

'About marriages one can only rejoice with trembling.'

George Eliot to Benjamin Jowett, 14
April 1875

Preface

There is something dazzling about marriage — that leap into the open-endedness of another human being. It is difficult to look directly at it, difficult to think that thought. A philosopher usually swoops on such things like a magpie: *Look!* a shifting, shimmering *question*, all indeterminacy and iridescence. Don't you just want to snatch it up, take it home, and sit on it for a long time?

Yet marriage is rarely treated as a philosophical question. Perhaps domestic life, traditionally a feminine domain, has seemed too trivial a subject for deep thinking. When I studied philosophy at university, most of the authors I read were unmarried men: Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein. Did they regard marriage as a hindrance to the serious work of philosophy, rather than a spur to thought? My friends and I were constantly analysing relationships — our own and other people's. We sat up late contemplating our parents' happy and unhappy marriages, and asked ourselves if we would ever get married. I loved the idea of choosing my own family — but how would I know I was making the right choice?

Beneath its conventional surface, marriage simmers with tensions between self and other, body and soul, passion and restraint, the poetry of romantic love and the prose of domestic routine. Each day our partners watch us cross the precarious bridge between our intimate and our social selves. Somehow we are supposed to make a happy home in these fraught, ambiguous double binds. For better or worse, the answers we find to our marriage questions — whether to marry, whom to marry, how to live in a marriage, whether to remain married — are often close to the heart of our life's meaning. Over centuries these questions have shaped religious, political and social histories. Of course, in such a culture choosing to be or become single is as significant as choosing to marry — just look at Kierkegaard, whose broken engagement was not just a personal drama but the catalyst for existentialism. As soon as we begin to reflect on marriage we stumble across great philosophical themes: desire, freedom, selfhood, change, morality, happiness, belief, the mystery of other minds.

In the middle years of the nineteenth century Marian Evans found her calling when she transformed herself into George Eliot — an author celebrated for her ‘genius’ as soon as she published her debut novel. During those years she also became a wife. Bruised by a series of messy romantic involvements, she had met the writer George Henry Lewes, whose wife was sleeping with his best friend. After ‘eloping’ to Berlin in 1854 Eliot and Lewes lived together for twenty-four years. They could not be legally married, but she asked people to call her ‘Mrs Lewes’ and dedicated the manuscript of each novel to her ‘Husband’. George Eliot did not appear on my philosophy curriculum, and it was a long time before I discovered that she pursued her marriage question with the tenacity of a great philosopher, as well as the delicacy of a great artist.

Early in her relationship with Lewes she wondered at the ‘great experience’ of marriage — ‘this double life, which helps me to feel and think with double strength’.¹ These words hint at questions that would continue to shape her married life, over the years ahead: ambition, dependence, and the effort to connect thought and feeling which surges through her writing, creating a new philosophical voice. Precisely this combination, and the struggles it entailed, produced the extraordinary works of art — intense, intimate, experimental — that still open our eyes and stretch our souls. George Eliot’s fiction searches the lives of ordinary people to uncover truths we can recognize as our own, truths at once intellectual and emotional. Her literary achievement was so immense that her successors felt bound to break the form of the novel in order to move beyond her.

Eliot’s leap into life with Lewes was a crisis from which she never recovered, though she grew immeasurably within it. Their union was unconsecrated, outside the law: by daring to call it a marriage she was prising the concept from the grip of Church and State. To nearly all her contemporaries the relationship was a scandal, and for years she was socially ostracized. At the same time, her marriage helped her to become George Eliot. Lewes urged her to begin writing fiction, and gave constant encouragement as she laboured, full of self-doubt, over her work. He acted as her agent, publicist and secretary. For more than two decades ‘Mrs Lewes’ was a role she lived day to day — yet this name was a fiction: the woman she could not be. ‘George Eliot’, too, was an invented self, a male author who was entitled to be a serious thinker as well as a popular novelist.

