rarely comes through sweet suasion. Social sin requires a hammering down of the door by people who are simultaneously aware that they are unworthy to be so daring.

This is a philosophy of power, a philosophy of power for people who combine extreme conviction with extreme self-skepticism.

CHAPTER 7

LOVE

"HUMAN LIFE, I THINK," GEORGE ELIOT WROTE, "SHOULD BE WELL rooted in some spot of native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of the earth, for the labors men go forth to, for the sounds and accents that haunt it, for whatever will give that early home a familiar unmistakable difference amidst the future widening of knowledge."[1]

Eliot's native spot was in Warwickshire, in the middle of England, a gentle, soft, unremarkable landscape. From her home she could see both the ancient rolling farmland and also the new and grimy coal mines, the economic clash that gave the Victorian era its special intensity. She was born with the name Mary Anne Evans on November 22, 1819.

Her father began as a carpenter but rose through self-discipline and an eye for opportunity and ended up as a very successful land agent. He supervised other people's properties and became moderately rich in the process. She adored him. When she became a novelist, she would use his traits—practical knowledge, unlettered wisdom, a loyal devotion to his work—as the basis for several of her more admirable characters. After he died she kept his wire-rimmed glasses as a reminder of his watchful eyes and his perspective on the world.

Her mother, Christiana, was in ill health through most of Mary Anne's girlhood. She lost twin boys eighteen months after Mary Anne's birth, and she sent her surviving children away to boarding

schools to spare herself the physical effort of raising them. Mary Anne seems to have felt the loss of her mother's affection acutely, responding with what one biographer, Kathryn Hughes, calls "an infuriating mix of attention-seeking and self-punishing behavior."[2] She was, on the surface, a precocious, strong-willed, somewhat awkward girl, more comfortable in the company of adults than with other children, but there was something deeply needy about her.

Hungry for affection and terrified of being abandoned, she turned her attention, as a young girl, to her older brother, Isaac. When he returned on visits from school she followed him about, badgering him with questions about every particular of his life. For a time he returned her love, and they enjoyed "little spots of time," perfect days playing in the grass and streams. But then he grew older, got a pony, and lost interest in the bothersome little girl. She was left weeping and abandoned. This was a pattern—her desperate need for love and some man's exasperated refusal—that would dominate the first thirty years of her life. As her final husband, John Cross, would put it, "In her moral development she showed, from the earliest years, the trait that was most marked in her all through life—namely the absolute need of some one person who should be all in all to her, and to whom she should be all in all."[3]

In 1835 her mother fell ill with breast cancer. Mary Anne, who had been sent away to boarding school at age five to spare her mother's health, was called back at age sixteen to tend to it. There's no record that she suffered any great grief when her mother finally succumbed to the disease, but her formal education was over, and she took over the role of supervising the household, almost as her father's surrogate wife.

In her famous preface to *Middlemarch,* Eliot writes about the crisis of vocation that many young women feel. They experience a great yearning inside, she wrote, a spiritual ardor to devote their energies in some substantial, heroic, and meaningful direction. They are propelled by moral imagination, the urge to do something epic and righteous with their life. These young women, "fed from within," soared after some "illimitable satisfaction, some object which would never justify weariness, which would reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self." And yet Victorian society provided so few avenues for their energy that their "loving heartbeats

and sobs after an unattainable goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed."

Mary Anne was driven by that moral ardor, that spiritual perfectionism. In her late teens and early twenties, she became something of a religious nut. She came of age in a time when society was in great religious tumult. Science was beginning to expose cracks in the Church's description of human creation. The spread of unbelief made morality a problem; many Victorians clung more ferociously to stern moral precepts even as their doubts about the existence of God increased. Among the faithful, there were efforts to make the church more vibrant and more spiritual. John Henry Newman and the Oxford Movement tried to return Anglicanism to its Catholic roots, tried to restore a sense of reverence for tradition and medieval ritual. The evangelicals democratized the faith, creating more charismatic services and emphasizing individual prayer, individual conscience, and each individual's direct relationship with God.

During her teenage years, Mary Anne was caught up in the religious fervor and, in her self-centered immaturity, came to embody many of religion's most priggish and unattractive aspects. Her faith was long on self-admiring renunciation and short on delight or humane sympathy. She gave up reading fiction, believing that a morally serious person should focus on the real world and not imaginary ones. She forswore wine and as manager of her household forced those around her into abstinence as well. She adopted a severe and puritanical mode of dress. Music, which had once been a source of great joy, was now, she decided, permissible only when it accompanied worship. At social events she could be counted on to disapprove of the vulgar humanity and then to fall into fits of weeping. At one party, she wrote a friend, "the oppressive noise that accompanied the dancing" made it impossible for her to "maintain the Protestant character of a True Christian."[4] She developed a headache, slipped into hysterics, and vowed to reject "all invitations of a dubious character."

D. H. Lawrence once wrote, "It was really George Eliot who started it all. It was she who started putting the action inside." In her teenage years, Mary Anne lived melodramatically and narcissistically, full of solitary internal anguish, struggle, and resignation. She was trying to lead a life of martyrdom and surrender. But she was artificially nar-

rowing herself, amputating every humane and tender piece that didn't fit into a rigid frame. Her behavior was filled with affectation, less about being a saint than about getting herself admired for being a saint. There was a painful and ostentatious self-consciousness in her letters from this period, and even in her bad early poetry: "Oh Saint! Oh would that I could claim / The privileg'd, the honored name / And confidently take my stand / Though lowest in a saintly band!" One biographer, Frederick R. Karl, sums up the common view: "Except for her high intelligence, Mary Ann, in 1838, at close to nineteen, sounds intolerable."[5]

Fortunately, her roving mind couldn't be contained for long. She was too intelligent not to be able to observe herself accurately. "I feel that my besetting sin is the one of all others most destroying, as it is the fruitful parent of them all, Ambition, a desire insatiable for the esteem of my fellow creatures," she wrote in a letter. "This seems the center whence all my actions proceed."[6] At some level she understood that her public righteousness was just a play for attention. Furthermore, she was just too curious to stay in a self-imposed mental straitjacket for very long. She was too hungry for knowledge. Her reading could not be contained within narrow banks.

She was still reading biblical commentary, but she was also learning Italian and German, reading Wordsworth and Goethe. Her reading stretched to include the Romantic poets, including Shelley and Byron, whose lives certainly did not conform to the strictures of her faith.

Soon she was reading widely in the sciences, including John Pringle Nichol's *The Phenomena and Order of the Solar System* and Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology,* a book that paved the way for Darwin's account of evolution. Christian writers were rising up to defend the biblical account of creation. She read their books, too, but they backfired with her. They were so unpersuasive in rebutting the findings of the new science that they only served to reinforce Mary Anne's growing doubts.

She was profoundly influenced by a book titled *An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* by Charles Hennell, which she bought in 1841 at the age of twenty-one. Hennell parsed through each of the Gospels, trying to determine what could be established as fact and what was later embellishment. He concluded that there was insufficient evidence to prove that Jesus was divinely born, or that he had performed any miracles, or that he had been resurrected from the dead. Hennell concluded that Jesus was a "noble minded reformer and sage, martyred by crafty priests and brutal soldiers."[7]

For most of this time, Mary Anne had nobody close to her intellectual level with whom she could discuss what she was reading. She invented a word to describe her condition: "non-impartitive." She received information but could not digest it through conversation.

