

Biblical Criticism in George Eliot's "Peter von Bohlen's *Introduction to the Book of Genesis*"

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I

If we look closely at George Eliot's essays and book reviews, it dawns upon us that biblical criticism was one of the few central concerns she held consistently over her years of essay and review writing. Already in 1851 she exhibited a formidable knowledge of the critical study of the *Bible* as we see its best fruit in the reviews entitled "R.W. Mackay's *The Progress of the Intellect*" and "W.R. Greg's *The Creed of Christendom*." These are powerful enough testimonies to make us realize that her historical study of the *Bible* was a mirror in which her path of self-discovery had been reflected. Naturally enough we can see in them Marian's (earlier George Eliot's) mature thoughts on religion and science. And these, as some of the major critics¹ of the age agree, represent the voice of the nineteenth century.

Ever since then Marian never ceased to hold dialogues with the *Bible* and the representative voices of the biblical critics at once German and British. But no dialogue, it seems to us, could have left so lasting an influence on her as one she held with Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* prior to and during the process of her translation of it in 1853. This is largely due to the book's innate quality of Feuerbach's matchless spirit of exploration of the historical nature of Scripture. What made this dialogue of vital importance to Marian's personal lot

was her moral and spiritual crisis on the eve of her departure for Germany with her de facto spouse, George Henry Lewes. The coincidence of her personal crisis and the serious dialogue with Feuerbach turned out to be a turning point of the writer's course of life that marked a watershed on her journey of self-exploration. This is, however, not an immediate concern of ours to treat at large in the present paper. But the soulful dialogue with Feuerbach and the subsequent eight-month travel alone with Lewes could not be overemphasized as formative influence on her creative imagination.

Some of the mature reflections of Marian, the fruit of her dialogue with biblical criticism, were crystallized in her subsequent essays: "Evangelical Teaching Dr Cumming" (1855), "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), and "William Lecky's *The Influence of Rationalism*." (1865) But among these major essays we should not forget a modest one entitled: "Peter von Bohlen's *Introduction to the Book of Genesis*" (1856). What captivates our imagination with this humble piece is that it seems to suggest the process of Marian's deepening appreciation of her version of biblical reinterpretation on historical basis. We can see that as early as 1851 her emerging view of the Hebrew Scriptures was hinted by a quotation from "R.W. Mackay's *The Progress of the Intellect*" thus:

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. . . divine revelation is not contained exclusively or pre-eminently in the facts and inspirations of any one age or nation, but is co-extensive with the history of human development, and is perpetually unfolding itself to our widened experience and investigation, . . . The master key to this revelation, is the recognition of the presence of undeviating law in the material and moral world—of that invariability of sequence which is acknowledged to be the basis of physical science. (20-1)

In the light of this law she implies her whole-hearted sympathy with Mackey's view: "A correct generalization gives significance to the smallest detail, just as the great inductions of geology demonstrate in every pebble the working of laws by which the earth has become adapted for the habitation of man." (*Ibid* 21) Thus she implies that religious mode of perception and vision of natural history can be reconciled in such a manner as to illuminate each other; and that upon the solid foundation of this reconciliation is our faith kept open and receptive to "the working of laws." Here we see an early sign of her approach of biblical criticism developing into her enduring principle of literary creation. Her insight into "the presence of undeviating law in the material and moral world" has been so fully digested into her outlook of human drama that it is just a matter of time for its fruit to grow ripe for novel writing. In her review of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1855) she admiringly refers to his method: "he [Goethe] quietly follows the stream of fact and of life; and waits patiently for the moral processes of nature as we all do for her material processes." ("The Morality of *Wilhelm Meister*" 131) Here we discern a new approach of fictional creation where history, psychology, and anthropology are to work together to describe human scenes.