Eliot belonged to a generation bereft of the old religious certainties. ‘All around us, the intellectual lightships had broken from their moorings,’² wrote J. A. Froude, an historian whose early career coincided with hers. Future

generations would ‘never know what it was to find the lights all drifting, the compasses all awry, and nothing left to steer by except the stars.’ In 1851 newly-wed Matthew Arnold wondered if marital fidelity was now the only kind of faith and truth to hope for: ‘Ah love, let us be true / To one another!’ Eliot shared this sense of spiritual search, and likewise turned to long-term love for an anchor in a shifting, spinning modern world. Yet she experienced marriage quite differently from male acquaintances such as Froude, Arnold, and other eminent Victorians. From her youth to her last years she wrestled with what her generation called the Woman Question: how should a woman live in a patriarchal world? In Eliot’s writing as well as in her public and private lives, the Woman Question became inseparable from the marriage question. She lived these questions, often painfully, caught in the tension between her longing for approval and her refusal to compromise.

‘I don’t consider myself as a teacher, but a companion in the struggle of thought,’ Eliot wrote to a friend in 1875, as she worked on her last novel. Writing fiction, she found creative ways to address deep questions: rather than personifying ideas or telling didactic stories, she philosophized through her art. Her willingness to think in the medium of human relations and emotions, and to carry out that thinking in images, symbols and archetypes, expands the canonical view of philosophy that is embedded in universities — institutions that systematically excluded women until the twentieth century. Eliot once reflected that her friend Herbert Spencer, a prominent Victorian philosopher, had an ‘inadequate endowment of emotion’³ which made him ‘as good as dead’ to large swathes of human experience, thereby weakening his arguments and theories. She might as well have been talking about philosophy itself. Her own philosophical style is compassionate, subversive, seasoned with humour, and enriched by an attentiveness in which fleeting moments — a glance, a touch, a flush of feeling — become significant.

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Marriage is made of these intimate and ephemeral moments, yet it also has epic proportions. It stretches out through time, into the future, growing and changing: that is why George Eliot had to write grand novels such as *Middlemarch* to bring it into view. Like a plant, a long-term relationship has its phases of development, its cycles, its seasons, its changing weather. Under adverse conditions, it might wither and die; it might come close to death and then revive. When we imagine a marriage like this, we think about how it is connected with other living things — other people, other relationships — and rooted in an ecosystem. Victorian

philosophers learned to call this ecosystem a ‘milieu’ or ‘environment’. We could also call it a world: a mixture of natural, social and cultural conditions.

Getting together with another person means stepping into their world: their family, friendships, culture, career path, ambitions; the places they know and the possibilities they contemplate; their taste and style and habits. Being in a marriage — legal or otherwise — means living in a shared world. We might even say that the marriage *is* this shared world: again, something that grows and changes.

When Marian Evans met George Lewes in 1853, their worlds already overlapped. They moved in the same circles in London’s literary scene. They had read many of the same books, immersed themselves in intellectual currents that were shaping their century — Spinoza’s philosophy, Carlyle’s histories and satires, Romantic literature. But when their worlds merged, a shared world began to grow.

The effort to understand growth was, in fact, at the heart of this world. Seized by the idea of development, the nineteenth century generated theories of progress and evolution which transformed the way people thought about nature, history, and themselves. From their study of Goethe, Marian and Lewes learned to see growth as a question at once scientific, philosophical and artistic. When they met Lewes was working on his biography of Goethe, and he finished it during their first year together. It was due to Goethe’s legacy, he explained, that ‘we are now all bent on tracing the phases of development. To understand the *grown* we try to follow the *growth*.’⁴

Goethe’s first scientific work was a little treatise titled *The Metamorphosis of Plants*. Echoing Spinoza, Goethe saw matter and spirit, body and soul, as the ‘twin ingredients of the universe’. A plant, he argued, is not merely a physical thing. It is an archetype, an idea: a fluid pattern and rhythm of growth, expressed in visible form — root, stem, leaf, flower, fruit. George Eliot would carry Goethe’s obsession with form and flux into her fiction, through her inquiry into the ‘process and unfolding’ of human character,⁵ and her increasingly daring experiments in literary form.

If we take a plant as our metaphor for marriage, this must be the plant as Goethe envisaged it: essentially in process, simultaneously ideal and real, symbolic and particular, inward and expressive. What I am calling ‘the marriage question’ should also be thought of as a living, growing thing, frequently branching in new directions, always rooted in and reaching out to a world. Eliot’s marriage question was entangled with meanings of marriage expressed in customs, laws, works of art. It cannot be summed up in a sentence or a paragraph

because it stretched through her whole lifetime. It shaped her sense of self, coloured her emotional experience, and continually found expression in her writing.

