

GEORGE ELIOT AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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CHAPTER I

*Imperial knowledge: George Eliot, G. H. Lewes, and
the literature of empire*

... and yet, how little do we still know of Africa.

George Eliot¹

Like many of her contemporaries, George Eliot looked to the empire for solutions to poverty and unemployment in England. In January 1851, she moved from Coventry to London, and between 1851 and 1854 she edited the *Westminster Review* for its publisher, John Chapman. On December 20, 1851, her brother-in-law Edward Clarke died, leaving her sister Chrissey with six children and a considerable debt. Although Eliot had emigrated to London rather than to a colony to escape the “moral asphyxia” of the Midlands, she thought Australia was just the place for her widowed sister and six orphaned children. Chapman had traveled to Australia before becoming a publisher and he was at the time engaged in preparing Sophia Tilley, the sister of his mistress, Elisabeth Tilley, to emigrate to Australia (*GEL*, 2:93). Writing to her friends Charles and Cara Bray in Coventry, Eliot asked: “What do you think of my going to Australia with Chrissey and all her family?” According to this plan, Chrissey was to relocate permanently because she seemed to have so few alternatives in England; it may have been the one way to keep the family together. Eliot did not intend to stay, merely “to settle them and then come back” (*GEL*, 2:97). Chrissey’s emigration would give her a chance to travel, see the world, and return home, perhaps to write for an English audience about what she had seen in Australia.

Eliot’s vision of Australia as a salvation from the physical hardships and the social disgrace of poverty into which Chrissey had fallen derived from the reading and reviewing that made her life so radically different from that of her sister. Her position as editor of the *Westminster* was transforming her into a member of the London literary elite, the type of person who would never emigrate, but who would express opinions about the emigration of others. Several books about Australia had been

reviewed recently in the *Westminster*, including “the book of books for the emigrant,” Samuel Sidney’s *The Three Colonies of Australia*.² Samuel Sidney and his brother published many books on Australia, as well as articles in Charles Dickens’s *Household Words*. In 1850, Dickens wrote to his friend Miss Burdett-Coutts that he had gained from guidebooks some little knowledge of the state of society in New South Wales “of which one could have no previous understanding, and which would seem to be quite misunderstood, or very little known, even in the cities of New South Wales itself.”³ Dickens felt that this and other sources of second-hand information provided a sufficient basis for understanding and knowing Australia. His “little knowledge” was enough for him to support the emigration of others – of “fallen women” as part of the Urania House project beginning in 1847 and of his own sons in the 1860s.

Similarly, in 1850 Eliot looked to the popular guidebook for justification in urging the emigration of her sister, who had “fallen” in a different sense. Her plight was more like that of the Micawber family in Dickens’s *David Copperfield*. The initial plan had been to send Chrissey’s son Edward to Australia, where an acquaintance had “offered to place him under suitable protection at Adelaide” (*GEL*, 2:88). Eliot “strongly recommended” that Chrissey accept the offer and, perhaps under Chapman’s influence, continued to push the idea of the whole family’s emigration. She bought Sidney’s book and sent it to Chrissey “to enlighten her about matters there and accustom her mind to the subject” (*GEL*, 2:88). Sidney advocated “an influx of well-disposed, educated, intelligent families, prepared to carry on colonization by cultivation,” and clearly this was the image Eliot had of orderly settlement and a new life in the colonies.⁴ But Chrissey refused to go. She died in 1859, and her sons Edward and Charles eventually emigrated to Australia and New Zealand.

This moment of enthusiasm in 1853 was the closest Eliot ever came to visiting a colony. In 1854 she began living with G. H. Lewes and embarked on a shared intellectual life in which the two often read the same books. Their reading formed a common basis of knowledge, including knowledge about the empire, on which they drew to make joint decisions about issues such as emigration and investment. This reading included theories of, as well as practical advice about, the colonies. The case that colonization was regenerative for some Germans was made in W. H. Riehl’s *Die Naturgeschichte des deutschen Volkes* (1854). In her review essay “The Natural History of German Life” (1856), Eliot notes that Riehl “points to colonization” for the peasant class as the remedy for the

degenerative effects of civilization. She seems to concur that on “the other side of the ocean, a man will have the courage to begin life again as a peasant, while at home, perhaps, opportunity as well as courage will fail him” (Pinney, p. 281). Just as Riehl believed that the peasants were the most successful of German agricultural colonists, so Sidney remarks that British attempts to “fill ships with the higher and middle classes” have failed because “they are not the class who, in a body, can succeed” under colonial conditions in Australia.⁵

In the early 1850s, Eliot believed that emigration would enhance the development of the English race. She was thrilled at the thought of the “great Western Continent, with its infant cities, its huge uncleared forests, and its unamalgamated races” (*GEL*, 2:85). She recalled these early impressions of North America in an 1872 letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, in which she confessed that she “always had delight in descriptions of American forests since the early days when I read ‘Atala.’” She enjoyed the primeval setting of Chateaubriand’s 1801 romance about French colonizers and the American Indians they encountered in the Louisiana territory at the end of the eighteenth century, even though it was “half-unveracious” (*GEL*, 5:279–80). In the same letter, Eliot recalled admiring Stowe’s descriptions of the American South in *Dred, a Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, which she had reviewed when it appeared in 1856. The freshness of her early reading had faded by 1872, when she knew that she would never see the New World except, as she wrote to Stowe, “in the mirror of your loving words” (*GEL*, 5:279).

