Daniel's life; what does change it is the meeting with his mother and the knowledge that he is Jewish.

Daniel Deronda ends before revealing whether Daniel will become part of a larger social movement, but he and Fedalma in the long poem, *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868), are the only characters that Eliot presents with such an opportunity. Eliot could also be ironic about history, as when the narrator contextualizes the insignificant Anna Gascoigne in *Daniel Deronda*:

I like to mark the time, and connect the course of individual lives with the historic stream, for all classes of thinkers. This was the period when the broadening of gauge in crinolines seemed to demand an agitation for the general enlargement of churches, ball rooms, and vehicles. (74; ch. 8)

In simultaneously providing a knowledge of broader historical contexts but choosing in most of her works to focus on the private, internal, emotional history of her

characters, Eliot offers clues to her own ideas about biography and about what matters when we seek to understand an individual human life. Toward the end of her career, she seems conflicted. Felix Holt is reluctantly swept up in local politics and effects that have rippled out from national reform legislation, and in the end he consciously returns to a modest domestic life. Fedalma inherits the responsibility to lead the Gypsy people to a new nation. After these are the stories of Dorothea and Lydgate, which are tragic in their failures. Finally, Deronda allies himself with the greater good of the Jews, and the moral value of that choice is affirmed in the chapter of *Impressions*, “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” But which is more important – our national ideal or our domestic realities? Daniel’s story suggests that national ideals are more important than doing good at home. Rather than just representing the humble domestic realities of insignificant people, Eliot’s later work self-consciously thematizes the opposition between the great and the ordinary. The vision of Jewish nationalism in *Daniel Deronda* is contrasted to the insignificant “speck” that Gwendolen imagines herself to be at the end of the novel.

Eliot’s writing and the questions it asks about how individual lives determine, and are determined by, a broader social context, lead to questions about how we should understand her life. Which contexts are relevant? Her remarks in letters on political events from Reform Bill riots in Nuneaton to the Zulu War? Her involvement in British colonialism through her investments and her influence in leading Lewes’s sons to emigrate to South Africa? Or, the quiet, private struggles with religious doubt, her sometimes immobilizing insecurity about her morality and abilities, her sexual desires and frustrations? Should we consider the Divorce Act, the Married Women’s Property Act, the founding of Girton College? Theories of evolution or “the development hypothesis” in the writings of Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, and Lewes influenced her intellectual life and fiction, but the extension of railways affected her more practically than the Reform Bills or scientific theories. The notion of social context can be overwhelming to the biographer (or the novelist). Eliot’s own fictional situating of human lives in social and cultural contexts suggests that we need to keep as much of this complexity in mind as possible. Unlike novels, however, lives are not unified by themes. The art of biography may lie in identifying the themes that make the story of a life more like a novel than an objective recording of facts and events.

As a book of character types, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* repeatedly questions the very notion of originality in life and art. Theophrastus is the only one of her fictional creations that merges author, narrator, and character and does so through biographical fragments that do not contribute to an overall narrative but rather amount to a self-conscious meditation on the relationship between the three personae. To complicate matters, he also has an historical “original,” the ancient Greek philosopher. At the same time in the 1870s that she was dismissing a genre (biography) to which she had once been so attached, in her last work she played out

the notion that an author's writings are his chief acts, and in doing so, she deconstructed the author/character binary in uniquely self-conscious fashion. The reticent narrator knows that he can only be known by what he writes: "It is my habit to give an account to myself of the characters I meet with: can I give any true account of my own?" (*Impressions* 3; ch. 1). Already here, we see the self-reflexiveness of this work. Theophrastus is an author but as a fictional character the people he meets are, inevitably, also characters (as highlighted by their unrealistic names). The pun is on character: can he give an account of himself as a character and also of his moral character? Did George Eliot view the people she met as characters? Did she think of her authorial/narrative voice as that of a character, leaving clues to his/identity in his dissection of other characters? The pun is also on "impressions": "Impressions of Theophrastus Such" are his impressions of others and also our impressions of him via these written impressions of others. It is an impressionistic work during the early era of what would come in fact to be called impressionism. It differs from ancient Theophrastus's *Characters* precisely because we are supposed to take the moods and crotchets of the modern London bachelor into account when reading his sketches. It is a playful, instructional challenge to see both the fictional author Theophrastus and the "real" author George Eliot "contained" in the writing.