Upon the surface the review of *Introduction to the Book of Genesis* may appear to be a concise summary of Bohlen's view of the Hebrew Scriptures. But on closer examination it becomes clear that behind a seemingly detached account of his overview are implied Marian's own close observation of, and imaginative reflections upon, how biblical criticism came into being. "What is the office of the biblical critic in relation to the Old Testament?" (358) Thus, she starts her argument by asking the

question: She, then, sketches the process of the wholesale change of attitude across the nineteenth century Europe. And she seems to have found an echo of that voice in her own soul. Bohlen is, in her view, clear and concise in describing the three stages in which the traditional orthodoxy of the Church was infected with the germ of a new outlook, and finally found its foundation undermined and replaced by the latter.

Supernatural Christianity, in those days, presupposed that "the divine origin and direct verbal inspiration of the Hebrew Scriptures" (358) is a revealed truth; and "the critic has simply to interpret the meaning of the text;" (358) but "if an undeniable fact turns out to be in contradiction with the text, the received interpretation is to be reconsidered and altered so as to agree with the undeniable fact." (358) Seen in this light, examining the sacred writings and ascertaining their origin represent an impious sacrilege to Divine authority. For "having beforehand settled their origin, he [critic] has to explain everything so as to make it accord with this premise. He is not an inquirer, but an advocate." (358) Here is hinted a way of thinking that should be called intellectual laziness and moral obtuseness. This is how dogmatic religion ends up losing contact with reality, and finding its own vitality drained. This was the situation witnessed on a large scale around the middle of the century across Europe.

II

At the root of the massive popular discontent in those days lay the negative impact of the Industrial Revolution and its materialistic mode of thought; the disintegration of the traditional, close-knit community brought all kinds of social ills, leaving the mass of people divorced from land. Along with this came a growingly utilitarian value in people's way of life under the predominating influence of modern science. This was the historical background of the massive outcry for hearkening back to the ancient voice of memory that found expression in the Romantic Revival. In this respect Cazamian recognizes a kindred spirit between Ruskin and Carlyle. What they shared, according to him, was an organic vision of living relatedness between man and the Universe. He describes their Organicism thus:

It [Ruskin's artistic teaching] is primarily a burning glorification of the poetry of things; an effort to discover, express and reveal the beautiful. A torpor made of laziness, ignorance, hardening and impiety blinds the eyes of men to the awful wonder of creation; let them learn to see, and they will be dazzled by the grand aspect of nature, and by the tiny miraculous beauties of the humblest beings. (51)

What was at stake, according to these prophets, was a time-honoured inheritance, among the folk, of harmony with the natural world and its gifts. In Carlyle's vision "if Nature is one, and a living indivisible whole, much more is mankind, the image that reflects and creates Nature, without which Nature were not." (186) This is, in its essence, an upsurge of the voice of intuition that has been transmitted from time immemorial. Now, challenged by an onrushing wave of rationality and utility, the voice has surfaced to the consciousness of the European.

In step with this organic vision a new horizon of natural history made itself visible among the receptive intellectuals following the footsteps of Darwinian cosmologists. The function of biblical criticism as originated in German Higher Critics was to reinterpret the Scriptural text on historical principle to meet the needs of the newly converted; thus they expected to relieve and relive time-honored truths of *the Bible* from the husk of dead letter religion. In order to practice this, they felt the need of turning to historical, anthropological, psychological insights for unlearning system of high and dry dogmas.