REVIEWING COLONIAL LITERATURE

Throughout the nineteenth century, the expanses of Australia, Canada, Africa, India, or “the East” were colored for those at home by the accounts of explorers, missionaries, emigrants, colonial officials, and novelists. Among the many categories of books Eliot read, travel and exploration narratives comprised a significant portion. Because she reviewed extensively in the 1850s, she read many classics of travel writing, such as Captain James Cook’s *Voyages around the World* and Alexander von Humboldt’s *Travels and Discoveries in South America*, as well as the most recent accounts of David Livingstone, Richard Burton, John Hanning Speke, and others. This reading established the groundwork of her knowledge about the empire, and textual information was infused later with personal experience of the imperial bureaucracy at home and correspondence with friends and relatives in the colonies.

In the 1850s, Eliot's writing negotiates the uneven ground of her knowledge about the empire in ways that contributed to her developing realist aesthetic. Like any other genre, colonial literature demanded critical evaluation. Her standard for the judgment of such books was not personal experience: she could not assess the descriptions of geography, natural life, and indigenous peoples based on her own travel. She could ask only, as she would of any book, whether it was well-written, informative, and consistent with similar accounts. In her 1856 review of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (vol. III), she defined "realism" as "the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature." While the objectives of travel and exploration literature were to inform and entertain rather than to achieve "truth and beauty," we find her suspicious that travel writing, like painting and fiction, could fail by "substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality."⁶

The social need for realistic representation was especially great in the descriptions of unfamiliar, foreign places. With the expansion of the empire through exploration and colonization, the observations of travelers had considerable cultural significance.⁷ In 1854, Eliot reviewed the Rev. N. Davis's *Evenings in My Tent; or, Wanderings in Balad Ejjareed*. "In comparison with other quarters of the globe," she wrote, "Africa may be considered almost as a *terra incognita*."⁸ Ever precise in her expression, Eliot summarizes the received wisdom about Arabs, neither crediting nor doubting it on her own authority: "Modern travellers concur in representing the Arab as singularly cunning, rapacious, and cowardly, apparently incapable of truth, and sunk in abject superstition; in fact, as exhibiting all the vices of an oppressed race."⁹ The depressed state of the Arabs is made known to her by Davis's account of their moral failings. As she would do later in her fiction, Eliot looks immediately to the conditions that created the alleged demoralization. She speaks against the negative effects of Christian missionaries, referring to the "evil that has been done by an *ill*-organized missionary system in some of our colonies, the irreparable injury to progress and to real civilisation."¹⁰ Real civilization resists the "narrow bigotry and intolerance" of missionaries and depends on "progress" of a more scientific nature.

Two years later, she made a similar case about representations of moral degeneration in her review of Stowe's *Dred*. According to Eliot, Stowe's social criticism is weakened (she commits "argumentative suicide") because her Negro characters are too good and fail to capture "the Nemesis lurking in the vices of the oppressed." Stowe "alludes to

demoralization among the slaves, but she does not depict it; and yet why should she shrink from this?"¹¹ A strict commitment to what Eliot sees as the realistic condition of demoralization among American slaves would show readers the consequences of slavery. Unflinching realism would lead readers to condemn slavery all the louder, just as Davis's account of the Arabs led Eliot to criticize the missionary system.

From her reviews in the 1850s through her last book, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Eliot expressed the conviction that oppression leads to a collective degeneration, whether in slaves, in the English working classes, or in colonized peoples. In *The Mill on the Floss*, her narrator observes of Philip Wakem: "Ugly and deformed people have great need of unusual virtues," but "the theory that unusual virtues spring by a direct consequence out of personal disadvantages, as animals get thicker wool in severe climates, is perhaps a little overstrained" (331). Similarly, in "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" Theophrastus observes: "An oppressive government and a persecuting religion, while breeding vices in those who hold power, are well known to breed answering vices in those who are powerless and suffering" (152). Together with realistic descriptions of landscape, architecture, or physiognomy, Eliot believed that the artist was obliged to represent such hard truths.

Eliot's reviews suggest that it was partially by balancing the claims of veracity and artistic merit in fiction and travel writing that she came to formulate her theory of fiction. The themes of her reviews, whether of fiction or non-fiction, are consistent. In an 1855 review of Charles Kingsley's historical romance *Westward Ho!*, she showed her willingness to appreciate his story while judging its realism cautiously. "We dare not pronounce on the merit of his naval descriptions," she wrote, "but to us, landlubbers as we are, they seem wonderfully real" (Pinney, p. 128). The next year she reviewed Richard Burton's *First Footsteps in East Africa* (1856). For her, accuracy of description in the literature of exploration was not sufficient. The author must also hold the reader's attention. Here Burton failed, and Eliot complained that his book "labours under the sin (unpardonable in the production of so extremely clever a man) of being dull." She objects that "we are hungry, and are not fed, we are thirsty, and find no drink."¹²

In other reviews, she speculated about the veracity of travelers' accounts with an implied concern that any inaccuracies or distortions would be perpetuated by less cautious readers. In a review of C. J. Andersen's *Lake Ngami*, she applauds the author's contribution to British geographical knowledge of southern Africa. Correcting the reports of

missionaries (received “second hand from Arab travellers”) about an enormous inland lake, Andersen shows that the lake “turns out to be a mirage – a mythus with the smallest conceivable nucleus of fact.” “So perishes a phantom,” she writes, “which has excited London geographers for a whole season.”¹³ Andersen, she remarks, is more hunter than scientist, but it is on these testimonies that scientists must depend. It took explorers like Andersen and Burton, she believed, to separate the facts from the myths. Eliot acknowledges that information about Africa was inconsistent and fragmented, and that unconfirmed reports could leave even men of science chasing phantoms.¹⁴