Although criticized from the time of its publication to the present, Cross's *George Eliot's Life* is a text more aware of its own subjectivity than is usually recognized. Cross modestly calls his effort "*an autobiography* (if the term may be permitted)" and states his view that, "All interpretations depend on the interpreter," and I have judged it best to let George Eliot be her own interpreter, as far as possible" (qtd. in *GEL* 1:xiii). Writing in the 1880s under the influence of Eliot's late life and writing – and in the context of an emerging aestheticism and proto-Modernism – Cross deserves more credit for creating a work that was continuous with Eliot's own writing and thinking about biography. He was, after all, writing a life of "George Eliot," not Marian Evans Lewes or Mary Ann Cross.

Similarly, I would like this *Life of George Eliot* to take its cue from Eliot's insights into the stories of lives. Her life is the more remarkable when we think of her own invisible, counter-factual life – lived out as a housewife and mother in Nuneaton, never having reached London and the intellectual and professional opportunities it provided. Might she have been a nineteenth-century version of Shakespeare's sister in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929)? This leads us back again to Eliot's own views about how lives are lived and their potential realized. What were the unique historical opportunities that made George Eliot possible? They were not only (as Gordon Haight's version of her life might suggest) her meeting with Lewes (though this was a crucial, personal event), but a seizing of nineteenth-century advantages never before possible for a woman writer, combined with the distinctive character traits that led her to struggle against an "imperfect social state" (*Middlemarch* 784; Finale).

George Eliot in Biography

One might argue that Eliot had good reason to worry about her future biographies, and that she rightly withheld facts about her life. We assume that Cross had access to his wife's thoughts about what her first biography should be and that he offered facts and anecdotes as selectively as her narrators dole out information about characters. Any biography of Eliot today must rely on past biographies. It must also be critical and resist the power of a biographical narrative that has taken on a self-referential life of its own. I will give an overview of how the standard narrative of Eliot's life has been constructed, indicating the ways in which I hope to revise it.

For years after her death on December 22, 1880, biographical studies of Eliot relied on Cross's *Life*. Mathilde Blind published her *George Eliot* (1883) first, but Cross was able to select and edit letters and journals available only to him. In doing so he created an image of the author while omitting anything he thought would undermine that image, thereby respecting her wishes as he understood them. From the publication of Gordon Haight's *George Eliot and John Chapman* (1940) through the 1970s, accounts of Eliot's life were dominated by the revisionist investigations of Haight, who in his nine-volume edition of the *Letters* and in his own *George Eliot: A Biography* (1968) sought to replace Cross's image with one of his own making. Critics have depended on Cross, and then on Haight, using them to interpret fictional characters, or using fictional characters to fill in what the biographies lack. While some of Eliot's fictional characters and situations can offer biographical insight, much more can be learned through close attention to language and textual allusion.¹² Allusion and intertextuality are not usually considered relevant to biography, but to the extent that they reflect Eliot's reading – so essential to her life – they are biographical. The characters she met in fiction are as likely to provide clues to her fictional characters as the real life people she met. George Eliot started out taking figures from the past, such as her aunt Elizabeth Evans (Dinah Morris) and transforming them into fiction. In part because this method was exposed and implicitly impugned her abilities as an artist, she developed a complex interplay of real life models whether historical, like the fifteenth-century monk Savonarola in *Romola*, or people she actually knew, like her brother Isaac.¹³

The publication of the letters marked a turning point, and Haight's biography was the first to take advantage of this material, establishing him as "the founder of George Eliot studies" (Haight, *Originals* vii). His biography narrates the seven volumes of letters that he had by that time collected and draws on Lewes's journals and other materials collected from the descendants of Charles Lewes. Important works appeared between Cross's *Life* and Haight's *Biography* (1885–1968). Haight mentions Leslie Stephen's *George Eliot* (1902) and credits *George Eliot's Family Life and Letters*, edited by Arthur Paterson (1928), for introducing the Lewes family (on whose cooperation he relied for letters and remembrances), but he is less interested in

biographical research conducted by women in the 1930s, including works by Anne Fremantle (1932), Blanche Colton Williams (1936), and Anna Kitchel (1933).

Following Haight, Eliot's life has been approached from numerous revisionist standpoints, incorporating new information (Ashton) as well as the perspectives of feminism (Redinger; Rose, *Parallel Lives*; Uglow), psychoanalysis (Johnstone), and post-structuralism (Bodenheimer). Some have aimed to be popular retellings (Hughes; Karl; Taylor; Maddox). Numerous short works have also retold the story of Eliot's life with distinctive critical insights (Brady; Hardy). Other work has contributed to our knowledge of focused aspects of Eliot's life (Collins, *Interviews*; McCormack, *English Travels*). And while the letters may establish a certain shape to the story of Eliot's life, it is useful to read all biographies with a critical eye, especially to repeated but unsubstantiated statements.