But then she learned that Hennell's youngest sister, Cara, lived nearby. Cara's husband, Charles Bray, was a successful ribbon merchant who had written his own religious tract, "The Philosophy of Necessity." It held that the universe was governed by unchanging rules ordained by God, but that God was not active in the world. It was man's duty to discover these rules and improve the world along their lines. Bray believed people should spend less time praying and more time involved in social reform. The Brays were bright, intellectual, unconventional thinkers who would go on to lead unconventional lives. Though they remained married, Charles fathered six children with their cook, and Cara had a close and possibly sexual friendship with Edward Noel, a relative of Lord Byron, who had three children of his own and an estate in Greece.

Mary Anne was introduced to the Brays by a mutual friend, perhaps in order to bring the Brays back into the fold of orthodox Christianity. If that was her intent, it didn't work. By the time Mary Anne settled into their lives, she herself was already drifting away from the faith. The Brays immediately recognized her as a kindred spirit. She began socializing with them more and more, delighted to have found intellectual peers at last. They did not cause her defection from Christianity, but they catalyzed it.

It was dawning on Mary Anne that her growing disbelief would cause her no end of trouble. It would mean a rupture with her father, the rest of her family, and polite society generally. It would make it very hard for her to find a husband. In the society of her time, agnosticism meant ostracism. But she pushed on bravely toward what her heart and head told her was truth. "I wish to be among the ranks of that glorious crusade that is seeking to set Truth's Holy Sepulcher free from usurped domination," she wrote in a letter to a friend.[8]

As that sentence indicates, Mary Anne was not renouncing the spirit of religion even while she was coming to renounce Christianity.

She discounted Christian teaching, and the divinity of Jesus, but she did not doubt, especially at this age, the existence of God. She rejected Christianity on realist grounds, out of distaste for anything abstract or fantastical. She did it after exhaustive reading, but she did not do it coldly or by the use of dry reason. Rather, she loved life with such an earthy passion that she had trouble accepting the idea that this world was subsidiary to some other world that obeyed different laws. She came to feel she could achieve a state of grace not through surrender but through her own moral choices, by living a virtuous and rigorous life. With this philosophy Mary Anne put a heavy burden on herself, and on her own conduct.

In January 1842, Mary Anne told her father that she would no longer accompany him to church. His response was to withdraw into what one biographer called a cold and sullen rage. Mary Anne was not only defying her father and God, as he saw it; she was also choosing to dishonor her family and to cast it into social disgrace. On the first Sunday after her refusal, Mary Anne's father went to church, but he noted simply and coldly in his diary, "Mary Anne did not go."

The next few weeks were spent in what Mary Anne called a "Holy War." She lived at home at loggerheads with her father. He broke off contact with her but fought back in different ways. He enlisted friends and relatives to come plead with her to attend church, if only on prudence grounds. If she continued on this path, they warned, she would spend her life poor, cast out, isolated. These very plausible predictions had no effect on her. Her father also asked clergy and other knowledgeable scholars to come and persuade her by force of reason that Christianity was the true doctrine. They came, they argued, they were defeated. Mary Anne had already read every book they cited to make their case, and she had her responses.

Finally, her father decided to relocate the family. If Mary Anne was going to make herself unmarriageable, there was no use keeping the big house that had been rented to catch her a husband.

Mary Anne tried to reopen conversation with her father by writing him a letter. First, she made clear why she could no longer be a Christian. She said she regarded the Gospels as "histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction, and while I admire and cherish much of what I believe to have been the moral teaching of Jesus himself, I consider the system of doctrines built upon the facts of his life . . . to be most dishonorable to God and most pernicious in its influence on individual and social happiness."

It would be rank hypocrisy, she told him, to appear to worship in the home of a doctrine she thought pernicious. She wrote that she would like to go on living with her father, but if he wanted her to leave, "I can cheerfully do it if you desire it and shall go with deep gratitude for all the tenderness and rich kindness you have never been tired of showing me. So far from complaining I shall joyfully submit if as a proper punishment for the pain I have most unintentionally given you, you determine to appropriate any provision you may have intended to make for my future support to your other children whom you may consider more deserving."

At the first dawn of her adulthood, Mary Anne was not only renouncing the faith of her family. She was willing to go out into the world without a home, without an inheritance, without a husband, and without prospects. She concluded with a declaration of love: "As a last vindication of herself from one who has no one to speak for her I may be permitted to say that if ever I loved you I do so now, if ever I sought to obey the laws of my Creator and to follow duty wherever it may lead me I have that determination now and the consciousness of this will support me though every being on earth were to frown on me."

This letter, remarkable for a woman so young, shows many of the traits the world would later come to see in George Eliot: an intense intellectual honesty, an arduous desire to live according to the strictures of her conscience, an amazing bravery in the face of social pressure, a desire to strengthen her character by making the necessary hard choices, but also a bit of egotism, a tendency to cast herself as the star of her own melodrama, an intense desire for the love of men even as she puts that love at risk.

After a few months, they compromised. Mary Anne agreed to accompany her father to church, so long as he and everybody else understood that she was not a Christian and a believer in the doctrines of the faith.

It looks like a capitulation, but it wasn't entirely. Mary Anne's father must have realized the cruelty in his rejection of his daughter. He bent. Meanwhile, Mary Anne came to see and regret the thick vein of self-aggrandizement that was running through her protest. She came

to see that she was taking a secret delight in being the center of a town scandal. She regretted the pain she was causing her father.

Moreover, she knew there was something self-indulgent in the way she had taken an uncompromising stance. Within a month she was writing a friend saying that she deplored her "impetuosity both of feeling and judging." Later she said she deeply regretted this collision with her father, which might have been avoided with a little subtlety and management. Yes, she had an obligation to follow her individual conscience, she concluded, but it was her moral duty to mute her own impulses by considering their effect on others and on the social fabric of the community. By the time Mary Anne Evans became the novelist George Eliot, she was an avowed enemy of that kind of stark grandstanding. By middle age, she was a meliorist and a gradualist, believing that people and society were best reformed by slow stretching, not by sudden rupture. She was capable of making brave and radical moves in line with her own convictions, as we shall see, but she also believed in the importance of social niceties and conventions. She believed that society is held together by a million restraints on individual will, which enmesh the individual within a common moral world. When people behave on the basis of uncompromising individual desire, she came to believe, they might set off a selfish contagion in those around them. She cloaked her own radical path in all the trappings of respectability. She became a courageous freethinker with a faith in ritual, habit, and convention. The Holy War with her father was important in teaching her that lesson.

Within a few months, Mary Anne and her father were reconciled. Her admiration for him and moral dependence upon him was expressed in a letter she wrote shortly after his death seven years after the Holy War: "What shall I be without my Father? It will seem as if part of my moral nature were gone. I had a horrid vision of myself last night becoming earthly sensual and devilish for want of that purifying restraining influence."