Eliot wrote in “The Natural History of German Life” that art is “the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot” (Pinney, p. 271). Her historical romance *Romola* (1863) illustrates her interest in reconstructing a non-English past based on her readings about it. *Daniel Deronda* shows her entering into the lives of European and English Jews, about whom her research made her expert. Yet her writing shows a decided avoidance of the realities of British colonialism. Considering her belief in emigration as a solution to domestic problems, she might have striven to extend the contact of her readers to the experiences of English colonists. Or, with her critical attitude toward missionaries, she might have shown the vices and answering vices of the oppressors and oppressed in any number of places about which she had read. But with the British empire, Eliot seems to have run up against the limits of her realism, or at least the limits of what she was willing to represent.

Mid-century fiction that does more than allude to parts of the empire is noteworthy in that action and violence in the colonies, whether in sport or in warfare, was consigned primarily to boys’ literature until the late nineteenth-century emergence of a new generation, most notably Kipling and Conrad.¹⁵ In the early part of the century, novels set in India would have been familiar to the British reading public. Scott’s *The Surgeon’s Daughter* (1827), for example, extended a Scottish romance plot to India. Novels were also written by Englishmen who had served in India, such as Colonel Meadows Taylor, author of *Confessions of a Thug* (1839) and four other Indian romances. W. D. Arnold’s *Oakfield; or, Fellowship in the East* (1853) was based on his experiences in India, as Henry Kingsley’s *Geoffrey Hamlyn* (1859) was based on his five years in Australia.

But authors such as Eliot, Trollope, Dickens, and Thackeray had a more oblique relationship to the empire. They resisted extending to

the colonies their representations of English life, yet the colonies are present in their fiction. Thackeray was born in India. Eliot, Trollope, and Dickens all sent sons to the colonies. Trollope represented the Australian colonies he had visited, but in the work of Dickens and Eliot colonial spaces constitute the margins of their fictional worlds, simultaneously lands of opportunity and dumping grounds: the “Indies” to which David Faux emigrates in “Brother Jacob”; the Botany Bay to which Hetty is transported in *Adam Bede*; the Australia to which Dickens’s Magwitch is transported in *Great Expectations* and to which Martha the reformed prostitute and Micawber the reformed debtor emigrate in *David Copperfield*. Eliot did not represent the colonies, which could seem alternately ominous and prosperous, but the tension between their image as “new worlds” for starting life over and as desolate, perilous margins of an empire to which the unwanted could be conveniently removed is evident in her life and fiction.

Although she never set a novel in the colonies, Eliot described those aspects of British imperialism that were part of her daily life as a resident in the metropolis of London. We can see her own experiences breaking in on her aesthetic argument. Correcting false images of English peasants in “The Natural History of German Life,” she applies a metaphor drawn from her own decontextualized observation. Speaking of the English ploughman, she writes that “the slow utterance, and the heavy slouching walk” remind one of “that melancholy animal the camel” (Pinney, p. 269). Such an exotic analogy is part of Eliot’s stated aesthetic project of representing the common English folk to English readers. It is possible that a greater number of urban middle-class readers had seen live camels than had seen live peasants. Where, we might ask, did Eliot encounter a camel? In a painting? A novel? Most likely it was at the London Zoological Gardens.

Once she moved to the Priory in Regent’s Park in 1863, the Royal Zoological Gardens were within walking distance. Through Lewes’s scientific observations, she became aware of the differences between animals in captivity, which she was able to view, and animals in the wild, about which she read, and this distinction is registered in her fiction. The imperialist nature of nineteenth-century zoos has received much critical attention. Harriet Ritvo argues that “[t]he maintenance and study of captive wild animals, simultaneous emblems of human mastery over the natural world and of English dominion over remote territories, offered an especially vivid rhetorical means of reenacting and extending the work of empire.”¹⁶ Robert W. Jones argues that in zoos “it was possible to

suggest, indeed to insist, that the animals were to be viewed as metonyms for imperial triumph, civic pride, the beneficence of God or scientific discovery.”¹⁷ Eliot assumes that even those who had never traveled to the natural habitat of camels – to northern Africa or northern India – would have been familiar with the vivid theatrical reenactment of the empire to be found in zoos and menageries.

In *Adam Bede*, she distinguished between the observed and the merely imagined in art: “Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult.” Her example of falsity is a drawing of a griffin – easy enough to do when there is no reality against which to test it, but “that marvelous facility which we mistake for genius, is apt to forsake us when we want to draw a real unexaggerated lion” (177). While no one can doubt that the drawing of a lion in a zoo represents a “real” lion, both Eliot and Lewes made a point of differentiating lions in zoos and menageries, which they had seen, and lions in Africa, about which they had only read. As Ritvo notes, the display of animals in zoos was a reenactment, a representation, of natural life in colonial places inaccessible to average zoo goers. Animals in captivity became symbols of British exploration and power. As we shall see, such animals, particularly lions, function as metonymic illustrations of Eliot’s knowledge of British conquest throughout the empire. Her dependence on zoos, like books about hunting, travel, and emigration, accentuated the limitations of her authority to represent the real. In her fiction, she highlights the differences between the real and the represented colonial experience, rather than attempting to represent realistically what she had not seen.