In pursuit of George Eliot's marriage question this book will move between biography, philosophy, literary interpretation, and histories of art and religion. It begins with a choice, a momentous day, and a honeymoon; it ends with death, mourning, and another choice.

Within this arc, its structure is thematic as well as chronological. Reading Eliot's works as she wrote them, we will see her wrestling, in life as in art, with themes that belong to a philosophy of marriage: sanctity and morality, vocation and voice, passion and sacrifice, motherhood and creativity, trust and disillusion, success and failure, destiny and chance, love and loss — and also the nature of philosophy itself.

With its desire to understand human relationships and feelings, its interest in the form and flux of a life, biography offers another means to expand philosophy into the territory Eliot herself cleared and claimed. By showing how Eliot's thought grew, biography becomes a medium for philosophical inquiry.

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Though Eliot and Lewes socialized with many eminent intellectuals and artists during their later years together, the core of their double life was what she called a 'shared solitude'. Perhaps this description fits all marriages, though of course the experience of solitude can range from blissfully contented to desperately lonely. If marriage is a shared subjectivity, then its truth can only be known from the inside. This inwardness belongs to the sanctity of marriage; it is one of the things betrayed when a marriage is violated.

Phyllis Rose's 1983 book *Parallel Lives* peered inside the marriages of five Victorian writers — Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, John Stuart Mill, Charles Dickens and George Eliot — and concluded that Eliot and Lewes had by far the happiest relationship. Was it simply a coincidence that they were the only couple not legally married, and that in this instance the wife was more famous than her astonishingly supportive husband? Or did these exceptional conditions make their partnership freer, less compromised, more authentic? Eliot's story of marital success seemed the perfect match for Rose's second-wave feminism. And it is still seductive: we want to watch Eliot flouting convention and having it all — work, love, wealth, fame, even (by a certain definition) motherhood.

Other biographers have tended to share this positive assessment of George Eliot's unconventional marriage. But as I read her letters and reread her fiction, I

feel more and more curious about the image of ‘perfect love’ that both Eliot and Lewes cultivated — at least in part, surely, to prove their critics wrong. How does this defiantly idealized public image connect to the very dark marital interiors portrayed in the novels, with their recurring scenes of ambivalence, brutality and disappointment? Do these scenes retaliate against the moralism that condemned their author, by smashing the façade of respectable marriage? Or do they transmit inward experiences that Eliot knew first-hand? And how did a woman who once declared that she liked ‘to feel free’⁶ find life with a husband who kept her ‘in a mental greenhouse’, as the Scottish writer Margaret Oliphant once put it? Mrs Oliphant, a widow who churned out dozens of novels, biographies and histories to support her three children, rather envied Eliot’s rarified literary life — but greenhouses can be oppressive as well as nurturing, and are not built for human habitation.

If there were moments when Eliot’s marriage stifled or disappointed her, would she have admitted it? The narrator of *Middlemarch* suggests that it is ‘not a bad thing’ for wives and husbands to hide their domestic suffering. Our pride demands this, he explains — as if unhappiness were a failure — and Eliot was certainly proud. ‘We mortals, men and women, devour many a disappointment between breakfast and dinner-time; keep back the tears and look a little pale about the lips, and in answer to inquiries say, “Oh, nothing!” Pride helps us; and pride is not a bad thing when it only urges us to hide our own hurts — not to hurt others.’ *Daniel Deronda*’s proud young wife Gwendolen Grandcourt believes that revealing her ‘disappointment’ and ‘sorrow’ will bring ‘nothing but a humiliation which would have been vinegar to her wounds’. I am not suggesting that Mrs Lewes was secretly as miserable as Mrs Casaubon, or abused like Mrs Grandcourt, but she might have tasted some of their feelings. At least we might wonder how many tears, how many compromises, how many days of depression and despair a happy marriage can absorb, before its happiness is called into question.

