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Introduction

> … though I have studied [Mill's] books, especially his Logic and Political Economy, with much benefit, I have no consciousness of their having made any marked epoch in my life. Of Mr. Herbert Spencer's friendship I have had the honour and advantage for twenty years, but I believe that every main bias of my mind had been taken before I knew him. Like the rest of his readers, I am of course indebted to him for much enlargement and clarifying of thought.
>
> (letter of August 13, 1875)

> If you referred to something in Mr. Lewes's letter, let me say once for all that you must not impute *my* opinions to *him*, nor vice versa. The intense happiness of our union is derived in a high degree from the perfect freedom with which we each follow and declare our own impressions.
>
> (letter of November 13, 1860)

> 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.
>
> Bessie R. Parkes (letter of March 6, 1852)[1]

What is an intellectual biography? It would be the story of a life largely devoted to and directed by ideas – i.e., the biography of an intellectual. In the case of an intellectual who is also a creative artist, little distinction is to be made between narration of the life and description of the works; the latter are life-events conveying not ideas as such but stances taken by the artist-intellectual toward aspects of her experience, her responses to the world. And they are often directed toward the reading public not only to convey those responses but to inspire life-experiences, too.

Studies of intellectual writers' development have had varying degrees of success in dealing with the interaction of thinking and living, and with the interaction of ideas and creative work. They range from compendia of

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mental acquisitions like Harris Fletcher's *The Intellectual Development of John Milton* to works like Newman White's volumes on Shelley, in which the poet's critical and political prose and his poetry are set side by side and accorded equal attention. Perhaps closest to an integrated account of intellectual activities and creative production are narratives of an author's readings becoming art, like J. Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (Coleridge's). A sense of this dynamic has not been achieved in previous biographies of George Eliot, though copious data on her activities and writings have been supplied by Gordon Haight and those proceeding in his wake.[2] Critical awareness of Eliot's fiction as a literature of ideas is a general and rewarding one, but her achievement in the specific genre of the novel of ideas has received only an outline in an essay by Gillian Beer.[3] The present work will not assign Eliot to specific philosophical movements, as have students of her Comtism, nor will it dwell on them as sources for her fiction, as those with critical emphasis have done. It will attempt instead a developmental account of her mental working, emphasizing change and expansion, refinement and response to challenges from without and within.

To take up another key question in approaching this subject: what is an intellectual? A vexed question, probably unanswerable to the satisfaction of all concerned since the intellectual is by its nature a permanently contested concept. Stefan Collini has usefully classified the myriad definitions of intellectuals under three heads: the "sociological sense," in which they are treated as a professional group necessary to, though different in, every society; the "subjective sense," an honorific and somewhat moralistic account, usually containing expressions like "a *true* [i.e., authentic] intellectual"; and the "cultural sense," featuring their publicly influential role, often with the sobriquet of "public intellectual."[4] I shall blend the three approaches, and consider Eliot as a mighty mind, operating in distinct social roles (editor, reviewer, translator, creative writer), and exercising, or attempting to exercise, ethical and perspectival influence in the society in which she worked.[5]

From her country home, Mary Anne Evans moves to a nearby city (Coventry) to be exposed to society in view of greater marriageability, and falls in with a group of freethinkers, the brother of one of whom has recently published the first English exercise in the "higher criticism" of the Bible. In this milieu, she finds a bourgeois lifestyle in place of her rural one, a Unitarian religiosity and emergent agnosticism instead of her Anglican upbringing, a devotion to scientific inquiry well in advance of her schoolgirl curriculum. She forthwith loses her faith not only in the stories of the son of

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God (the focus of Charles Hennell's critique) but in a loving and providential deity. To promulgate this insight, she translates the groundbreaking German work of higher criticism, David Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (*The Life of Jesus*). Much of her subsequent life is devoted to the making of a worldview in which the ethics, the social values and even the aura of religion at its best can be accessed without recourse to mythology. In this pursuit, much mythology and other writings are canvassed and converted to new meanings – a phenomenon familiar to culture critics from Nietzsche to Northrop Frye, which Sartre called "*la grande affaire*."[6]

After her father's death, after a Continental sojourn in virtual isolation, she moves to London on the offer of a journalistic position and directly enters the center of the intellectual world, becoming assistant editor (functionally, the editor) of one of the foremost quarterlies in the land. Although the *Westminster Review* had fallen on hard times, she restores it to its former eminence – no longer the organ of philosophic radicalism, now without partisan affiliation. In addition to reviewing for the literary journals, she translates a philosophical work on religion as mythology, thereby continuing the effort to contribute to her society's enlightenment.

In her new intellectual milieu, she befriends both a young journalist, Herbert Spencer, destined to become one of the leading philosophers and social theorists of the century, and a man of letters, George Henry Lewes, with a weekly journal of his own and an extensive repertoire in fiction, drama, literary criticism, history of philosophy, etc. No doubt moved by more than intellectual attractions, she elopes with Lewes, an unhappily but encumbered married man, in a non-demonstrative but socially defiant decision. Having skirted the margins of Bohemia in her relations with her editor's domestic circle, she steps into social marginality with a self-confidence rare in this most self-critical of geniuses.