In this connection Livingstone in his unrivaled "Introduction" to *Literature and Dogma*, epitomizes the whole point of what Matthew Arnold tried to achieve as "establishing the truths of Christianity on the unassailable ground of human experience." (xiv) Toward this end the first step for us to take is to acknowledge the fact that "biblical language is not 'rigid and fixed,' but 'fluid, passing, literary'; . . . It is a language of image and metaphor, symbol and myth." (xiv) To make biblical language authentically our living one, "what was needed once more was a restoration of the personal and experiential—religion newly imbued with deep feeling, inwardness, and authenticity." (xv) In Arnold's own words we are required to "feel what the Bible-writers are

about; to read between the lines, to discern where he [the reader] ought to rest with his whole weight, and where he ought to pass lightly." ("Preface" 10) Again Livingstone sums up Arnold's vision:

Myth and poetry alone can give wing to the faith and hopes and aspirations of men's spirits; they alone can integrate the personality around some great loyalty, fire the will, and liberate the spirit of man from the blind contingency of nature. (xx-xxi)

We are made aware by Livingstone's deeply resonant language that the biblical critics' true goal was to renew the whole fabric of religious faith by breaking the habit of the dogmatic dryness, and to infuse into it life blood of poetry and myths as powerful means of expressing human passion and spirituality.

III

To come back to the second stage of biblical criticism under consideration, it can be summed up by Bohlen, or for that matter Marian, in what he calls the "accommodation theory." (359) This represents an intermediate stage of the criticism that basically stays within the pale of the old orthodoxy, yet walks a step closer to a full stature of biblical criticism. According to this theory, there is a deep truth in the dispensation of God creating human beings in his own image (Gen 1: 27) "As the Deity, . . . in speaking to human beings, must use human language such as the 'eye of God', the arm of God', the 'laughter and jealousy of God.'" (359) Thus we can understand figuratively what God means to us. Behind this form of perception there seems to lie an assumption that the "Deity must adapt the form of His revelations to the degree of culture, which belongs to men at the period in which His revelations are made." (359) This is analogous to "a father teaching his children, by adapting the information he gives to their narrow stock of ideas." (359) We see here incipient signs of natural historian's eye in his belief that everything is in flux; nothing endures including our idea of God's Revelation; what has been accepted as unquestionable and infallible is capable of being modified as new vistas are opened up according to the unfolding knowledge of each succeeding generation.

The analogy of father-child relationship between

God and man is pervasive throughout the text of the Scriptures. This may be accounted for by our sense of wonder before the mystery of the Creation and our awareness of our own smallness. This is what the biblical account of man as being “created in the image of God” is all about, as Arnold sees concerning the psychological need of man for personifying the unknowable forces:

The grandeur of the spectacle given by the world, the grandeur of the sense of its all being *not ourselves* [author’s italic], being above and beyond ourselves and immeasurably dwarfing us, a man of imagination instinctively personifies as a single, mighty, living and productive power; (36)

Here we recognize our ancestors’ genuine reverence and awe in the face of the Inscrutable in their uncharted territory. What deserves our attention is that this is an imaginatively grasped picture of their world’s view by an anthropologist. This is the spirit of biblical criticism in its incipient form. In order to emerge from the habit of unquestioning acceptance of authority, we must exercise our imaginative faculties. Thus alone can we enter into the inner reality of our ancestors’ self-image in relationship to the Universe.

Again the theorists of accommodation hold, in Bohlen’s view, a “mild heterodoxy” in which “the presence of mythical and legendary elements in the Hebrew records” were admitted, and their infallibility questioned; still they regard these elements “as the medium of a special revelation as the shell that held a kernel of peculiarly divine truth, by which a monotheistic faith was preserved.” (359) True they find it hard to accept unquestioningly some episodes in which the Hebrew prophets are described to exercise merciless authority in tackling the tenacious worshipping of idols among the believers. A typical example of this is the massacre of three thousand congregation committed by the Levites who obeyed Moses’s intolerant injunction to punish the sinners. (Exod. 32: 25-29) As might be expected, the theorists of accommodation had difficulty believing in “divine commands to butcher men wholesale.” (359) Still on the whole “the history of Israel is a sacred precinct to them—they take their shoes from off their feet, for it is holy ground. . . . The Old

Testament is still an exceptional book. (360) This is how they “use historical criticism as a winnowing fan” to blow off inessential elements of myths and fables that have no relevance to “their acceptance of Christianity as a special revelation.” (360) Bohlen hints that this is nothing else than an uneasy glossing over what they intuitively felt to go against their conscience. The fact was, in Bohlen’s view, that this attempt at sifting out the essentials from the inessentials was their anguished endeavour to rescue the wholeness of their faith against the tide of enlightening currents of thought.