MANLINESS AND COLONIALISM

Lewes’s readings and reviews are relevant to Eliot’s experience in that they respond to colonial writing published in popular periodicals of the time. In 1850, Lewes and his friend Thornton Hunt established the *Leader* (1850–57), a weekly newspaper with a radical political agenda and commitment to literature and the arts. In his role as editor and primary contributor to the literature and arts section, Lewes reviewed some noteworthy publications and listed others. The lists, and frequently the review section, included books relating to the empire. Lewes’s writing shows that he was concerned with the moral effects of travel writing, as well as of literature and drama. Through his reviews, he scrutinized fundamental issues of English national character, including the stereotypes and conventions of manliness.

One of his harshest reviews was of R. Gordon Cumming's *Five Years of a Hunter's Life in the Far Interior of South Africa*. Cumming, who abandoned a colonial military career to devote himself to field sport, was the premier big-game hunter of the period and one of the first to capitalize on his success.¹⁸ Lewes objected to the brutality and bravado that characterize this account of lion-hunting in the same country to which his son Thornie would be sent thirteen years later with, as Eliot wrote, "a very sanguine expectation of shooting lions" (*GEL*, 4:117). Lewes confesses that in encounters between man and beast, "we heartily wished the lion success." He mocks Cumming's bluster, asking: "If a lion, obeying the impulses of his own nature, seeks for food and finds it in the flesh of a man whom he subdues, deserves to be tortured alive, what does the man deserve who, in mere wanton sport, slaughters animals with every circumstance of cruelty, and glories in the deed as if it proved his manliness?"¹⁹ The infliction of pain without limits and without sympathy signifies a descent into savagery that undermines any claims to manliness by which colonial activities might be justified. Further chiding Cumming, he writes: "Our sense of courage, hardihood, adventure, is lost in that of butchery . . . The page reeks with blood; and the writer smears himself all over with it as if blood in itself were ornamental!"²⁰ In Lewes's metaphor, the writer becomes the stereotype of a "savage," besmeared with the blood of his victim. The ultimate civilized act – writing – becomes a barbarous ritual, the very ink figured as blood.

Hunting narratives described performances that took place on a colonial stage and epitomized the relationship between conventional manliness and the empire. With his experience as an actor, playwright, and theatre critic, Lewes was insightful about performances on and off the stage. "Vivian," Lewes's persona in his theatre reviews for the *Leader*, was a bachelor dandy, who, in reviews with titles such as "Vivian in Tears," fusses about his clothing, teases and flirts with his readers, and self-consciously inquires into his manliness. Vivian's challenge to masculinist stereotypes carries over into Lewes's comments on books such as Cumming's. He is not afraid to berate inferior authors, nor to tweak fellow reviewers who "have touched but gently on its brutal and demoralizing tone, probably from some secret fear of being thought effeminate!"²¹ In undermining what passes for manly behavior in popular hunting narratives, Lewes accuses other literary men of insecurity about their manliness and neglect of their duties as reviewers. Such an offensive book should have been condemned by critics, but male reviewers shrink from speaking out against the hyperbolic manliness in the lion hunter's

story. Neither true manliness nor good literature, he implies, is to be found in the bloodthirsty pursuit of big game.²²

The distinction between adventure and butchery has implications for the behavior of the English in the colonies generally, and, by extension, for the treatment of native peoples. John MacKenzie argues that the “emergence of natural history specialisms, the division and ordering of the scientific effort, reflected the accelerating urge to order the world of nature, which was itself both an impulse towards and a symptom of the developing yearning to order and classify human affairs through imperialism.”²³ MacKenzie shows that scientific collecting meant “killing on a large scale.” Classifying and destroying, he argues, “epitomised Western man’s command of a global natural world.”²⁴ Yet as Lewes’s interest in hunting as mere sport was supplanted in the 1850s by a conception of hunting in relation to science, he continued to value the kind of manliness that avoided cruelty. He wrote, for example, that John Petherick “shows how a man may be strong and terrible without being brutal.”²⁵

“Lions and Lion Hunting,” written six years after his review of Cumming, discusses *Le tuer de lions* (1855) and *Chasse au lion et les autres chasses de l’Algérie* (1854), both by the Frenchman Jules Gérard.²⁶ More than the previous review, this article is concerned with natural history and what it has to tell us about lions. Lewes begins with the characteristically direct statement: “We know very little about lions,” and suggests that if scientists could only observe the lion in his natural environment as carefully as Gérard has done, “we should have another conception of the lion from that to be derived by a study of books or an inspection of menageries.”²⁷ Of course Lewes’s information is derived from Gérard’s book, but his point is that the hunter’s first-hand knowledge is valuable and his techniques instructive to the naturalist, who, with similar methods of observation, might produce a truer picture of natural life, rather than another lion-skin rug or trophy head.

The moral tone of the earlier article is missing from his reading of Gérard (whom he compares to Cumming), perhaps because he had begun to embrace the association between hunting and science and wanted to stress the contribution to knowledge that might be made by those who knew lions in the wild, even if they were hunters. Lewes implicitly criticizes menageries as productive of incomplete knowledge about animals, in part because the animals themselves are inferior specimens, ‘taken from the mother’s breast, bred like rabbits, deprived of the

fresh mountain-air and ample nourishment.”²⁸ The pathos of captivity is confirmed by an anecdote from Gérard’s book that describes the slow wasting of a lion, Hubert, caught by Gérard and brought to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. When Gérard, who had raised Hubert from a cub, visits him in the zoo, “He stood up, pressed against the bars, striving to break through the obstacle which separated us.”²⁹ Much affected, the hunter resolves to “kill as many lions as he could, but to capture no more.”³⁰ Gérard thus affirms killing manfully but despises the humiliations of captivity – a code of honor for lion-hunters.

