A NEW PORTRAIT OF GEORGE ELIOT?

PAUL GOLDMAN

For an author who was at once both lionized in some quarters, and despised in others, it is remarkable that descriptions of George Eliot's appearance are so much at variance. On one hand is the unkind, but memorable yet still unattributed line, 'Have you seen a horse, sir? Then you have seen George Eliot!' In contrast are the words of John Fiske, an American admirer, who wrote to his wife, 'She is much better looking than George Sand... her features are regular, her nose is very good, her eyes are a rich blue and very expressive, her mouth is very large, but it is pleasant in expression. Her hair is light and profuse and she wears a lovely lace cap over it...'

Probably both these descriptions are inaccurate; the former for its overstated harshness, and the latter on account of its almost total lack of critical balance. It is valuable to note, however, that when Fiske wrote, George Eliot was fifty-four years old.

It is equally remarkable that comparatively, so few drawn or painted portraits are now widely accepted as being genuine. There are indeed some photographs, an early silhouette as well as Caroline Bray's watercolour of 1842 (both in the National Portrait Gallery), and a handful of slight sketches such as that by L. C. Dickinson of 1880 (NPG). Not to be forgotten either is Burton's preparatory sketch for the National Portrait Gallery picture, purchased in 1972 by the Princeton University Library, or the Samuel Laurence drawing (British Museum) which is itself a controversial work. However, the total number of authentic portraits of the novelist remains pitifully small.

It was, therefore, with both excitement and a measure of trepidation that the present drawing (fig. 1) was exhibited as a 'possible' portrait in the British Library Exhibition (December 1980-May 1981) which was held to mark the centenary of George Eliot's death. The drawing came to light in the Department of Prints and Drawings of the British Museum only a short time before the exhibition was due to open, and hence it was not possible to undertake lengthy research into the attribution before it was put on display.

The drawing, in coloured chalks, is the work of Sir Frederic Burton (1816-1900) whose larger portrait of 1865 (fig. 2) adorns many of the covers of editions of Eliot's works. However, it bears virtually no resemblance to that heavy-lidded and mournful countenance. In contrast, it shows a bust of almost Grecian magnificence, redolent with a strength of purpose and a determination heightened by the eyes, which are
Fig. 1. Drawing in coloured chalks by Sir Frederic Burton, datable 1864-5. British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings (1905-10-19-9)
Fig. 2. George Eliot. Chalks, by Sir Frederic Burton, 1865 (By courtesy of The National Portrait Gallery)
piercing and a brilliant blue: if the portrait is of George Eliot, then even its most enthusiastic advocate must accept that it is a highly idealized and artistically somewhat free conception. It is even more unlike the other equally well-known portrait in the possession of Girton College, Cambridge (fig. 3). In this study by Samuel Laurence (1812–84) for a portrait of 1860, the equine features are most pronounced. On the evidence of these portraits any claim for the authenticity of the British Museum drawing should perhaps be immediately discounted. However, one other portrait exists which is generally accepted and yet is less famous than the other two. It is the small oil painting by François d’Albert-Durade (1804–86) executed in 1850, when George Eliot was still Marian Evans and aged only thirty-one (fig. 4). It shows a not unlovely face, with bright blue eyes and a lock of hair falling over the temple in a manner close to the drawing in question. In addition, the head is held in a way which is virtually identical. Thus two accepted drawings seriously damage the case for the newly discovered drawing’s authenticity while one painting assists, not a little, the case for the defence. It should be remembered that the British Museum sheet is datable only some fourteen or fifteen years after Durade’s picture. George Eliot would have been no older than forty-six.

‘She [George Eliot] gave the first sitting [to Burton] on 29 June. There must have been several studies before one was achieved that satisfied the artist, the subject and her friends.’ It is possible that the British Museum drawing was done at one of these sittings and probably rejected by the sitter and perhaps disposed of after the artist’s death at his studio sale. Unfortunately, the drawing cannot be identified from the sale catalogue (Christie’s, 21 June 1901).

There is no question of attempting to suggest that the present drawing is an accurate representation in terms of strict physiognomy. However, it could be a highly idealized and a romanticized impression of a great writer and a supreme intellect. If George Eliot had approved of it, might it not hang in the National Portrait Gallery today?