Neediness

INTELLECTUALLY, MARY ANNE WAS MATURE. THE INTENSIVE READING SHE had done throughout her adolescence produced an impressive depth of knowledge and a capacity for observation and judgment. At the level of the mind, Mary Anne was well on the central journey of her life, the transformation that would take her from a self-absorbed adolescent to an adult whose maturity was measured by an unsurpassed ability to enter into other people's feelings.

Emotionally, though, she was still something of a basket case. By the time she was twenty-two it became a joke in her circle that Mary Anne fell in love with everyone she met. These relationships followed a general pattern. Desperate for affection, she would throw herself at some man, usually a married or otherwise unavailable one. Dazzled by her conversation, he would return her attention. Mistaking his intellectual engagement for romantic love, she would become emotionally embroiled, hoping their love would fill some void in herself. Finally he would reject her or flee, or his wife would force her out of the picture. Mary Anne would be left awash in tears, or crippled by migraines.

Mary Anne's romantic forays might have been successful if she had been conventionally pretty, but as Henry James, then a young and handsome man, reported, she was "magnificently ugly—deliciously hideous." A series of men simply couldn't get around her heavy jaw and plain horselike features, though finer spirits eventually came to see the beauty within. In 1852, an American visitor, Sara Jane Lippincott, described the effect her conversation had on her appearance: "Miss Evans certainly impressed me at first as exceedingly plain, with her aggressive jaw and her evasive blue eyes. Neither nose, nor mouth nor chin were to my liking; but, as she grew interested and earnest in conversation, a great light flashed over or out of her face, till it seemed transfigured, while the sweetness of her rare smile was something quite indescribable."[9]

Men came. Mary Anne fell. Men went. She had an infatuation with a music instructor and with Charles Hennell, the author. She became entangled with a young man named John Sibree who was studying for

the ministry. Sibree didn't return her affection, but after conversations with her, he gave up his clerical career, though he had nothing else to fall back on.

Later she attached herself with disturbing intensity to a married, four-foot-tall, middle-aged artist named François d'Albert Durade. Once, and for about a day, she developed an infatuation with a man who was actually single, but she lost interest in him by the morrow.

Friends would invite Mary Anne to stay in their homes. Before long she'd be involved in some sort of passionate intimacy with the father of the family. Dr. Robert Brabant was a much older, cultivated doctor who gave Mary Anne access to his library and asked her to come live with his family. Before long they were completely entwined. "I am in a little heaven here, Dr. Brabant being its archangel," she wrote in a letter to Cara; "time would fail me to tell of all his charming qualities. We read, walk and talk together, and I am never weary of his company." Before long Dr. Brabant's wife put her foot down. Either Mary Anne would leave the house or she would. Mary Anne had to flee in disgrace.

The oddest imbroglio happened in the home of John Chapman, publisher of the *Westminster Review,* which Mary Anne would eventually write for and edit. Chapman was already living with his wife and a mistress when Mary Anne moved in. Before long the three women were competing for Chapman's affections. As the Eliot biographer Frederick R. Karl puts it, the situation had all the makings of a country house farce, with slammed doors, couples sneaking out for walks, hurt feelings, and tearful, angry scenes. If there was too much calm one day, Chapman would stir the drama by showing a love letter from one woman to one of the others. Eventually the wife and the mistress formed an alliance against Mary Anne. Once again she had to flee amid whispers of scandal.

Biographers generally argue that the absence of maternal love created a hole at the center of Mary Anne's being, which she desperately tried to fill for the rest of her life. But there was also some narcissism here, the love of her own love, the love of her own nobility, of feeling the sweep of one's own passion. She made a drama of herself and indulged in it, enjoying the attention, luxuriating in her own capacity for emotional depth, and savoring the sense of her own epic importance. People who see themselves as the center of their solar system, often get enraptured by their own terrible but also delicious suffering. People who see themselves as a piece of a larger universe and a longer story rarely do.

She would later write, "to be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern, that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely ordered variety of chords of emotion—a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge." Mary Anne had that kind of soul. Feeling and action and thought were the same thing. But she had no person to attach her passion to, and no work to give it discipline and shape.

Agency

IN 1852, AT AGE THIRTY-TWO, MARY ANNE FELL IN LOVE WITH THE PHILOSOpher Herbert Spencer, the only one of the men thus far in her life who was close to her intellectual equal. They went to the theater together and talked constantly. Spencer liked her company but could not overcome his own narcissism and her ugliness. "The lack of physical attraction was fatal," Spencer would write decades later. "Strongly as my judgment prompted, my instincts would not respond."

In July she wrote him a letter that was both pleading and bold. "Those who have known me best have already said that if ever I loved any one thoroughly my whole life must turn upon that feeling, and I find they said truly," she declared. She asked him not to forsake her: "If you become attached to someone else, then I must die, but until then I could gather courage to work and make life valuable, if only I had you near me. I do not ask you to sacrifice anything—I would be very glad and cheerful and never annoy you. . . . You will find that I can be satisfied with very little, if I am delivered from the dread of losing it."

Finally, she added a climactic flourish: "I suppose no woman ever before wrote such a letter as this—but I am not ashamed of it, for I am conscious in the light of reason and true refinement I am worthy of your respect and tenderness, whatever gross men or vulgar-minded women might think of me."[10]

This letter represents a pivotal moment in Eliot's life, with its

mixture of pleading vulnerability and strong assertion. After the years of disjointed neediness, the iron was beginning to enter her soul and she became capable of that declaration of her own dignity. You might say that this moment was Eliot's agency moment, the moment when she began the process by which she would stop being blown about by her voids and begin to live according to her own inner criteria, gradually developing a passionate and steady capacity to initiate action and drive her own life.

The letter didn't solve her problems. Spencer still rejected her. She remained insecure, especially about her writing. But her energies were roused. She exhibited growing cohesion and at times amazing courage.

This agency moment can happen, for many people, surprisingly late in life. Sometimes you see lack of agency among the disadvantaged. Their lives can be so blown about by economic disruption, arbitrary bosses, and general disruption that they lose faith in the idea that input leads to predictable output. You can offer programs to improve their lives, but they may not take full advantage of them because they don't have confidence that they can control their own destinies.

Among the privileged, especially the privileged young, you see people who have been raised to be approval-seeking machines. They may be active, busy, and sleepless, but inside they often feel passive and not in control. Their lives are directed by other people's expectations, external criteria, and definitions of success that don't actually fit them.

Agency is not automatic. It has to be given birth to, with pushing and effort. It's not just the confidence and drive to act. It's having engraved inner criteria to guide action. The agency moment can happen at any age, or never. Eliot began to display signs of emotional agency when she was with Spencer, but it came to mature fruition only after she met George Lewes.

One True Love

THE STORY OF GEORGE ELIOT'S LOVE FOR GEORGE LEWES IS ALMOST ALways told from her perspective, as the great passion that gave coherence to her soul, that took her from a self-absorbed and desperate girl and provided her with the love she craved and the emotional support

and security she required. But the story can equally well be told from Lewes's perspective, as the central element in his journey from fragmentation to integrity.

Lewes came from a long lineage of family chaos. His grandfather was a comic actor who was married three times. His father was married to one woman in Liverpool and had four children by her, then left and set up a new household with another woman in London with whom he had three boys before he disappeared forever to Bermuda.