As if to challenge the stereotypical manliness of the lion-hunter, Lewes’s article takes a whimsical turn, and describes his own encounters with two lions in the London Zoological Gardens. “We were once embraced by an affectionate young lioness,” he boasts, “who put her paws lovingly round our neck, and would have kissed our cheek, had not that symptom of a boldness more than maidenly been at once by us virtuously repressed.”³¹ Gone are the bars that separated Hubert and Gérard, whose manly love affair ended in tragedy. Turning tragedy to farce, Lewes presents a man’s love for lions, troping the conventions of courtship. In a tone more like that of “Vivian,” who rebuffed the advances of marriage-minded women, Lewes invokes an endearing if ludicrous image of the author standing face to face with a female lion, an experience surely missed by hunters in the wild. The lioness is not only personified, but cast as a leading lady to Lewes’s anti-hero, the man who loves rather than kills lions. Lewes experiences the lion as he would a pet; he takes great delight in the animals in this instance and in numerous other trips to the zoo described in his and Eliot’s diaries.

In the description of his second encounter with a lion, Lewes diminishes himself further by his willingness to appear ridiculous. He tells of his fascination with the angry roars of the “noble lion who occupies the last den” at the Zoological Gardens, and how “we one day got over the railing opposite his den, and began dancing and *hishing* before him, in a wild and, as we imagined, formidable manner.” Starting with this improbable image, Lewes continues:

Instead of flashing out in wrath and thunder, the lion turned his eye upon us, and in utter contempt continued licking his leg of beef, perfectly untroubled by our *hishing*, probably asking himself the meaning of those incomprehensible gesticulations. We felt small. He evidently did not think us worth even a growl; and we were forced to get back over the railing, utterly discomfited by the quiet dignity of his majesty.³²

Following an account of the many episodes in which Gérard is rushed by angry, roaring lions in the wild, Lewes's failure to make this less threatening lion so much as growl, leads him not only to feel, but to appear, small. For the sake of comic relief and his readers' entertainment, Lewes displays his domestication and humiliation. Crossing the boundary that separates the passive spectator from the captive and recalcitrant leonine performer, Lewes undercuts the notion that manliness is to be found in combat with wild animals, and makes such combat absurd through his parody of it. Here Lewes is the performer; the lion is the unimpressed audience.

However lightly done, this juxtaposition in the same article of the hunter's dramatic triumphs in Africa and the spectator turned spectacle in the London Zoo, is an important indication of Lewes's skepticism about displays of bravado and his self-consciousness about the relationship between gender and performance. Writing itself is a performance, and just as Cumming had smeared his pages in blood, so the critic exposes through mimicry the façade of manliness in the lion-hunter's text.³³

Eliot made a similar criticism of Charles Kingsley's *Westward Ho!*. In her generally favorable 1855 review of this immensely popular novel by the foremost proponent of "Muscular Christianity," she found fault with the violence that seemed to conflict with the sensibilities of the author. She wrote that the "ruddy and, now and then, rather ferocious barbarism, which is singularly compounded in Mr Kingsley with the susceptibility of the poet and the warm sympathy of the philanthropist, while it gives his writings one of their principal charms, is also the source of their gravest fault" (Pinney, p. 126). Her rebuke of the novel's representations of the Elizabethan age takes on a contemporary colonial significance when we consider that the novel is dedicated to "Rajah" Brooke, who had recently been censured in Parliament for his excesses against natives in Sarawak, and that Kingsley's depiction of the eviction of the Spaniards from Ireland was intended as a justification for such violence. Then and later, the figure of Rajah Brooke epitomized masculine imperial conquest, as in, for example, Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King," in which Daniel Dravot fantasizes, "we shall be Emperors – Emperors of the Earth! Raja Brooke will be a suckling to us."³⁴ Eliot complained of Kingsley that the "battle and the chase seem necessary to his existence" (Pinney, p. 126). This violence with which she found fault as art was a component of colonial manliness. In their reviews, both Eliot and Lewes condemned such glorified violence as unmanly.³⁵

THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

Much has been written about women and gender in Eliot's life and art, but there have been few considerations of how she experienced masculinity in her personal relationships or how she examined the category in her fiction.³⁶ *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) traces the painful process of socialization by which conventional masculinity is constructed. Rosemarie Bodenheimer notes that *The Mill on the Floss* "has always been understood as the last of the fictions to be generated directly from her provincial childhood," but that it also "marked a farewell to little sisterhood and a reorientation in Marian's experience of family life."³⁷ The young Maggie and Tom were created in part from the memory of her childhood relationship to her brother Isaac, yet while writing the novel she received letters from the Lewes boys, who were away at school in Switzerland. Thornie Lewes in particular wrote to her about hunting and about his schoolboy fights and war games. Tom Tulliver emerged from a combination of intense recollection of the past and present reflections on the struggle of teenage boys to establish themselves as men by the standards of their society, often in counter-distinction to their fathers' perceived failures by those same standards.