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It is often said, echoing Plato and Aristotle, that philosophy begins with wonder. Thinking about other people’s relationships tends to begin with wonder, and stay there. The world is full of couples, like it is full of houses: we are surrounded by these everyday mysteries, but we hardly ever get to go inside. Maybe a lighted window now and then lets us glance into the interior of a shared life; we might see a kitchen or a living room, very rarely a bedroom. In our own house, when we were children, we never saw what happened after bedtime when the grown-

ups were alone. We didn't know what they felt when they touched each other — or when they found themselves far apart.

Some of Eliot's biographers have speculated about her sex life with Lewes, but we know almost nothing about it. One fourth-hand source has her saying something about birth control and sexual satisfaction⁷ — it is not clear whose — early in their relationship; twenty-two years later a close friend saw Lewes seize her hand and kiss it. Eliot seems to have possessed a certain sexual power, particularly over younger women, though it is impossible to say how deliberately she wielded this power, or how it made her feel. Much more certain is the interest in sexuality — its many modes, its fluctuations, its hidden depths, its complexity — that is indirectly yet unmistakably expressed in George Eliot's writing. Of course, this does not tell us what Eliot herself experienced. It tells us what she thought about, where her imagination could go.

The letters exchanged between Eliot and Lewes were buried with them in Highgate Cemetery. Although this puts the intimate details of their relationship beyond our reach, it is itself revealing. It suggests a deep commitment to the privacy of their marriage, which they nevertheless performed for friends and acquaintances — and increasingly, as George Eliot's fame grew, for posterity. We might be tempted to think that if we dug up those buried letters we could prise open the black box that recorded the inner workings of their shared life. And it is true that most marriages do contain secrets, which may or may not one day come to light. But they also contain questions, ambiguities, grey areas: zones of conflict and confusion that even the partners themselves struggle to understand, let alone resolve.

For example: how do you tell the difference between protectiveness and control, between love and selfishness, between loyalty and submission? Who has compromised more, sacrificed more, suffered more? Who has the most power? Marriages, like people, are not entirely transparent to themselves, and answers to these questions are perhaps more often decided than discovered.

I think that by a combination of close reading and empathy, and also a little imagination, we can lay our hand on Eliot's marriage questions. We might already inhabit some of them ourselves. If being 'Victorian' now seems synonymous with conventional marriage and its corseted moral codes, it may be surprising to discover that a novelist as solidly Victorian as George Eliot brings new elasticity to the concept of marriage. Many of the themes she explores in her art — desire, dependence, trust, violence, sanctity — could be transferred to wider, less traditional ideas of married life.⁸ In this way, Eliot can be our

‘companion in the struggle of thought’ even when this struggle encounters possibilities which she did not inhabit or imagine.

More biographically, too, Eliot’s unusual circumstances brought her closer to a modern experience of marriage. She was involved with several men before settling down with a long-term partner in her mid-thirties. She chose not to have children, and navigated relationships with Lewes’s sons. Within a few years of her married life she was earning much more than her husband. Living at once inside marriage and outside its conventions, she could experience this form of life — so familiar yet also so perplexing — from both sides. A successful marriage was never, for this woman, an easy lapse into social conformity, but a precarious balancing act — and people were watching to see if she would fall.

Last Words

Why are we so intensely curious about other people's relationships? Does the hope of uncovering their secrets lure us because this might unlock the mystery of our own attachments — so close, so familiar, yet riddled with depths and intricacies that resist our comprehension?

Curiosity, the desire to know, is a philosophical passion, and can be awakened by the sheer contingency of marriage. What if I had never met my partner, or if the timing had been even slightly different? Each life contains so many moments of encounter — seeds light enough to be lifted by a breeze, yet potentially a great love, a lifelong partnership, a profound tenet of faith. These seeds are scattered daily, tiny tokens of the baffling coincidence of destiny and chance that seems to make us who we are. How does one of them become the root of a double life, the origin of an entire world? And then — does living in this world with me make my partner more or less happy than he or she might have been, in some other possible world?

Eliot's life, as well as her art, has taught me that when philosophy directs its desire to such questions, its habitual modes of rationalism and empiricism will not do. Marriage resists these lines of inquiry not because we have failed to think clearly or to gather sufficient evidence, but because of the complexity and aliveness of the human heart. Certain things seem inclined to hide in the heart's darker reaches, and perhaps some of them should remain hidden there. It is this element of mystery that makes it feel right to speak of marriage as an initiation and a sacrament, even outside a religious context.