Lewes grew up moderately poor and educated himself by going to Europe and schooling himself in the leading Continental authors such as Spinoza and Comte, who were then largely unknown in England. He returned to London and supported himself with his pen, writing on any subject for anybody who would pay. In an age that was beginning to favor specialization and earnestness, he was slighted as a superficial journeyman writer.

The American feminist Margaret Fuller met Lewes at a party at Thomas Carlyle's house and called him a "witty, French, flippant sort of man" who possessed a "sparkling shallowness." Most biographers have followed this line, slighting him as a bit of an adventurer and opportunist, as a facile but shallow and not entirely reliable writer.

The biographer Kathryn Hughes persuasively takes a more appreciative view. Lewes, she writes, was witty and effervescent in a society that tended toward dour self-importance. He was knowledgeable about French and German life in a society that was often suspicious of anything that wasn't British. He had a genuine passion for ideas and for bringing neglected thinkers to public view. He was freethinking and romantic in a society that was in a stringent, buttoned-up Victorian phase.

Lewes was famously ugly (notoriously, the only major London figure who was even less attractive than George Eliot), but he could talk comfortably and sensitively with women, and this served him well. He married a beautiful young woman named Agnes when he was twenty-three and she was nineteen. They had a modern, freethinking marriage, mostly faithful for the first nine years and then mostly unfaithful after that. Agnes had a long-running affair with a man named Thornton Hunt. Lewes sanctioned this affair so long as she didn't have any children by Hunt. When she did, he adopted them as his own in order to spare them the disgrace of illegitimacy.

By the time he met Mary Anne, Lewes was living apart from Agnes (though he seems to have believed that someday he would move back, and their marriage would remain legally intact for the rest of his life). He was in what he regarded as a "very dreary wasted period of my life. I had given up all ambition whatever, lived from hand to mouth, and thought the evil of each day sufficient."[11]

Mary Anne, for her part, was also lonely, but maturing. She wrote to Cara Bray, "My troubles are purely psychical—self-dissatisfaction and despair of achieving anything worth doing." In her journal she embraced the sentiment that was first written by the feminist author Margeret Fuller: "I shall always reign through the intellect, but the life! The life! O my god! Shall that never be sweet?"[12]

But by this stage, in her midthirties, she was less frantic about herself: "When we are young we think our troubles a mighty business—that the world is spread out expressly as a stage for the particular drama of our lives and that we have a right to rant and foam at the mouth if we are crossed. I have done enough of that in my time. But we begin at last to understand that these things are important only to one's own consciousness, which is but as a globule of dew on a rose-leaf that at midday there will be no trace of. This is no high flown sentimentality, but a simple reflection which I find useful to me every day."[13]

Lewes and Mary Anne met at a bookshop on October 6, 1851. By this time she had moved to London and had established herself as an anonymous contributor to (and eventually the editor of) the *Westminster Review*. They traveled in the same circles. They both had a close friendship with Herbert Spencer.

She was unimpressed at first, but before long she was writing to friends that she found Lewes "genial and amusing" and reporting that he has "quite won my liking, in spite of myself." On his part, Lewes seemed to understand the quality of the woman he was getting to know. Flitting and peripatetic in other spheres of life, Lewes was completely solid and dependable when it came to his service to the woman who would become George Eliot.

None of their letters to each other survive. That is in part because they didn't write very many (they were often together) and also because Eliot did not want later biographers raking over her private life and exposing the vulnerable heart that underlay the formidable novels. So we don't know exactly how their love grew. But we know that Lewes was gradually winning her over. On April 16, 1853, she wrote to a friend, "Mr. Lewes, especially, is kind and attentive, and has quite won my regard, after having had a good deal of my vituperation. Like a few other people in the world, he is much better than he seems. A man of heart and conscience, wearing a mask of flippancy."

At some point Lewes would have told her about his broken marriage and his messy private life. This probably wouldn't have shocked Mary Anne, who was familiar with complex living arrangements. But they also would have talked a great deal about ideas. They were interested in the same authors: Spinoza, Comte, Goethe, Ludwig Feuerbach. Around this time Mary Anne was translating Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*.

Feuerbach was arguing that even if the age had lost faith in Christianity, it was still possible to retain the essence of its morality and ethics, and this could be done through love. He maintained that through love and sex with someone you loved, human beings could achieve transcendence, and defeat the sinfulness in their own nature. He wrote:

> Now by what means does man deliver himself from this state of disunion between himself and the perfect being, from the painful consciousness of sin, from the distracting sense of his own nothingness? How does he blunt the fatal sting of sin? Only by this; that he is conscious of love as the highest, the absolute power and truth, that he regards the Divine Being not only as a law, as a moral being of the understanding; but also as a loving tender even subjective human being (that is, having sympathy even with the individual man.)[14]

Mary Anne and Lewes fell in love over ideas. In the years before they met they had been drawn to the same writers, often at the same time. They composed essays on overlapping subjects. They both took the search for truth with the same earnest intensity, and both subscribed to the idea that human love and sympathy could serve as the basis for their own morality as a substitute for a Christianity they could not actually believe in.

Intellectual Love

WE DON'T HAVE ACCESS TO THE EXACT SCENE IN WHICH THEIR HEARTS became inflamed with each other, but we do have access to the process by which similar sorts of people fell in love, and they give one the flavor of what Mary Anne and Lewes must have felt. One famous passion of this sort occurred between the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin and the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. Their meeting of the minds took on a special drama, because it happened all in one night.

The scene took place in Leningrad in 1945. Twenty years older than Berlin, Akhmatova had been a great prerevolutionary poet. Since 1925 the Soviets had allowed her to publish nothing. Her first husband had been executed on false charges in 1921. In 1938, her son was taken prisoner. For seventeen months, Akhmatova had stood outside his prison, vainly seeking news of him.

Berlin didn't know much about her, but he was visiting Leningrad and a friend offered to make an introduction. Berlin was taken to her apartment and met a woman still beautiful and powerful, but wounded by tyranny and war. At first their conversation was restrained. They talked about war experiences and British universities. Other visitors came and went.

By midnight they were alone, sitting on opposite ends of her room. She told him about her girlhood and marriage and her husband's execution. She began to recite Byron's *Don Juan* with such passion that Berlin turned his face to the window to hide his emotion. She began reciting some of her own poems, breaking down as she described how they had led the Soviets to execute one of her colleagues.

By four in the morning they were talking about the greats. They agreed about Pushkin and Chekhov. Berlin liked the light intelligence of Turgenev, while Akhmatova preferred the dark intensity of Dostoyevsky.

Deeper and deeper they went, baring their souls. Akhmatova confessed her loneliness, expressed her passions, spoke about literature and art. Berlin had to go to the bathroom but didn't dare break the spell. They had read all the same things, knew what the other knew, understood each other's longings. That night, his biographer Michael Ignatieff writes, Berlin's life "came as close as it ever did to the still

perfection of art." He finally pulled himself away and returned to his hotel. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. He flung himself on the bed and exclaimed, "I am in love, I am in love."[15]

The night Berlin and Akhmatova spent together stands as the beau ideal of a certain sort of communication. It's communication between people who think that the knowledge most worth attending to is found not in data but in the great works of culture, in humanity's inherited storehouse of moral, emotional, and existential wisdom. It's a communication in which intellectual compatibility turns into emotional fusion. Berlin and Akhmatova could experience that sort of life-altering conversation because they had done the reading. They believed you have to grapple with the big ideas and the big books that teach you how to experience life in all its richness and how to make subtle moral and emotional judgments. They were spiritually ambitious. They had the common language of literature written by geniuses who understand us better than we understand ourselves.