Issues of manliness in *The Mill on the Floss* circulate around images of hunting wild animals and of military combat and are linked by the larger themes of reading and imagination. Engaged in conversation with the mill-hand Luke, who is opposed to books on the grounds that "they're mostly lies," Maggie argues that through books we learn about other people, and "we ought to know about our fellow-creatures" (30). She offers the example of Goldsmith's *Animated Nature* with its "elephants, and kangaroos, and the civet cat, and the sun-fish" (30). "There are countries full of those creatures," she explains, "instead of horses and cows, you know."³⁸ Maggie is distinguished by her sympathetic imagination, which allows her to feel for "fellow creatures" of the animal and human kind. Her imagination takes flight with her knowledge of wild and exotic animals while Tom's remains grounded by ignorance.

It is typical of Maggie that she takes Tom's pedestrian account of schoolboy combat – giving Spouncer a black eye – and elevates her expectations of his bravery to mythic levels:

"O how brave you are, Tom! I think you're like Samson. If there came a lion roaring at me, I think you'd fight him – wouldn't you, Tom?"

"How can a lion come roaring at you, you silly thing? There's no lions, only in the shows."

“No; but if we were in the lion countries – I mean in Africa, where it’s very hot – the lions eat people there. I can show it you in the book where I read it.”

“Well, I should get a gun and shoot him.”

“But if you hadn’t got a gun – we might have gone out, you know, not thinking – just as we go fishing; and then a great lion might run towards us roaring, and we couldn’t get away from him. What should you do, Tom?”

Tom paused, and at last turned away contemptuously, saying, “but the lion *isn’t* coming. What’s the use of talking?”

“But I like to fancy how it would be,” said Maggie, following him. “Just think what you would do, Tom.” (34–5)

Tom’s desire for mastery, linked implicitly to his intellectual insecurity, requires him to deny the reality of animals of whose existence in the wild he is ignorant: “There’s no lions, only in the shows.” Maggie combines what she has read in the bible (the story of Samson) and what she has read in *Animated Nature*. She conflates the story of Samson slaying the lion with contemporary images of African lion-hunting. She inserts Tom into narratives unfamiliar to him, and he responds reflexively with simple solutions, first of shooting the lion, and then of silencing his sister. He ends the discussion with an assertion of literalism: “But the lion *isn’t* coming. What’s the use of talking?” Maggie’s intellectual emasculation of Tom (as if, like Delilah, she had shorn her Samson of his strength) is met with an outleap of metaphoric talons. Lacking both knowledge and imagination, Tom extinguishes Maggie’s fantasy about his bravery as completely as he smashed the earwig about which she had been making up stories “as a superfluous yet easy means of proving the entire unreality of such a story” (99).

The Mill on the Floss is structured by the gradual divergence of Tom and Maggie in response to specifically gendered social expectations. As her world expands through reading and becomes diffuse through her apparent superfluosity to her family, Tom’s views narrow and focus through an almost monomaniacal sense of purpose. He transforms his limitations into strength, working to save the mill and losing his already limited capacity for sympathy in his vow to avenge his father’s name. Their emotional differences are made explicit by the narrator when Mr. Tulliver emerges from his illness and faces the reality of his financial losses. The children wait in terror for their father’s response. Maggie “yet felt as if the sorrow made larger room for her love to flow in, and gave breathing-space to her passionate nature” (259). “No true boy feels that,” asserts the narrator: “he would rather go and slay the Nemean lion, or perform any round of heroic labours, than endure perpetual appeals to

his pity, for evils over which he can make no conquest" (259–60). Here the narrator echoes Maggie's casting of Tom as Samson, who killed a lion with his bare hands, by invoking Hercules, whose first great feat was to throttle the Nemean lion. And Tom is a "true boy," representing "the generic character of boyhood" (33) with a want of sympathy that leads even his loving sister to condemn him: "You have no pity: you have no sense of your own imperfection and your own sins" (347).

Tom Tulliver's sole imaginative moment in the novel is his hyper-masculine performance with the sword. He prepares to frighten his sister with small gestures toward making his "round pink cheeks" look formidable – blackening his eyebrows and winding a red handkerchief around his head to give it "the air of a turban" (179). Maggie misconstrues the costume, thinking Tom has made himself "like Bluebeard at the show" – an image threatening specifically to women. Tom corrects her by proclaiming "I'm the Duke of Wellington! March!" and frightens her onto the bed "as the only means of widening the space between them" in the small theatre of Tom's bedroom (180). Tom, "happy in this spectator of his military performances," marches on until the sword becomes too heavy and he drops it on his foot, fainting in pain.

This scene of masculine performance to a female audience occurs during that period in Tom's life when he has been explicitly feminized. Poor Tom, as the narrator reflects, has his male supremacy dislodged by his "education" at Mr. Stelling's. He "began even to have a certain scepticism about guns, and a general sense that his theory of life was undermined" (134). Ironically, by forcing Tom to learn Latin and refusing to "enfeeble and emasculate his pupil's mind by simplifying and explaining," Mr. Stelling makes Tom "more like a girl than he had ever been in his life before" (141). His self-image is further compromised by the "pretty employment" designed for him by Mrs. Stelling, of watching her baby girl. The narrator remarks that Tom might have come to hate "the little cherub Laura," but "there was too much in him of the fibre that turns to true manliness, and to protecting pity for the weak" (142–3). Yet that fibre is overcome by Tom's need to perform a masculine role that combines martial and sexual domination but that only emasculates him further, turning him temporarily into an invalid and forcing him to accept the sympathy of both Maggie and his natural enemy Philip Wakem, whom he had previously accused of being "no better than a girl" (173).