On this uncertain terrain we have to find a different path, pursue some other kind of wisdom that yields both less and more than explanation. This is partly a matter of uncovering emotional truth. It also means inhabiting our own mystery, living our questions as they arise and change, contending with life's 'imagined otherwise' — the happiness or fulfilment that might have been if we had chosen to be single, or chosen someone else, or stayed with an ex-partner, or avoided the wrong turns we made in our relationships, whether those were awful betrayals or simply careless words. When we are lucky in love, thinking about

how things might be otherwise makes way for gratitude, not regret: where would I be without you?

All this is a work of imagination — even a work of art — which must marry thought and feeling, as Eliot marries them in her fiction. I say ‘marry’ because it is a daily work. Elated during her honeymoon in Weimar, Eliot pictured a ‘lovely rainbow’ that could ‘blend all the hues of thought and feeling’, which sounds so easy and spontaneous — but usually it is more difficult than this, especially for philosophers. Herbert Spencer, for example, seemed to take refuge from perplexing emotions in intellectual work, while Spinoza was determined to explain the nuances of human feeling with geometrical precision. Though their achievements were impressive, it may be even harder to learn to think feelingly, to feel thoughtfully. At the end of *Middlemarch*, Celia is naturally curious about her sister’s relationship with Ladislaw — ‘I cannot think how it all came about.’ And Dorothea cannot explain it: ‘you would have to feel with me, else you would never know.’ These words — the last words we hear between the sisters — are also George Eliot’s message to her readers. Even in her sixth decade she saw herself not as a teacher, but as ‘a companion in the struggle for thought’.

Eliot understood that emotional truths are more layered than linear, with deep interior dimensions. These truths provoke political questions, spiritual questions, cosmic questions. Intense, subtle, tender, they must be handled with great care. This is what is so exciting about Eliot’s philosophy. She searched for truths not in order to form crisp definitions or moral judgements, but to make space for souls to grow, to stay curious, to feel alive.

Nevertheless, the urge to judge keeps pulling us back, and that is something to be curious about too. Beneath the superficial pleasure of gossip and the fleeting sensations of power felt in passing judgement on another person, lies some grasp of the moral stakes of marriage. These stakes are so high precisely because they concern the growth of our souls. It can be quite literally a matter of life and death, as Janet, Maggie, Romola, Dorothea, Lydgate and Gwendolen all discover.

In some religious traditions there is a belief that at the end of their life each person is judged by God, and rewarded or punished accordingly. This can sound like a threat, but perhaps it is good to believe that judgement must be withheld until a life is whole, and that only an omniscient being is able to judge truly. If we imagine how much God would see of a single life — every thought, every feeling, every experience, every word that is heard and spoken — it becomes clear that our own judgements are based on very partial knowledge of a tiny fraction of another person’s life. God would examine how a life is entwined with the lives growing around it. He would look at the whole milieu that formed it,

and at tangled roots reaching deep underground. His judgement would not be cluttered and confused, as ours is, by a strange mixture of ideas about how human beings are supposed to behave.

In the days after Eliot died, a handful of men representing the Church of England pronounced their verdict on her life. Cross did his best to persuade them to bury her in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, as she had wished, but they decided that the author of *Middlemarch* did not belong there. They cited her 'notorious antagonism to Christian practice in regard to marriage'.¹ At some point their Church had ceased to be a refuge for sinners and become a palace of propriety — and Eliot's late Anglican marriage was not enough to gain entry to it.

'She cannot eat her cake and have it too,' opined Thomas Huxley, one of the Victorian luminaries who refused to support Cross's efforts to have his wife buried in the Abbey. This implies that Eliot had reaped rewards from her scandalous relationship with Lewes, and could not expect to reap the rewards of respectability as well. Of course, her marriage to Lewes was extremely rewarding, but not because it was unconventional: if the new Divorce Act had been passed ten years earlier, or if Agnes had died in one of her many childbirths, Lewes might have been her legal husband *and* helped her to become George Eliot. She had suffered rather than benefited from the scandal of her life with Lewes. So Huxley's remark was not logical — nor was it fair, considering that Dickens had been deemed acceptable. But it expressed something more emotive, more visceral. George Eliot was greedy, she wanted too much, and this was not how a woman was supposed to be. Though her heart railed against it, Eliot probably shared this belief: from her youth to her last years she felt ashamed of her ambition.