The night also stands as the beau ideal of a certain sort of bond. This sort of love depends on so many coincidences that it happens only once or twice in a lifetime, if ever. Berlin and Akhmatova felt all the pieces fitting amazingly into place. They were the same in many ways. There was such harmony that all the inner defenses fell down in one night.

If you read the poems Akhmatova wrote about that night, you get the impression that they slept together, but according to Ignatieff, they barely touched. Their communion was primarily intellectual, emotional, and spiritual, creating a combination of friendship and love. If friends famously confront the world side by side and lovers live face to face, Berlin and Akhmatova seemed somehow to embody both postures at once. They shared and also augmented each other's understanding.

For Berlin this night was the most important event of his life. Akhmatova was stuck in the Soviet Union, suffering under a regime of manipulation, fear, and lies. The regime decided that she had consorted with a British spy. She was expelled from the Writers' Union. Her son was in prison. She was desolated but remained grateful for Berlin's visit, speaking of him fervently and writing movingly about the numinous magic of that night.

The love Eliot felt for Lewes had some of that intellectual and emotional intensity. They, too, experienced love as a moral force that

deepens a person, organizing human minds around other souls and lifting them so they are capable of great acts of service and devotion.

And indeed, if we look at love in its most passionate phase, we see that love often does several key things to reorient the soul. The first thing it does is humble us. It reminds us that we are not even in control of ourselves. In most cultures and civilizations, love is described in myth and story as an external force—a god or a demon—that comes in and colonizes a person, refashioning everything inside. It is Aphrodite or Cupid. Love is described as a delicious madness, a raging fire, a heavenly frenzy. We don't build love; we *fall* in love, out of control. It is both primordial and also something distinctly our own, thrilling and terrifying, this galvanic force that we cannot plan, schedule, or determine.

Love is like an invading army that reminds you that you are not master of your own house. It conquers you little by little, reorganizing your energy levels, reorganizing your sleep patterns, reorganizing your conversational topics, and, toward the end of the process, rearranging the objects of your sexual desire and even the focus of your attention. When you are in love, you can't stop thinking about your beloved. You walk through a crowd and think you see her in a vaguely familiar form every few yards. You flip from highs to lows and feel pain at slights that you know are probably trivial or illusory. Love is the strongest kind of army because it generates no resistance. When the invasion is only half complete, the person being invaded longs to be defeated, fearfully, but utterly and hopelessly.

Love is a surrender. You expose your deepest vulnerabilities and give up your illusions of self-mastery. This vulnerability and the desire for support can manifest itself in small ways. Eliot once wrote, "There is something strangely winning to most women in that offer of the firm arm; the help is not wanted physically at the moment, but the sense of help, the presence of strength that is outside them and yet theirs, meets a continual want of imagination."

Love depends on the willingness of each person to be vulnerable and it deepens that vulnerability. It works because each person exposes their nakedness and the other rushes to meet it. "You will be loved the day when you will be able to show your weakness without the person using it to assert his strength," the Italian novelist Cesar Pavese wrote.

Next, love decenters the self. Love leads you out of your natural state of self-love. Love makes other people more vivid to you than you are to yourself.

The person in love may think she is seeking personal happiness, but that's an illusion. She is really seeking fusion with another, and when fusion contradicts happiness, she will probably choose fusion. If the shallow person lives in the smallness of his own ego, a person in love finds that the ultimate riches are not inside, they are out there, in the beloved and in the sharing of a destiny with the beloved. A successful marriage is a fifty-year conversation getting ever closer to that melding of mind and heart. Love expresses itself in shared smiles and shared tears and ends with the statement, "Love you? I am you."

Many observers have noticed that love eliminates the distinction between giving and receiving. Since the selves of the two lovers are intermingled, scrambled, and fused, it feels more delicious to give to the beloved than to receive. Montaigne writes that the person in love who receives a gift is actually giving her lover the ultimate gift: the chance to experience the joy of giving to her. It doesn't make sense to say that a lover is generous or altruistic, because a lover in the frenzy of love who gives to her beloved is giving to a piece of herself.

In his famous essay on friendship, Montaigne described how a deep friendship or a love can rearrange the boundaries of self:

> Such a friendship has no model but itself, and can only be compared to itself. It was not one special consideration, nor two, nor three, nor four, nor a thousand; it was some mysterious quintessence of all this mixture which possessed itself of my will, and led it to plunge and lose itself in his, which possessed itself of his whole will, and led it, with a similar hunger and a like impulse, to plunge and lose itself in mine. I may truly say lose, for it left us with nothing that was our own, nothing that was either his or mine.

Next, love infuses people with a poetic temperament. Adam I wants to live according to a utilitarian calculus—to maximize pleasant experiences, to guard against pain and vulnerability, to maintain control. Adam I wants you to go through life as a self-contained unit, coolly weighing risks and rewards and looking out for your own interests.

Adam I is strategizing and calculating costs and benefits. He wants you to keep the world at arm's length. But to be in love is to lose your mind a bit, to be elevated by magical thinking.

To be in love is to experience hundreds of small successive feelings that you never quite experienced in that way before, as if another half of life has been opened up to you for the first time: a frenzy of admiration, hope, doubt, possibility, fear, ecstasy, jealousy, hurt, and so on and so on.

Love is submission, not decision. Love demands that you make a poetic surrender to an inexplicable power without counting the cost. Love asks you to discard conditional thinking and to pour out your love in full force and not measure it by tablespoons. It crystallizes your vision so that, as Stendhal put it, your beloved shimmers like a sparkling jewel. To you she possesses magic that others don't see. To you the historic spots where love first bloomed take on a sacred meaning that others can't perceive. The dates on the calendar when the crucial first kisses and words were exchanged assume the aura of holy days. The emotions you feel cannot quite be captured in prose, but only in music and poetry, looks and touches. The words you exchange are so silly and overwrought that they have to be kept private. They would sound insane if they were bandied about with your friends in the daylight world.

You don't fall in love with the person who might be of most use to you—not the richest, most popular, most well-connected person, not the one with the best career prospects. Adam II falls for the distinct person, for no other reason than some inner harmony, inspiration, joy, and uplift, because he is he and she is she. Moreover, love doesn't seek the efficient path, the sure thing; for some perverse reason, love feeds on roadblocks and is not usually won by prudence. You might have tried to warn two people in love that they should be wary of marrying because their union will not be a happy one. But lovers caught up in magical thinking don't see what others see, and they probably wouldn't change their course even if they could because they would rather be unhappy together than happy apart. They are in love, not buying a stock, and the poetic temperament—part thinking, part brilliant emotion—guides their decisions. Love is a state of poetic need; it exists on both a higher and a lower plane than logic and calculation.