In her analysis of gender roles in *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot focuses on Tom's performance, not his imagination. Ironically, Tom's literalness

and lack of imagination do not secure his masculine identity, which, when under assault, is held together by force of will and by forceful acts. While Maggie's imagination takes her out of herself, in her daily life she nonetheless refuses to perform the role of the good girl that would make her family happy. Tom, who never imagines, is always acting as is expected, as a man should. Eventually he learns what it means to be manly through the hard work of redeeming the mill, but the sword scene and other performative moments in the first two books of the novel expose the gap between what Eliot considered real manliness and the displays of violence that passed for manliness.

Here, as elsewhere, Eliot is engaged in scrutinizing the process by which the English learned about other places and peoples through representations and thus came to understand the meaning of home. Characters in the novel, like the Dodsons, know who they are by knowing who they are not; they are not, for example, Tullivers. While critical of provincialism, the narrator is sympathetic to the domestic attachments that make a secure sense of identity possible. The description of Mr. Tulliver's feelings about the mill and the land on which he was raised calls attention to contemporary (*circa* 1860) reading about foreign travel and the very accounts of African exploration that Eliot reviewed in the 1850s. The narrator muses:

Our instructed vagrancy, which has hardly time to linger by the hedgerows, but runs away early to the tropics, and is at home with the palms and banyans, – which is nourished on books of travel, and stretches the theatre of its imagination to the Zambesi, – can hardly get a dim notion of what an old-fashioned man like Tulliver felt for this spot, where all his memories centred, and where life seemed like a familiar smooth-handled tool that the fingers clutch with loving ease. (263)

Through instruction, or reading, “our” imaginations “run away” and we are “at home” in foreign lands, rather than in England. Mr. Tulliver's vision of past and future is limited to this spot of ground. His love is the stronger for its narrowness. Modern sensibilities are wider and more inclusive, but, like Maggie's, more fractured and conflicted as a result. This is a difference between the English past and present as established by Eliot: her readers face the modern dilemma, as she did herself, of understanding where home was when “books of travel” made the foreign seem familiar. Surveying the British empire from the South Pacific palms to the Indian banyans and the African river Zambesi, *The Mill on the Floss* is both nostalgic for the hedgerows and old-fashioned ways of thinking

and critical of the restricted imaginations that constrain Maggie and Tom.³⁹

Although set in an earlier period, *The Mill on the Floss* is an indictment of the “moral asphyxia” that generations of sameness prepared for Mary Ann Evans and from which she saved herself by moving to London. She would have saved her sister Chrissey Clarke, the missing sibling from the autobiographical portrait of herself and Isaac, through emigration to Australia. Yet for Maggie, whose imagination extended to Africa and into worlds of sympathy and romance where Tom’s could not follow, there can be no solution apart from home. Both Maggie and Eliot’s earlier heroine Milly Barton, whose experiences of childbearing and poverty resemble those of Chrissey, are released only through death from predicaments that migration (to the city or to the colonies) appeared capable of solving in the Evans family.

COLONIAL EMIGRATION AND TRAVEL LITERATURE

Lewes, in his review of Livingstone’s *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, described the Zambesi as a “magnificent stream, which permits navigation all the year round” and “as fine a path into the interior as commerce could desire.”⁴⁰ Lewes also shared Livingstone’s optimism about the opening up of African commerce, noting that “for civilization, there must be commerce.” Colonial exploration and the expansion of commercial routes were among the modern changes that contrasted with the simpler life of the setting of *The Mill on the Floss*. Eliot’s vagrant imaginings were instructed by books of exploration and emigration, and the map of her imagination charted the *terra incognita* of Africa, even as her books focused intensely on the hedgerows and on the “familiar smooth-handled tool” of life in the rural Midlands.

By invoking travel literature as a common experience in *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot recalled her own reliance on similar guidebooks in considering the future of her family members. Sidney’s book on Australia and other emigrants’ guidebooks advised on matters such as the best emigration agent to use and clothes to pack, what weather to expect and crops to plant. They also described the behavior of a desirable new colonist. Long before Lewes thought of sending his sons to Africa, he reviewed Charles Barter’s *The Dorp and the Veld; or, Six Months in Natal*. He called the book “very acceptable to emigrants,” observing of the author with some ironic distance: “He has ‘strong views,’ and expresses them without equivocation. He ‘goes in’ for the extirpation of the Kafir.”⁴¹

Here his skepticism and implied disapproval is expressed through quotation marks, but the review evades the common if not majority view that the native South Africans should and would be exterminated as a result of British settlement. Some Englishmen approved of “extirpation” because they feared that continued exposure to “savages” might lead to their own moral degeneration, a backward sliding from moral progress of which the Boers were their prime example.

Emigration literature frequently addressed the potential for moral degeneration among English colonists. One guidebook, *The Settler's New Home* (1849), is quoted in Dr. Robert James Mann's *The Colony of Natal*.⁴² It advised against emigration to the newly acquired colony of Natal because of the “unsettled and unsafe state of the Kafir population.” The settlers themselves risk falling into a state of “barbarism” when the “antagonism of races degenerates into a loss of respect for humanity and life.” “Where there is no power of enforcing respect for the law,” this guide warns, “each man must depend on his bowie knife and revolving pistols.”⁴³ In the main, *The Settler's New Home* is alarmist and racist. Yet, rather than assume a stable moral superiority in the English, it worries about the moral consequences for the English of racial conflict in the colonies.