She was buried in the unconsecrated part of Highgate Cemetery, next to Lewes's grave. This now strikes many of her readers as romantic, though it was not what she had hoped for. The large obelisk above the grave seems to have been chosen, presumably by Cross, to make up for its obscure location. It bears two of her names, George Eliot and Mary Ann Cross, while hidden below ground are all those words written to, from and about Lewes. Her grave is not alongside his but touches it obliquely, reminding us that she had not planned to be buried here. It is a plot both suitable and unsuitable for George Eliot: an appropriately ambiguous resting place.



[52](#). The graves of George Eliot (above, centre), and G. H. Lewes (below, centre), Highgate Cemetery

In 1980, one hundred years after her death, George Eliot was finally admitted to Westminster Abbey. A stone was laid for her in Poets' ² Corner, squeezed between memorials to Dylan Thomas and W. H. Auden. Here she is remembered as Mary Ann Evans, as well as George Eliot — a choice of names that represents a greater portion of her sixty-one years while setting aside both her marriages.

The Church of England's change of heart about receiving George Eliot testifies to its own larger tolerance, and to history's confirmation of her literary greatness. Did it also reflect changed perceptions of marriage? Perhaps not. The Church was — and is — still insisting that only one shape of love, between a man and a woman, can be sanctified as marriage. Its doctrines had certainly become less influential within wider culture, but here too the marriage ideal was thriving, despite the radical politics of the sixties and seventies. In the summer of 1981, one year after George Eliot was honoured in Westminster Abbey, 750 million people watched as Diana Spencer married Prince Charles in St Paul's Cathedral. There is something of Gwendolen Harleth in Diana — a statuesque English goddess, for ever young, mythical and archetypal as well as ordinary, at

once tragic and triumphant, compelling yet helpless, secretly desperate in her fine clothes, destined to be trapped in a pathologically English marriage.

I was four years old that summer. Any memories of the wedding day are submerged by photographs and replayed TV footage: my generation grew up with the image of Diana's ivory silk dress, and that flock of enviable blonde bridesmaids dressed as miniature brides. The princess's own marriage fantasy had survived her parents' bitter divorce, in which her mother lost custody of her children. Shy Diana in navy eyeliner and a high-collared blouse, showing off her sapphire engagement ring; demure Diana on the edge of a polo field, watching her prince gallop around — she still rises effortlessly to mind. She was the chosen one. And that is the essence of the fairy tale: to be chosen as a wife. Many of us watched this fantasy darken as our parents divorced, and as Diana lived out her fate; yet it stayed strong, and seems to keep recurring. Just recently I was teaching a small third-year philosophy class and one of my students mentioned that she had got married that weekend. As we questioned her excitedly — did she wear a white dress, had she taken her husband's name, did their relationship feel different now? — I noticed another student wiping tears from her eyes. They were not unhappy tears. Her mother, she said, had also married young.

I think this is something to be conscious of as we make our own judgements about George Eliot — how we ourselves have inhabited the marriage questions we grew up with, how difficult it is to think them through while we are tangled up inside them. Having searched for the meaning of Eliot's life, I am struck — sometimes overwhelmed — by how complex and ambiguous it was. Are all human lives like this, if you look at them closely enough? For her, at least, life was complicated by a marriage question weighted by family expectations and cultural norms, bound up with ideas of success, and inseparable from a woman's self-image. This made it difficult for her to speak truthfully about marriage, even to her closest friends.

And the stakes of Eliot's marriages were especially high. Neither of these relationships could fail. With Lewes, ever-growing happiness and perfect love were the only way to justify her decision to break the rules of propriety. By the time she married Cross, she was — partly through Lewes's efforts — a celebrity and a sage, propped on a pedestal and expected to 'vent wisdom',³ as she once remarked gloomily. Cross seemed stunned by their marriage, dazzled by the radiance of its ideal. 'It is almost too great happiness to have got the best,' he wrote in the first week of their honeymoon, struggling to make sense of his anxiety. 'The great object of my life now will be to justify her trust and to fulfil worthily the high calling which I have undertaken.'