In this way, love opens up the facility for spiritual awareness. It is an altered state of consciousness that is intense and overwhelming but at the same time effervescent. In that state, many people are likely to have mystical moments when they feel an awareness of some wordless mystery beyond the human plane. Their love gives them little glimmerings of pure love, love detached from this or that particular person but emanating from some transcendent realm. These sensations come in fleeting moments. They are intense and effervescent mystical experiences, glimpses into an infinity beyond what can be known for sure.

In his masterpiece, *My Bright Abyss,* the poet Christian Wiman writes,

> In any true love—a mother's for her child, a husband's for his wife, a friend's for a friend—there is an excess energy that always wants to be in motion. Moreover, it seems to move not simply from one person to another but through them toward something else. ("All I know now / is the more he loved me the more I loved the world"—Spencer Reece.) That is why we can be so baffled and overwhelmed by such love (and I don't mean merely when we fall in love; in fact, I'm talking more of other, more durable relationships): it wants to be more than it is; it cries out inside of us to make it more than it is."[16]

For many people, religious and nonreligious, love provides a glimpse of some realm beyond the edge of what we know. It also in a more practical sense enlarges the heart. This act of yearning somehow makes the heart more open and more free. Love is like a plow that opens up hard ground and allows things to grow. It cracks open the crust that Adam I depends on and exposes the soft fertile soil of Adam II. We notice this phenomenon all the time: one love leads to another, one love magnifies the capacity for another.

Self-control is like a muscle. If you are called upon to exercise self-control often in the course of a day, you get tired and you don't have enough strength to exercise as much self-control in the evening. But love is the opposite. The more you love, the more you can love. A person who has one child does not love that child less when the second and third child come along. A person who loves his town does not love his country less. Love expands with use.

In this way love softens. We all know people who were brittle and armored up for life before they fell in love. But in the midst of that sweet and vulnerable state of motivation their manner changed. Behind their back we tell each other that they are aglow with love. The lobster shell has been peeled away, exposing flesh. This has made them more frightened, and more open to damage, but also kinder, more capable of living life as an offering. Shakespeare, the inevitable authority on this subject, wrote, "The more I give to thee / The more I have, for both are infinite."[17]

And so, finally, love impels people to service. If love starts with a downward motion, burrowing into the vulnerability of self, exposing nakedness, it ends with an active upward motion. It arouses great energy and desire to serve. The person in love is buying little presents, fetching the glass from the next room, bringing a tissue when there's flu, driving through traffic to pick the beloved up at the airport. Love is waking up night after night to breastfeed, living year after year to nurture. It is risking and sacrificing your life for your buddy's in a battle. Love ennobles and transforms. In no other state do people so often live as we want them to live. In no other commitment are people so likely to slip beyond the logic of self-interest and unconditional commitments that manifest themselves in daily acts of care.

Occasionally you meet someone with a thousand-year heart. The person with the thousand-year heart has made the most of the passionate, tumultuous phase of love. Those months or years of passion have engraved a deep commitment in their mind. The person or thing they once loved hotly they now love warmly but steadily, happily, unshakably. They don't even think of loving their beloved because they want something back. They just naturally offer love as a matter of course. It is gift-love, not reciprocity-love.

This is the kind of love that George Lewes had for Mary Anne Evans. They were both transformed and ennobled by their love for each other, but Lewes's was in many ways the greater and more ennobling transformation. He celebrated her superior talent. He encouraged, elicited, and nurtured it. With a thousand letters and gestures, he put himself second and her uppermost in his mind.

The Decision

THE DECISION TO BE TOGETHER WAS A PROFOUND AND LIFE-ALTERING one. Even though he and his wife were living in separate households and Agnes was bearing children by another man, Lewes was officially a married man. If Eliot and Lewes became a couple they would be committing brazen adultery in the eyes of the world. Polite society would be closed to them. Family would cut them off. They would be outcasts, especially Eliot. As Eliot's biographer Frederick R. Karl puts it, "The men who kept mistresses were called philanderers, but the women who were kept were called whores."[18]

And yet by the winter of 1852–53, Eliot seems to have recognized that Lewes was her soul mate. During the spring of 1853 they began to contemplate breaking with society to be with each other. In April, Lewes collapsed with dizziness, headaches, and ringing in the ears. Eliot spent these months translating Feuerbach. He argued that in its true definition, a marriage is not fundamentally a legal arrangement, it is a moral arrangement, and reading his thoughts on the subject would have helped Eliot conclude that the love she and Lewes shared was a truer and higher thing than the arrangement he had with his legal and separated wife.

Ultimately she had to make a decision about what sort of ties meant the most to her, and she decided that love must triumph over social connections. As she later wrote, "Light and easily broken ties are what I neither desire theoretically nor could live for practically. Women who are satisfied with such ties do not act as I have done."

With her genius for judging character, Eliot decided to put her faith in Lewes, even though at this point he had not fully committed himself to her. As she put it in a letter, "I have counted the cost of the step that I have taken and am prepared to bear, without irritation or bitterness, renunciation by all my friends. I am not mistaken in the person to whom I have attached myself. He is worthy of the sacrifice I have incurred, and my only anxiety is that he should be rightly judged."

All love is narrowing. It is the renunciation of other possibilities for the sake of one choice. In a 2008 wedding toast to Cass Sunstein and Samantha Power, Leon Wieseltier put it about as well as possible:

Brides and grooms are people who have discovered, by means of love, the local nature of happiness. Love is a revolution in scale, a revision of magnitudes; it is private and it is particular; its object is the specificity of this man and that woman, the distinctness of this spirit and that flesh. Love prefers deep to wide, and here to there; the grasp to the reach. . . . Love is, or should be, indifferent to history, immune to it—a soft and sturdy haven from it: when the day is done, and the lights are out, and there is only this other heart, this other mind, this other face, to assist in repelling one's demons or in greeting one's angels, it does not matter who the president is. When one consents to marry, one consents to be truly known, which is an ominous prospect; and so one bets on love to correct for the ordinariness of the impression, and to call forth the forgiveness that is invariably required by an accurate perception of oneself. Marriages are exposures. We may be heroes to our spouses but we may not be idols.

Eliot's mind at that juncture seems to have been in a state of convulsive change. She was aware that her life was about to take an irreversible new form. She seems to have concluded that her life up to this moment had been based on a series of faulty choices and it was time to bet all on one true choice. She took the leap W. H. Auden described in his famous poem "Leap Before You Look":

The sense of danger must not disappear:
The way is certainly both short and steep,
However gradual it looks from here;
Look if you like, but you will have to leap.

Tough-minded men get mushy in their sleep
And break the by-laws any fool can keep;
It is not the convention but the fear
That has a tendency to disappear. . . .

The clothes that are considered right to wear
Will not be either sensible or cheap,
So long as we consent to live like sheep
And never mention those who disappear. . . .

A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep
Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear:
Although I love you, you will have to leap;
Our dream of safety has to disappear.

On July 20, 1854, Eliot went to a dock near the Tower of London and boarded a ship, the *Ravensbourne,* bound for Antwerp. She and Lewes would begin their life together abroad. She wrote some letters to a few friends informing them of her choice, trying to soften the blow. They considered this journey together something of a trial cohabitation, but in reality they were about to begin the rest of their lives. For both, it was an amazing act of courage, and an amazing commitment to mutual love.

