

noose? It might appear so. The book's statistical appendix reports that while the absolute number of baccalaureate and doctoral degrees in the humanities increased slightly between 1966 and 1993, the percentage of humanities degrees relative to the total number of degrees dropped. Financial support is down too, as America's foundations decide they have other things to do with their money. And so is the more precious kind of support that comes from a receptive and sympathetic public. Snug—and smug—in their encrypted reveries, humanists fail to notice that the room has emptied and they are talking only to themselves.

Ironically, this erosion of influence is accompanied by a passionate insistence on the part of some humanists that their work should effect social change. In the final essay, David Bromwich, professor of English at Yale University, writes that “the place of advocacy in teaching and research has become so prominent as almost to constitute in itself a separate description of what scholarship in the humanities is.” Higher education has accommodated itself to the twin ideologies of “reflection,” according to which institutions of learning must reflect what is going on in the society they serve, and “representation,” according to which scholarly interest and social identity must coincide. (The African-American scholar wanting to specialize in Milton would be viewed, at least, as a curiosity, as would the Native American medievalist or the female admirer of Hemingway.)

Overall, this collection gives the impression of a Web-site download perhaps 90 percent complete: the image is recognizable but wants the last degree of definition. It would have been sharper if the authors had been allowed to undo a couple of buttons on their dispassion—but that was explicitly not their assignment. They were asked to be descriptive as far as the data permitted, and to refrain from judgment. So certain questions go unanswered. Was there a failure of nerve on the part of humanists who watched while their colleagues danced on the cutting edge (where missteps have left them sliced and bloodied)? Did humanists listen politely to nonsense they might better have hooted off the podium? Did they shrink before challenges (“Who are you to say what's important?”) when they should have resisted?

The forces that have buffeted the humanities are not entirely external to them, as most of the contributors acknowledge. The state of the humanities is, after all, related to the state of humanists. It is not self-evident, for example, that changing demographics should have led to conspicuous transformation in the curriculum. The changes were voted in. They were justified, perhaps, as a way of helping students “start from where they are.” But most young people know where they are. The study of literature and history has always been an invitation to explore alien territory, to travel the distance from where one is to where one might be.

—James M. Morris

### GEORGE ELIOT:

#### *A Life.*

By Rosemary Ashton. Allen Lane/Penguin. 480 pp. \$32.95

No hidden cache of documents has been discovered and no drastic revision of literary reputation has occurred since the publication of Gordon Haight's commanding *George Eliot* in 1968. Why, then, attempt another biography? To explore “George Eliot the writer as well as George Eliot the woman,” is the reason given by Ashton, a professor of English at University College in London. Yet ironically this book has more to say about the woman than it does about the writer.

“Inquiring, skeptical, even rebellious by nature,” writes Ashton, Eliot “was also conservative, timid, self-doubting.” Ashton's retelling of the Victorian novelist's life (1819–80) is especially moving when she describes Eliot's insecurity about her art. Though fiercely opinionated toward others' work, Eliot withered at the slightest criticism of her own. To protect the eggshell fragility of her ego, both her companion and lover, George Lewes, and her publisher, John Blackwood, screened her mail, allowing only the most encouraging praise to reach her desk. Ashton tries to link this “diffidence” to Eliot's work, but the effort falls short. The best explanation offered is Eliot's own, which could have been written about many of her fictional characters: “I want encouraging rather than warning and checking. I believe I am so constituted that I shall never be cured of any faults except by God's discipline.”

—Sudip K. Bose