I will not try to weigh up these shared lives according to some scale of good and bad, right and wrong. The questions and contradictions and mysteries of Eliot's life, along with her faults and mistakes, have been laid out in these pages. We have noticed her moments of ruthlessness and duplicity, as well as her immense fortitude. At times we might have wished she was a better friend, and a better feminist — more supportive of women's suffrage, for example, or as generous in donating to Girton College as in endowing a studentship in Lewes's name. We may have felt disappointed to find that when this brave, brilliant woman was finally, properly married, she represented this as being chosen rather than as choosing. But we should remember that women, just as much as men, censured and shunned her when she settled down with Lewes. On the question of choice, Eliot's biographer Rosemarie Bodenheimer seems right to see her decision to be with Lewes as a traumatic experience, severing her from friends and family, permanently wounding her intense pride, and losing the respected place in the world she had earned as editor of the *Westminster Review*. It is no wonder she shrank from choosing again — or at least from being seen to choose.

Near the end of her life she told Charles Lewes that she could not have written her books if she 'hadn't been human with feelings and failings like other people'.⁴ Cherishing those books while expecting her heart to be purer than my own, her decisions tidier and less ambiguous, would be like trying to have my cake and eat it too.

Something else that strikes me, reflecting on George Eliot's marriage question, is the quality of devotion that cuts through all this complexity. Devotion is not a passing feeling. It is attention given, work done, tasks shared, disappointments borne, anger endured, quarrels forgiven, loss grieved. Lewes was devoted to George Eliot with a vigour and stamina that seem remarkable. He was steadfastly cheerful through her recurrent depressions, relentlessly encouraging through her self-doubt. 'The secret of his loveliness,' Edith Simcox wrote of Lewes, 'was that he was happy in being kind.' As we know, he was not a religious man, but putting her work before his own — answering her letters to give her time to write, poring over reviews of her books — became a daily practice of devotion.

John Cross, similarly, gave her years of practical service, before their marriage as well as during it. His three-volume 'autobiography' of George Eliot occupied him for four years after her death. It was a great devotional labour: interviewing people who knew her, reading all those letters, cutting bits out — editing his wife as he imagined she would have wished. Few things seem less romantic than compiling an index, but in Cross's case even this became a work of love. Ironically, his biography would be much maligned for making George

Eliot *too* respectable — in a new century, with new values, this pious portrait damaged her reputation instead of redeeming it.

I hesitate to insist that Eliot was as devoted to her husbands as they were to her: this question is difficult to judge. I think she loved Lewes through his bursts of temper, his showing off, his strenuous efforts to stay in control. She supported him financially as he pursued his scientific work. She also supported several members of his family, including his wife, for many years; her payments to Agnes continued after Lewes's death. Much of her penultimate year was spent finishing his last book. She accompanied Cross through his devastating mental breakdown. It is devotion to her art, however, that shines most constantly through the pages of her diaries and letters.

Cross concludes his *Life of George Eliot* by expressing faith in that art: 'The place that may belong to her in the minds and in the hearts of future generations will be finally adjudged on the merits of her works. We who write and we who read to-day will never know that final verdict, but I think that those of us who loved her may trust to it with confidence.'⁵ These are touching and generous last words. Finally reaching the end of his self-effacing task, her husband thought it important to say that George Eliot had not belonged only to him. She was loved by different people, and in different ways. Cross knew that 'those of us who loved her' included not just Lewes, but also the women who 'loved her lover-wise' — Edith Simcox, Maria Congreve, perhaps Sara Hennell — and other close friends.

It was something of a Victorian custom for widows to write biographies of their eminent husbands. Perhaps a biographer's devotion is a little like the devotion of a spouse. Writing a person's life means living with them intimately, struggling to understand them, wondering how far they can be trusted, dealing with the ways they resist, annoy, disappoint, challenge and elude you. It means staying with them for their whole life, if not for your own — though such a close encounter with another person is bound to leave you changed, even as you move on.