Life Together

THEY CHOSE WELL. THE CHOICE OF EACH REDEEMED BOTH OF THEIR LIVES. They traveled around Europe together, mostly in Germany, where they were welcomed by the leading writers and intellectuals of the day. Mary Anne loved living openly as Mrs. Lewes: "I am happier every day and find my domesticity more and more delightful and beneficial to me."[19]

Back in London, however, their relationship unleashed a storm of vituperation that would define Eliot's social life forever after. Some people took pleasure in thinking the worst of her, calling her a husband stealer, a homewrecker, and a sex maniac. Others understood that Lewes was effectively unmarried, understood the love that drew them together, but still could not sanction this relationship because it might loosen morals for others. One former acquaintance, who had conducted a phrenological examination of Eliot's head, declared, "We are deeply mortified and distressed; and I should like to know whether there is insanity in Miss Evans' family; for her conduct, with her brain, seems to me like a morbid mental aberration."[20]

Eliot was unwavering in her choice. She insisted on being known as Mrs. Lewes because even though her decision to be with Lewes had been an act of rebellion, she believed in the form and institution of traditional marriage. Circumstances had compelled her to do some-

thing extreme, but morally and philosophically she believed in the conventional path. They lived as traditional husband and wife. And they complemented each other. She could be gloomy, but he was a bright and funny social presence. They took walks together. They worked together. They read books together. They were exclusive, ardent, self-composed and self-completing. "What greater thing is there for two human souls," Eliot would later write in *Adam Bede,* "than to feel they are joined for life—to strengthen each other in all labor, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of last parting."

Her bond with Lewes cost her many friendships. Her family renounced her, most painfully her brother, Isaac. But the scandal was also productive in furnishing them with deeper insights into themselves and the world. They were forever on edge, looking for signs of insult or affirmation. Because they were cutting against the grain of social convention, they had to pay extra attention to what they were doing, to exercise special care. The shock of public hostility served as a stimulant. It made them acutely conscious of how society functioned.

Eliot had always been a sensitive observer of other people's emotional lives. She had always devoured books, ideas, and people. People had always found her scarily perceptive—as if she was some sort of witch with magical powers. But now there was something more orderly about her thought processes. In the months after her scandalous departure with Lewes, she seems to have finally come to terms with her exceptional gifts. Everything was hardening into a distinct worldview, a settled way of seeing the world. Maybe it is simply that she could finally approach the world with a sense of self-confidence. After all her flailing about in life, Eliot had finally gotten the big thing right. She had taken a chance on Lewes. She had paid a fearsome price. She had endured a baptism of fire. But she was able slowly to come out the other side. The prize of a fulfilling love was worth the cost. As she put it in *Adam Bede,* "Doubtless a great anguish may do the work of years, and we may come out from that baptism of fire with a soul full of new awe and new pity."

Novelist

LEWES HAD LONG ENCOURAGED ELIOT TO WRITE FICTION. HE WASN'T SURE she could come up with plots, but he knew she had a genius for description and characterization. Plus, fiction paid better than nonfiction, and the Lewes family was always hard up for cash. He urged her to just try her hand: "You must try to write a story." One morning in September 1856, she was fantasizing about writing fiction when a title popped into her head: *The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton*. Lewes was immediately enthusiastic. "Oh what a capital title!" he blurted.

A week later she read to him the first part of what she had written. He knew immediately that Eliot was a gifted writer. Eliot wrote in her journal, "We both cried over it, and then he came up to me and kissed me, saying, 'I think your pathos is better than your fun.' " They both realized that Mary Anne would be a successful novelist. She would be George Eliot, the name she took to hide (for a time) her scandalous identity. The skill that he doubted most—whether she could write dialogue—was actually the area where her talent was most obvious. Lewes still wondered if she could create action and movement in her tales, but he knew she had all the other tools.

Before long he was her consultant, agent, editor, publicist, psychotherapist, and general counselor. He understood quickly that her talent was vastly above his own, and he seems to have felt nothing but selfless delight in the way she was bound to overshadow him.

By 1861, her brief diary entries make it clear how intimately involved Lewes was in the development of her plots: She would write during the day and then read what she had written to Lewes. Judging by her letters and diary entries over the years, he was an encouraging audience: "I read the . . . opening scenes of my novel, and he expressed great delight in them. . . . After this record I read aloud what I had written of Part IX to George and he, to my surprise, entirely approved of it. . . . When I read aloud my manuscript to my dear, dear husband, he laughed and cried alternately and then rushed to me to kiss me. He is the prime blessing that has made all the rest possible to me, given me a response to everything I have written."

Lewes shopped her novels around, negotiating with different

editors. In the early years, he lied about who the true author of the George Eliot novels was, claiming it was a clergyman friend who wished to remain anonymous. After the truth got out, he protected his wife from criticism. Even after she was celebrated as one of the greatest writers of her day, he would get to the newspapers first and cut out and discard any article that might mention her with anything but the most fulsome praise. Lewes's rule was simple: "Never tell her anything that other people say about her books, for good or evil. . . . Let her mind be as much as possible fixed on her art and not the public."

Arduous Happiness

GEORGE AND MARY ANNE CONTINUED TO SUFFER FROM ILLNESSES AND bouts of depression, but they were generally happy together. The letters and diary entries they wrote during their years together bubble forth with assertions of joy and love. In 1859, Lewes wrote to a friend, "I owe Spencer another and deeper debt. It was through him that I learned to know Marian—to know her was to love her—and since then my life has been a new birth. To her I owe all my prosperity and my happiness. God bless her!"

Six years later Eliot wrote, "In each other we are happier than ever. I am more grateful to my dear husband for his perfect love, which helps me in all good and checks me in all evil—more conscious that in him I have the greatest of blessings."

Her masterpiece, *Middlemarch,* is mostly about unsuccessful marriages, but there are glimpses in her books of happy marriages, and marital friendship, such as she enjoyed. "I should never like scolding any one else so well; and that is a point to be thought of in a husband," one of her characters declares. She wrote in a letter to a friend, "I am happier every day, and find my domesticity more and more delightful and beneficial to me. Affection, respect and intellectual sympathy deepen, and for the first time in my life I can say to the moments, 'Let them last, they are so beautiful.'"

Eliot and Lewes were happy, but they were not content. In the first place, life did not cease happening. One of Lewes's sons from his earlier marriage came to them, terminally ill, and they nursed him until

his death. Their frequent periods of ill health and depression were marked by migraines and dizzy spells. But through it all, they were impelled by their own need to cultivate themselves morally, to be deeper and wiser. Capturing this mixture of joy and ambition, Eliot wrote in 1857, "I am very happy—happy in the highest blessing life can give us, the perfect love and sympathy of a nature that stimulates my own healthy activity. I feel, too, that all the terrible pain I have gone through in past years, partly from the defects of my own nature, partly from outward things, has probably been a preparation for some special work that I may do before I die. That is a blessed hope, to be rejoiced in with trembling."

Eliot would write, "Adventure is not outside man; it is within."