On reading and rereading the description of the painstaking effort of these mediators, one is tempted to suspect that Bohlen and Marian might have shared a subtle compassion on them for their painful sense of self-dichotomy in following the dictates of their conscience. Beneath the surface of a cool portrayal lurks a silent note of respect for their faltering yet genuine integrity. This is best illustrated by a reference to the “candid Dr Pye Smith” who figuratively interpreted “the narratives of the Creation and the Deluge” in the light of poetic truths, “to the great scandal of his Evangelical brethren.” (359) We are made to realize by the subtle intimation that we owe a debt of gratitude to those courageous trail-blazers for their contribution to reviving the poetry of the inherited Hebrew traditions. It is of second importance whether the undercurrent of respect is of Bohlen’s or Marian’s. What strikes us is their genuine sympathy with the struggle of erring human beings who had a genuine faith.

IV

Subsequent to the reflection on accommodation theory comes a concise picture of Feuerbachian biblical critics. According to Bohlen, they hold a conviction that the Hebrew Scriptures can be understood to be in “the common category of early national records, which are a combination of myth and legend, gradually clarifying at their later stages into genuine history.” (360) They embarked on “the examination of the Old Testament with as perfect a freedom from presupposition, as unreserved a submission to the guidance of historical criticism.” (360) To look at the Hebrew records in the ‘light of common day,’ they find in them simply:

the "history and literature of a barbarous tribe that gradually rose from fetishism to a ferocious polytheism, offering human sacrifices, and ultimately, through the guidance of their best men, and contact with more civilized nations, to Jehovistic monotheism. It [biblical criticism] finds in them as in other early records, a mythical cosmogony, an impossible chronology, and extravagant marvels tending to flatter national vanity, or to aggrandize a priesthood. . . . in short, it not only finds in the Hebrew writings nothing which cannot be accounted for on grounds purely human, but it finds them of a character which it would be monstrous to attribute to any other than a human origin. (360)

Thus outlining Bohlen's overview on Scriptural history, Marian pays tribute to his keen historical acumen well founded upon his immense learning in the department of ancient Indian literature. Here we recognize a dynamic process by which ever-regenerating truths have dawned upon an enlarging vision of humanity; a process of handing down the inherited wisdom that is constantly being modified by each new prophet's insight adding a new vision and vigor to the whole legacy. This inheritance of living spirits has been made possible by the Jewish leaders' encounter with other currents of thought; thus they find it easier to divest the rigid robe of the esoteric exclusivity of the Jewish nationalism. As we see in Micah, "What shall I bring when I come before the Lord, . . . Shall I offer my eldest son for my wrongdoing, . . . what it is that the Lord requires of you: only to act justly, to love loyalty, to walk humbly with your God." (6: 6-8) Here a break with the immemorial custom of sacrifice offering marks a significant step toward the Cross of Jesus.

Closely following the picture of the biblical critics, Marian suggests how to endorse their authenticity: "the reader, though he may not accept Von Bohlen's conclusions, is placed in an excellent position for pursuing the investigation by a closer study of the Scriptures themselves. (361) This was what Marian had been doing ever since she came to find in Charles Hennell's *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838) her own heart's cry at the age of twenty one. (Cross 45-6) Guided by this fore-runner of the biblical criticism and the like-minded

friends including Cara and Charles Bray, she found herself able to identify her position in the uncharted sphere of action. Due to Marian's effort of an independent exploration, she courted her alienation in religious matters from her family and the Church of England. This is one of the background reasons why her close companionship with the Brays took on the nature of an inner sanctuary where she could breathe freely enough to use her heart-felt language.