There has been much archival research published since Haight's biography: George Eliot's journals have been edited by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (1998). William Baker has produced an edition of Lewes's letters (3 vols; 1995, 1999), and the complete *Autobiography of a Shirtmaker* by Edith Simcox has also been published (1998). All of this material allows us to correct details, add information, and expand the foundational archival research published by Haight. Even more importantly, we have the opportunity to review and reinterpret the narrative that previous biographies have provided and to do so not only with the benefit of new facts and documents, but also with the benefit of massive numbers of critical interpretations of the fiction. Textual sources, including the notebooks for *Daniel Deronda* (Irwin) and *Romola* (Thompson), as well as numerous books and essays, place Eliot's work in the historical contexts of Victorian science, politics, religion, philosophy, and literature. Avrom Fleishman has updated a list of Eliot's reading (2010). The following chapters will integrate critical with biographical revelations and insights, reconsider assumptions about the relationship of history to literature as encouraged by various theoretical models, question biographies that have come before, and engage the fiction in fresh relation to the most pressing concerns of critics and readers.

Haight's biography, while still the standard source, has inevitably been criticized. Ira Bruce Nadel published an evaluation of "George Eliot and Her Biographers" (1982), which is useful for its recognition and summary of neglected Eliot biographies as well as for its historical perspective on biography generally.¹⁴ Nadel calls Haight's biography "the apotheosis of the scholarly, academic biography," reflecting "a stage in the writing of literary lives by academics" ("George Eliot and Her Biographers" 114). Noting Haight's "suppressed hostility to psychologising" (116), as well as his dedication to accumulating facts without interpreting them, Nadel particularly criticizes Haight's biographical theme. Drawn from a comment by the phrenologist George Combe (1788–1858) based on an examination of a cast of Mary Ann Evans's head and quoted with approval in Charles Bray's autobiography, *Phases of Opinions* (1884), the theme is: George Eliot needed "some one to lean upon" (Nadel 116; Haight, *Biography* 51). That Haight takes up a phrenological

observation uncritically seems surprising today, and while it does not discredit the basic narrative he established based on his collection of the letters, his anti-feminist assumptions have understandably disturbed subsequent biographers. So while Kathleen Adams could still publish a book about the men Eliot “leaned on” as late as 1980 (*Those of Us*), Redinger and Rose (1983; 1985) take aim at the idea and phrase, as do Brady (1992) and others. It is true that Eliot wanted a partner in life and someone to love. This makes her typical within Victorian society. Those figures in her life who remained single (Maria Lewis, Sara Hennell, Herbert Spencer, Edith Simcox) are the exceptions, as are such figures in her fiction, some of whom have been disappointed in an initial love (Seth Bede, Priscilla Lammeter, Silas Marner, Mr Brooke).

While more recent biographers reject Haight’s theme of Eliot’s not being “fitted to stand alone” (another phrase of Combe/Bray qtd. in Haight, *Biography* 51) and needing “someone to lean upon,” they fail to realize how the bias that informed this sexist view also informs other aspects of his narrative of Eliot’s life. There is a Victorian prudishness in Haight’s work. He follows earlier biographers in emphasizing that Eliot and Lewes acted on principle and embraced Feuerbach’s notion of love (rather than law) as being the only true basis of marriage. There is truth in this, and we need not reproach the couple’s brave actions in defying “the World’s wife” in order to see that, marriage being a legal category, they were not married. Adultery (of Chapman, Hunt, Lewes) is what gives the spice to Eliot’s biographies as to so many Victorian stories, and when examining its various forms, we need not rely solely on other Victorian terms. Aspects of Haight’s work reveal his bias toward marriage and a reticence about sexual matters, and especially non-normative sexual matters, reflective of his time.