By the early 1860s, when Natal was more settled with Englishmen, official government propaganda was adept at promoting the virtues of frontier life and downplaying the brutality of some English settlers as well as the twin threats of physical danger and moral degeneration through contact with native populations. Mann wrote from his knowledgeable position as Superintendent of Education in Natal and could evaluate competing claims to correct rumor and misinformation: “Land is so cheap, that for the mere sum which would be paid in England for a single year's rental, a man may purchase hundreds of acres of his own fields, fell his own trees, and gather his own fruits.”⁴⁴ He stresses that life in Natal is “rude, rather than hard” and free from “the artificial restraints imposed by society at home.”⁴⁵ He concludes that reports of native hostility and warfare are greatly exaggerated, and that since 1849, when such warnings were issued, Natal has become “a flourishing colony of more than eight thousand prosperous European inhabitants, and with prospects brightening day by day.”⁴⁶

For anyone living in mid-nineteenth-century London who was attempting to assess the situation in Natal based on information available at home, the messages were mixed at best. Hunting was abundant and unrestricted; the Zulus were threatening warriors; Kaffirs were to be extirpated like so much wild game; land was cheap and life was hard but

good; English society had been replicated; opportunities for advancement exceeded those in the climate of restricted employment at home. It is easy to understand from a survey of emigration propaganda how a family in England, relying on its information, would be optimistic about the opportunities for their children in the developing British dependency, especially if they downplayed or failed to imagine race relations. The lure of opportunity was too strong to resist in the practical matter of finding careers for English sons. Eliot and Lewes's belief that the weather was fine and the land cheap, combined with a willful disregard for what they had read about the dangers and difficulty of life in South Africa, affected their deliberations about the emigration of Lewes's sons in the 1860s.

In reviewing travel literature, both Eliot and Lewes searched for the appropriate models for evaluation. What was scientifically proven and therefore credible and what subjective and dubious? To what extent were these representations, which claimed to contribute to knowledge, to be viewed as literature? In a favorable review of the *Narrative of a Mission to Central Africa* by James Richardson, Lewes reports simply: "No extract can convey anything like the picture here given of African character, especially in its barbarian aspects of sensuality, lying, and fanaticism, because the picture is painted by a series of minute touches, jotted down as experience furnished them."⁴⁷ The metaphor of the painted picture suggests that the narrative's contribution is artistic, but that its supposed realism also adds to English knowledge of "African character." Perhaps he chose the painting metaphor because he was aware that words such as "sensuality," "lying," and "fanaticism" inevitably represented subjective moral judgments rather than scientific information.

Five years later, when he reviewed Livingstone's *Missionary Travels*, he struck an optimistic tone about Africa: "Missionary zeal, trading enterprise, and love of sport, together with the native restlessness and spirit of adventure animating the Anglo-Saxon race, will soon bring us acquainted with the whole habitable surface of our globe."⁴⁸ Enterprise, sport, and adventure animated Lewes's emigrant sons, while scientific and technological advancements animated their father, who adds with enthusiasm that the English are "gradually mapping the whole earth; and our children may live to see railroads across the desert."⁴⁹

It was scientific knowledge that most interested Lewes and many of his contemporaries, and explorer-authors like Livingstone forced readers to revise previous beliefs by furnishing "a mass of precise information which materially modifies our previous conceptions of the African races."⁵⁰ The emphasis that Lewes was coming to place on the scientific rather than

aesthetic value of colonial books is reflected in his change of terms from “African character” in 1853 to “African races” in 1858. Livingstone’s book makes Richardson’s painted picture look less reliable. Lewes writes that with Livingstone, “we feel perfect confidence that what he narrates really did present itself to his mind in the way he mentions,” concluding that “his evidence is trustworthy, as far as it goes.”⁵¹ A reliable narrator like Livingstone encourages him to see similarities between Africans and Europeans and, revising his previous conclusions, he asserts that “all [Africans] are unequivocally endowed with the same faculties and tendencies, and in the same degree, as Europeans” and that their intelligence equals that of “any race known to us.”⁵² These conclusions, perhaps echoing Livingstone’s more altruistic motives for exploration, are a notable contrast to the previous picture of African “lying” and “fanaticism.” Lewes’s racial views were evolving based on the available, contradictory accounts of travelers; with more reading, he encountered more opinions.

Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine was a primary source of African exploration narratives as well as reviews of travel literature. John Blackwood provided a personal connection to great explorers of the age. In 1859, he wrote to Eliot describing John Hanning Speke, Richard Burton’s companion (and ultimately his rival), as “a fine manly unaffected specimen of an Englishman,” who is “very innocent of literature having since he went to India at 17 been devoted to wild sports and geographical discovery” (*GEL*, 3:131). Blackwood explains that despite “dangers and suffering” in Africa, Speke is “determined to go back and carry out his discovery.” Eliot replied that she envied Blackwood’s acquaintance with a “genuine non-bookish man,” adding that she wondered “when men of that sort will take their place as heroes in our literature, instead of the inevitable ‘genius’” (*GEL*, 3:133). Eliot turns the implied deficiency of not being literary into a strength appropriate for admirable characters in literature.

Her preference here for the non-bookish over the bookish man as a hero in literature is enigmatic but suggestive. She seems to imply an admiration for the kind of manly, if unliterary, figure represented by Speke. Her own heroes, Adam Bede and later Felix Holt, were intent on education, though not bookish. Tom Tulliver is explicitly not bookish but likes to be told “a good many fighting stories” by bookish Philip Wakem (165). Later male characters such as Will Ladislaw and Daniel Deronda are more literary, but not bookish in the sense that Casaubon is. Yet neither they nor any of her future heroes resemble an African explorer.⁵³ Perhaps the men of action like Speke were seen to be doing