To relieve her from the drudgery of copious but financially necessary book reviewing, Lewes leads her into a translation project with a disappointing outcome, then encourages her to try her hand at fiction. She takes up the idea with immediate success, taking "George Eliot" as a pen-name (and signing herself in correspondence as an equally fictive "M[arian] E[vans] Lewes"). In the course of a twenty-year career, she becomes England's greatest novelist, both in her own day and in the literary-historical canon. It is a wish-fulfillment story akin to the day-dreams of her fictional avatar, Maggie Tulliver.

Each of her seven novels is infused with a number of leading ideas, though their didactic drive is subsumed in an intensively detailed realism. Most are the products of extensive research in cultures past and present

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(though only *Romola* is set in a remote time and place), so as to stand as the foremost English examples of an important nineteenth- and twentieth-century subgenre, the novel of ideas.

Perhaps the only life-events in Eliot's relatively brief mature life (she died at sixty-one) not governed by ideas are her formal marriage – to a much younger friend, after Lewes's death – and her own death soon after.

Where did she get her ideas? Many were self-generated, of course, in response to encounters with people and things. She read the newspapers, often minutely, and commented on political and other events as we all do. But most of her ideas were stimulated by books and review-articles in the periodical literature of her day. To tell the story of how her life and writings were shaped by ideas we must follow the course of her reading as well as her more outgoing experiences. From the moment she channeled her religious de-conversion into the social activity of translating Strauss's *Life of Jesus*, Eliot was on track to be a public intellectual, and the decision to write fiction was only another, though a determining, step in that ongoing commitment. Indeed, one may claim that she was among the first intellectuals to write fiction – Godwin, Peacock and Edgeworth having preceded her in England – and that she was perhaps the greatest novelist to be an intellectual, sharing the top tier in this class with her almost exact contemporary, Dostoyevsky. One of the challenges in writing her life is at least partially to explain how an intellectual could so well transform herself into a creative artist.

This will be the story of a life of ideas not like Shakespeare's, in which a world of ideas is gathered in, on the condition that they lead to the making of great art. Nor will it be a story like that of Goethe, a continual generation of ideas on literature, science, life and love. It is, rather, like a life of Dante, in which the author assimilates the leading (and some of the laggard) ideas of his time and produces comprehensive work that can stand as the cultural summa of the age.

Given the evident appropriateness of such comparisons, we may venture to ask, just how intelligent was she? (A recent *New York Times* reviewer asks rhetorically, "Does anyone go near the word 'intelligent' without an armed escort these days?" [Dec. 17, 2006].) From any ideological standpoint, one would think a credible assessment of historical persons impossible in the absence of norms, even without standardized testing (or even with it), but the attempt has been made. In the 1920s, a group of Stanford University psychologists produced studies of the partially genetic basis of high intelligence, including a volume on "the early mental traits of three hundred geniuses."[7] Estimates were made on the evidence of contemporary reports

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of childhood achievements and on writings like John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* – naturally he tops the list. Eliot ranks in a rather middling category with an estimated IQ of 150, along with women like George Sand, Mme de Staël, Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Brontë; their male opposite numbers include Descartes, Hume, Hegel and Comte, along with Wordsworth, Byron and Tennyson. The strongest support for such an estimate comes from the fact that Eliot's schools were all of the local dames' school variety, with language instruction limited to French, and from the fact that she left school at age sixteen, i.e., that she was largely self-educated, adding Latin, Greek and German early on and Italian, Spanish and some Hebrew later, along with competence in history, philosophy, the sciences, social and physical, and numerous literatures.

Our present sense of awe at Eliot's accomplishments may be exaggerated, but they are in line with her contemporaries' view of her. Most such observations come in the years of her eminence as a novelist, but the few early ones are worth noting. George Combe, Britain's leading exponent of the would-be science of phrenology – correlating character traits with craniological measurements – made a reading of Eliot's skull in 1851 and noted in his journal: "Miss Evans is the most extraordinary person of the party [the Charles Bray circle] … She has a very large brain, the anterior lobe is remarkable for length, breadth, and height …" In addition to correlations of character traits and skull features, Combe ventured psychological and physiological observations of some precocity: "Her temper[ament] is nervous lymphatic. She is rather tall, near 40 apparently, pale and in delicate health." Though Combe was off the mark in his estimate of her age – she was thirty-one at the time – his mistake accords with his, and our own, sense of her as readily subject to depression and illness, as she would be throughout her life. While attentive to her masculine head proportions, he noted that "she is extremely feminine and gentle," and concluded, "she appeared to me the ablest woman whom I have ever seen."[8]