Haight deciphered Chapman’s sexual activity as recorded in his diaries, but there may be more to say about how Eliot encoded sexuality in her fiction (which as a Victorian novelist she was obliged to do), as well as about her knowledge of alternative sexualities. Haight’s prudishness is evident in essays, including “Male Chastity” (1971) and “George Eliot’s Bastards” (1981). His use of the term “bastards” in the biography, along with his repeated references, for example, to Agnes Lewes’s “brood” of “bastards” (*Biography* 132, 135) betrays a disgust with children, real or fictional, born out of wedlock. One has to wonder whether it was this kind of moral judgment (even if directed at others connected to Eliot rather than to her) that she feared when contemplating her own biography. For the most part, Haight keeps to that tradition Nadel describes as the non-analytic accumulator of information. We should remember that he was a biographer writing from the 1940s through the 1980s who quoted F. R. Leavis with approval and wrote about his contemporary New Critic W. K. Wimsatt (1976). While influenced by New Criticism, he left in-depth literary analysis to others who were also beginning to apply their skills to Eliot’s novels quite apart from the biographical research that helped to revive her reputation.¹⁵

Among the specific prejudices of Haight's account that persist in later biographies and therefore need to be redressed are his assumptions that Eliot's mother was neglectful and irrelevant to her daughter's life and writing; that Eliot was morbidly insecure and needed Lewes's protection; that Agnes Lewes was a promiscuous breeder and also unimportant to Eliot's life and writing; his related unsubstantiated assertion that Lewes was unable to divorce because of his generosity (rather than his own adultery); his lack of interest in Eliot's knowledge of complex sexualities; his impression that her letters were "not planned and composed with care" (xli); and his belief that she married Cross out of a conservative desire to be married, rather than for his financial management and biographical skills (xliv). I plan to reexamine these aspects of Haight's master narrative as taken up by later biographers and critics.

In *Middlemarch*, Mrs Bulstrode mistakenly believes that "her husband was one of those men whose memoirs should be written when he died" (326; ch. 36). The narrator uses this touchstone of greatness ironically to show her quiet heroine's illusory opinion of her husband, who is no better than an ordinary sinner. The tragedy of Harriet Vincy Bulstrode's life is her disillusionment with her husband and the shame she is bound by marriage and honor to share with him. George Eliot's memoirs were written when she died, and her story has been rewritten almost countless times. In the chapters that follow, I will attempt to say some new things about the history of the writer whose life Basil Willey called a "graph" of the changes that marked the Victorian era (*GEL* 1:xlii). I will attempt to situate that life in relation to the historical changes that transformed the realist novel and "prepared" the future of English literature.

Notes

1. In fact, in *Identifying the Remains*, Collins argues that her contemporary readers knew very little about her life and certainly much less than we now know. Her Victorian readers experienced "a persistent uncertainty over who she was and what she believed" (4).
2. On the development of the genre in the nineteenth century, see Benton, *Literary Biography*.
3. On the forms of Victorian biographies, as well as the literature about them, see Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered*.
4. See Epstein, *Contesting the Subject*. On the emergence of the novel and biography, see McKeon in that volume. Nadel notes that the heyday of psychoanalytic biographies was 1920–35. On biographic form, see also Nadel, *Biography*, and Rose, "Fact and Fiction in Biography."
5. During this period, important biographies continued to be written. See Benton, *Literary Biography*, as well as Ellmann, *Golden Codgers* and Edel, "The Poetics of Biography."
6. Feminist literary criticism, while doing away with evaluative criticism, actually revived biography as part of its recovery of neglected women writers (Booth; O'Brian).
7. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1967) and Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" (1969).

8. In *The Return of the Author* (1981; trans. 1996), Eugen Simion traces Barthes's hostility to biography back to Proust's objections to Sainte-Beuve (an author whose work Eliot knew well). I am suggesting that we find the origins of this anti-biographical impulse in Eliot's own comments.
9. See Epstein, *Contesting the Subject* and Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography*. As post-structuralism informed the discipline of history, historians also took new, discursive approaches to biography. For an example of such a biography relevant to the context of Eliot's life, see Kali Israel, *Names and Stories*.
10. See Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* and Nadel, *Biography*.
11. On Eliot's novels in relation to contemporary Victorian biographies, see Atkinson 41–3.
12. The introduction to the New Riverside edition of *The Mill on the Floss* (2004) attempts to complicate the idea of the novel as autobiographical and of Maggie as a young Mary Ann Evans.
13. See Knoepflemacher, "Fusing Fact and Myth"; McCormack, *English Travels*; Newton, *Modernising George Eliot*; and Henry, "The Romola Code." Such studies identify a proto-modernist self-consciousness and playfulness in Eliot's fictionalizing of history and real life. In *George Eliot's Intellectual Life*, Fleishman argues against readings that see modernist or even postmodernist elements in Eliot's writing.
14. For other helpful summaries of past biographies, see Handley, *Guide* and Margaret Harris's entry on Biographies in the *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*.
15. An example is the work of Barbara Hardy (1959). It is interesting to note that in the twenty-first century, Hardy turned to a biography of George Eliot, calling it "A Critic's Biography."