V

Concerning the path Marian followed in her formative years, Willey thus comments:

. . . the whole predicament she represents was that of religious temperament cut off by the Zeitgeist [spirit of the age] from traditional object of veneration, and the traditional intellectual formulations. . . . in her estrangement from the 'religion about Jesus' she was none the further from the 'religion of Jesus.' She knew the hunger and thirst after righteousness, and the need for renunciation—the need to lose one's life in order to gain it. (238)

Willey's insight into Marian's adversity points to the significance of her literary achievement in her intuitive attempt to restore an inner equilibrium by representing the experience in dogma-free, humanitarian phraseology. Already in "Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming" (1855) she reflects on her personal, though clothed in non-theological terms, struggle played out on the stage of her mind:

It has not enabled him [Dr Cumming] even to conceive the condition of a mind 'perplexed in faith but pure in deeds,'² craving light, yearning for a faith that will harmonize and cherish its highest powers and aspirations, but unable to find that faith in dogmatic Christianity. (*George Eliot Selected Critical Writings* 152)

Out of this 'perplexity' emerges Marian's soul-to-soul dialogue with Feuerbach. The process of the translation of *The Essence of Christianity*, one is inclined to suspect, might have represented her exploration in search of her genuine language that throbs with her pulse of life. We find this suspicion

borne out by the translated English version. For, it has a note of an imaginative participation in Feuerbach's conviction: "God, for the sake of man, empties himself of his Godhead, lays aside his Godhead. Herein lies the elevating influence of the Incarnation; the highest, the perfect being humiliates, lowers himself for the sake of man." (57) This soulful discipline of rendering in her own mother tongue the voice of the great originator, in turn, inspired Marian to give rest to her strained intellect; then she found deep in herself words that were coloured with her genuine thoughts and heart-felt emotions. She pursued her point in the same essay:

The idea of a God who not only sympathizes with all we feel and endure for our fellow-men, but who will pour new life into our too languid love, and give firmness to our vacillating purpose, is an extension and multiplication of the effects produced by human sympathy; (*Ibid* 168-69)

A careful reading would convince us that Marian's choice of words is no less in keeping with her message of a secular, humanistic religion than Feuerbach's abstruse theological phraseology. The same exaltation of emotion and intuition as pathway to an inner peace is conveyed in a homely language blended occasionally with natural historian's. This is her peculiar style in the making. But in the core Marian and Feuerbach shared the inherited wisdom of biblical tradition: a deep meaning of human suffering and sympathy between fellow sufferers and Pauline conviction that "knowledge inflates a man, whereas love builds him up." (1 Cor. 8:1)

Concerning the language of the *Bible* Arnold points out that it is a "language thrown out at an object of consciousness not fully grasped, which inspire emotion." (38) If so, "the language of figure and feeling will satisfy us better about it, will cover more of what we seek to express, than the language of literal fact and science." (38) Few writers in the late Victorian age could master this art of language better than George Eliot, with an exception of Arnold himself.

NOTES

- 1 Willey, Basil. *Nineteenth Century Studies:*

Coleridge to Matthew Arnold. pp. 204-05; Also Karl, F. R. *George Eliot Voice of a Century: A Biography.* "Introduction," pp. xi-xii.

- 2 Tennyson, A. L. *In Memorium.* 96. l. 9. See Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982. p. 113.

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- . "Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming." *Ibid*, 138-70.
- . "The Morality of *Wilhelm Meister*" *Ibid*, 129-32.
- . "Peter von Bohlen's *Introduction to the Book of Genesis*." *George Eliot: Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*. Ed. by A.S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren with Introd. A.S. Byatt. Penguin Books, 1990. 358-62.
- . "William Lecky's *The Influence of Rationalism*." *Ibid*, 389-404.
- . "W.R. Greg's *The Creed of Christendom*" *Ibid*, 286-96.
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