As she aged, her affections grew stronger and were less perturbed by the egoism of youth. Writing for her remained an agonizing process. She fell into fits of anxiety and depression with each book. She despaired. Recovered hope. Then despaired again. Her genius as a writer derives from the fact that she was capable of the deepest feeling but also of the most discerning and disciplined thought. She had to feel and suffer through everything. She had to transform that feeling into meticulously thought-through observation. The books had to be pushed out of her like children, painfully and amid exhaustion. Like most people who write, she had to endure the basic imbalance of the enterprise. The writer shares that which is intimate and vulnerable, but the reader is far away, so all that comes back is silence.

She had no system. She was antisystem. As she wrote in *The Mill on the Floss,* she despised "men of maxims," because the "complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims, and that to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy."

She didn't use her books to set forth an argument or make points so much as to create a world that readers could dip into at different times of life and derive different lessons each time. Rebecca Mead writes, "I think *Middlemarch* has disciplined my character. I know it has become part of my own experience and my own endurance. *Middlemarch* inspired me when I was young, and chafing to leave home; and now, in middle life, it suggests to me what else home might mean, beyond a place to grow up and grow out of."[21]

Eliot creates her own interior landscape. She was a realist. She was

not concerned with the lofty and the heroic. She wrote about the workaday world. Her characters tend to err when they reject the grubby and complex circumstances of everyday life for abstract and radical notions. They thrive when they work within the rooted spot, the concrete habit, the particular reality of their town and family. Eliot herself believed that the beginning of wisdom was the faithful and attentive study of present reality, a thing itself, a person herself, unfiltered by abstract ideas, mists of feeling, leaps of imagination, or religious withdrawals into another realm.

In her early novel *Adam Bede,* she writes, "There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my every-day fellow-men, especially for the few in the foreground of the great multitude, whose faces I know, whose hands I touch, for whom I have to make way with kindly courtesy."

She ended her later and perhaps greatest novel, *Middlemarch,* with a flourish celebrating those who lead humble lives: "But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who live faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

Sympathy lay at the heart of Eliot's moral vision. After a self-absorbed adolescence, she went on to develop an amazing capacity to enter the minds of others and observe them from different points of view and with sympathetic understanding. As she put it in *Middlemarch,* "There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by a deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men."

She became, as she aged, an attentive listener. Because she registered other people with such emotional intensity, the facts and feelings of their lives lodged in her memory. She was one of those people on whom nothing is lost. Even though she was herself in a happy marriage, she wrote her greatest book about a series of unhappy marriages, and could describe them from the inside with concrete intensity.

"Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending," she writes in

Middlemarch. She sympathizes with even her least sympathetic characters, such as Edward Casaubon, the dreary, narcissistic pedant whose talent isn't as great as he thinks it is and who slowly comes to realize this fact. Under her perceptive pen, the inability to sympathize and the inability to communicate, especially within families, is revealed as the great moral poison in many of her stories.

The Inner Adventure

ELIOT WAS A MELIORIST. SHE DID NOT BELIEVE IN BIG TRANSFORMATIONAL change. She believed in the slow, steady, concrete march to make each day slightly better than the last. Character development, like historic progress, best happens imperceptibly, through daily effort.

Her books were aimed to have a slow and steady effect on the internal life of her readers, to enlarge their sympathies, to refine their ability to understand other people, to give them slightly wider experiences. In that sense her father, and the humble ideal he represented, lived in her all her life. In *Adam Bede,* she celebrated the local man:

> They make their way upward, rarely as geniuses, most commonly as painstaking, honest men, with the skill and conscience to do well the tasks that lie before them. Their lives have no discernible echo beyond the neighborhood where they dwelt, but you are almost sure to find some good piece of road, some building, some application of mineral produce, some improvement in farming practice, some reform of parish abuses, which their names are associated by one or two generations after them.

Many of her characters, and especially her magnetic character, Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch,* begin their adulthood with an ardent moral ambition. They want to achieve some great good, like a Saint Teresa, but they don't know what it is or what their vocation might be or just how to go about it. Their attention is fixed on some pure ideal, some distant horizon. Eliot was a Victorian; she believed in moral improvement. But she used her novels to critique such lofty and otherworldly moral goals. They are too abstract, and they can easily, as in Dorothea's case, be unrealistic and delusional. The best

moral reform, she counters, is tied to the here and now, directed by honest feelings for this or that individual rather than for humanity as a whole. There's power in the particular and suspicion of the general. For Eliot, holiness isn't in the next world but is embedded in a mundane thing like a marriage, which ties one down but gives one concrete and daily opportunities for self-sacrifice and service. Holiness is inspired by work, the daily task of doing some job well. She takes moral imagination—the sense of duty, the need to serve, the ardent desire to quell selfishness—and she concretizes it and makes it useful.

There are limits, she teaches, in how much we can change other people or how quickly we can change ourselves. So much of life is lived in a state of tolerance—tolerating other people's weaknesses and our own sins, even as we try to have some slow, loving effect. "These fellow mortals, every one," she wrote in *Adam Bede,* "must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses nor brighten their wit nor rectify their dispositions; and it is these people—amongst whom your life is passed—that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love: it is these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people whose movement of goodness you should be able to admire—for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience." This posture is at the essence of her morality. It is easy to say but hard to enact. She sought to be tolerant and accepting, but also rigorous, earnest, and demanding. She loved but she also judged.

The word most associated with Eliot's work is "maturity." Hers is, as Virginia Woolf said, literature for grown-ups—seeing life from a perspective both more elevated and more immediate, both wiser and more generous. "People glorify all sorts of bravery except the bravery they might show on behalf of their nearest neighbor," she wrote—a mature sentiment if ever there was one.[22]

A woman named Bessie Rayner Parkes met Eliot when she was still a young woman. She wrote later to a friend saying that she didn't yet know if she would come to like this creature, still known then as Mary Anne Evans. "Whether you or I should ever love her, as a friend, I don't know at all. There is as yet no high moral purpose in the impression she makes, and it is that alone which commands love. I think she will alter. Large angels take a long time unfolding their wings, but when they do, soar out of sight. Miss Evans either has no wings, or which I think is the case, they are coming budding."[23]

Mary Anne Evans took a long road to become George Eliot. She had to grow out of self-centeredness into generous sympathy. But it was a satisfying maturation. She never overcame her fits of depression and her anxieties about the quality of her own writing, but she could think and feel her way into other people's minds and hearts to exercise what she called "the responsibility of tolerance." From disgrace she rose, by the end of her life, to be celebrated as a large angel.

The crucial event in that long journey was her love for George Lewes, which stabilized, lifted, and deepened her. The fruits of their love are embodied in the inscriptions she put in each of her works:

Adam Bede (1859): To my dear husband, George Henry Lewes, I give the MS of a work which would never have been written but for the happiness which his love has conferred on my life.

The Mill on the Floss (1860): To my beloved husband, George Henry Lewes, I give this MS of my third book, written in the sixth year of our life together.

Romola (1863): To the Husband whose perfect love has been the best source of her insight and strength, this manuscript is given by his devoted wife, the writer.

Felix Holt (1866): From George Eliot to her dear Husband, this thirteenth year of their united life, in which the deepening sense of her own imperfectness has the consolation of their deepening love.

The Spanish Gypsy (1868): To my dear—every day dearer—Husband.

Middlemarch (1872): To my dear Husband, George Henry Lewes, in this nineteenth year of our blessed union.