The drawing was purchased for the British Museum by the distinguished Keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings, Sir Sidney Colvin. He was also a gifted literary critic and had written a perspicacious review of Middlemarch in the Fortnightly Review of January 1873 (pp. 142–7). The drawing was bought by Colvin on 18 October 1905, from Mr. Frank Sabin of 118 Shaftesbury Avenue, for the then considerable sum of one hundred pounds. The bill has been retained in the Department and it still bears Colvin’s agreement to purchase, signed in official red ink.

However, Colvin was a man of sixty and perhaps his memory was no longer what it had been. George Eliot had been dead for twenty-five years when he bought the drawing, and in a curious letter, of which only a fragment can now be found, his doubts are revealed. The drawing is reproduced in vol. xxv of The Writings of George Eliot Together with the Life by J. W. Cross, large paper edition, 25 vols. (Boston and New York, 1908), as frontispiece to vol. iii of the Life. Notes on the illustrations include:

Study for a portrait of George Eliot . . . from a painting in the British Museum . . . The following letter from Sir Theodore Martin, K.C.B., sufficiently explains this remarkable portrait:
Fig. 3. George Eliot. Chalks. Study for a portrait by Samuel Laurence, 1860 (By courtesy of Girton College, Cambridge)
Fig. 4. Marian Evans. Oil painting by François d'Albert-Durade, 1850 (By courtesy of The National Portrait Gallery)
Dear Sir,—I have seen the portrait of George Eliot at the British Museum referred to in your letter of the 18th inst. It was shown to me some months ago by Mr Sydney Colvin for the purpose of obtaining my opinion, as I was intimately acquainted both with George Eliot and Sir Frederic Burton whose work it was claimed to be. I have no doubt that the drawing is one of Sir Frederic Burton's sketches which ultimately resulted in the published portrait, now in our National Portrait Gallery. When engaged in the execution of a portrait of importance, Sir Frederic was in the habit of making many studies of the face and head, and the varieties of expression, and I have no doubt he made many in the case of George Eliot, for whom he had a great admiration, before he satisfied himself as to the best treatment of a face that demanded so much subtlety of appreciation. . . But that it is a study of George Eliot I am certain. I am, dear Sir,

Very truly yours

THEODORE MARTIN

If the missing section of the letter could now be found, Martin's suspicions about the drawing could be examined and discussed. Hence the doubts surrounding the portrait increase with Martin's letter rather than diminish, and it should be mentioned that at this date Martin himself was ninety-one years old.

That Colvin knew George Eliot is not in dispute. However, how well he knew her and indeed, more significantly, how well he remembered her after thirty years is crucial. Colvin wrote in his *Memories and Notes of Persons and Places, 1852–1912* (London, 1921), pp. 90–2: 'The Sunday afternoon receptions at the Priory were not always quite free from stiffness . . . Humour in abundance she had, but not of the light, glancing kind: it was a rich, deliberate humour springing from deep sources and corresponding with the general depth and power of her being. The signs of such depth and power were strongly impressed upon her countenance. I have known scarce anyone in life whose looks in their own way more strongly drew and held one.'

In a footnote on page 359 of *The George Eliot Letters*, vol. v: 1869–73 (London and New Haven, 1955), Professor Gordon S. Haight points out that Colvin 'had called at the Priory four or five times a year since 1869' (presumably at least up to January 1873), when George Eliot had written to him about his review (see above). However, 'four or five times a year' hardly equals close friendship—an acquaintanceship would be nearer the mark. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the appearance of George Eliot made a great impression upon Colvin. Colvin's doubts in 1907 were, in my opinion, honest ones made by a man who had gone beyond a period of supreme self-confidence to a maturer state of reflection and uncertainty. There is no evidence that he had any such misgivings when two years previously he had paid so large a sum for the drawing.

The defence rests. Against all the doubts and uncertainties as to the genuineness of the portrait we can place the evidence of the drawing itself, and its closeness to the painting by Durade of 1850. If it is only an idealized study for a hypothetical portrait it is none the less important for that. If nothing else, it adds a welcome new dimension
to further discussion of the iconography of George Eliot. Indeed, in my opinion, it is
worthy of argument and even academic disagreement because it is an outstandingly
beautiful drawing. If any justification is required for its publication there are no better
words than George Eliot's own at the beginning of Daniel Deronda: 'Was she beautiful
or not beautiful?' Indeed, for me, no other portrait mirrors the strength of character
and towering intellect of George Eliot better than this one.

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for his helpful criticism and encouragement.
1 Sir Sidney Colvin, Memories and Notes of Persons
2 Ethel F. Fiske (ed.), The Letters of John Fiske
3 Gordon S. Haight, George Eliot. A Biography