George Eliot was born in the Midlands countryside of England in 1819. Into which social class was she born? Her father, starting out in his father's craft as a carpenter, raised himself to become estate manager for an aristocratic family, the Newdigates, and by all accounts was accomplished in managerial and related specialities like forestry, surveying and property valuation. His income has not been reported, but he left property to his sons not only in Warwickshire but also in his ancestral Wales, along with £2,000 (life-income of £90 a year) to Eliot and each of her sisters. He was of "little schooling," according to Haight, and married, twice, women of approximately the same class: "His second wife, Christiana Pearson [George

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Eliot's mother], was the youngest daughter of Isaac Pearson, a well-established yeoman …" The word, not in our lexicon but in contemporary usage, permits a judgment about Evans's class; he himself used the term "yeomanry" in recording his son's entry into a semi-formal local group (Haight, p. 30). Not quite a gentleman, he was treated respectfully by his aristocratic employers, one of whom predicted that he would become Mayor of Coventry upon his move there. The social category gains further relevance from its Tory burdens of historical rootedness and traditional values, especially political affiliation with the ruling class, for Robert Evans was an unblinking Tory. We may measure the distance Eliot came in the course of her life when we recall another class term later used of her: "the Insurgents."[9] For this socially marginal grouping, I shall employ another term of comparable force: outsiders.

Evans was a member of the Church of England, in which denomination Eliot was raised. Her later apostasy from Christianity was not the first of her moves in the religious sphere. In adolescence, she showed affinities for what was then called Evangelicalism (with not the same meaning as in current parlance). What does it mean to be an Evangelical at that time? I shall address this question more closely in Chapter 1, but one may anticipate that this was Eliot's first decisive intellectual stance, and that like later stances it was marked by distinctly individual features.

To anticipate the direction, if not the conclusions, of this study: Eliot has been called many things by her critics, some of them apt even when they seem contradictory. Given a minimal definition of positivism, it might be generally agreed that she was a positivist with a small *p*, eschewing the rigors of Auguste Comte's Positivist movement but maintaining a steady commitment to the advancement of knowledge, yet with an awareness of the non-rational elements and the ultimate limitations of all forms of inquiry. These limitations are the defining marks of positivism, according to Edwin A. Burtt's definition: "It is possible to acquire truths about things without presupposing any theory of their ultimate nature, or, more simply, it is possible to have a correct knowledge of the part without knowing the nature of the whole."[10] The rubrics sometimes used in describing the balance between her positivism and her non-rationalist streak are "religious humanist" or "romantic humanist."[11] To her humanism we may assent, but the adjectives "religious" and "romantic" are more problematic. Even without placing Eliot in the Romantic tradition, a number of critics have ascribed to her its defining epistemological tenet that "truth is not an objective structure, independent of those who seek it … but is itself in all its guises created by the seeker." Without impugning the value of many of their observations

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on Eliot's fiction, I believe this characterization to be off the mark, perhaps as a result of a disposition toward Romantic ideology, in its postmodernist guise, entertained by many current literary scholars. Instead, I shall maintain that Eliot's view was that the mind is capable of learning pragmatic and scientific truths with assurance, though within its cognitive limitations, with specific qualifications for their processing, and without access to ultimate reality.[12]

Some misreadings of Eliot's fiction stem from a tendency to find her turned to the dark side of the human quest for knowledge rather than the bright and open one – in keeping with the Romantic or postmodern perspective. Thus, *Middlemarch* is frequently held to display Eliot's disdain for all "keys" or totalizing systems, without recognizing that Casaubon's quest for a key to all mythologies is doomed to failure not by the impossibility of generalization about mythologies but by his specific point of view, that of an orthodox cleric who believes that they are all mere veiled forms of Christian truth. Similarly, Eliot's description of the enthusiasm and imagination involved in another character's search for the "primitive tissue" is often glowingly approved, but without taking account of the fact that this pre-cytological research, whether by the fictional character or his opposite numbers in the history of science (the great Bichat is invoked), was on the wrong track – as acknowledged in the text – and that the true state of affairs, the structure of the cell, was discovered in less romantic fashion by a plodding succession of approximations, culminating in Schleiden and Schwann. (The subject will be pursued in discussing *Middlemarch*.) On the other hand, Eliot displayed considerable interest in the totalizing (and ultimately discredited) mythological theory of Max Müller, reading his works consecutively as they were published; and she never lost interest in, though she never took on, the totalizing systems of Comte and Spencer. She appears to have valued both the failed exercises of scientific imagination, since they were imaginative, and the overarching systems of the grand theorists, since they were grand, without despairing of reliable conclusions in a middle ground between subjectivity and abstraction.

Eliot's confidence in the power of mind, despite its limitations, to achieve progress through scientific investigation was only one strain in a broader faith in human advancement. The evidence I go on is typified by Eliot's credo, a poem she wrote in 1865, part way through her career in fiction (indeed, she used three lines from the poem as an epigraph in *Felix Holt*). It is from "A Minor Prophet," in which a simplistic optimism is satirized and a better kind proposed:

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> The faith that life on earth is being shaped
> To glorious ends, that order, justice, love
> Mean man's completeness, mean effect as sure
> As roundness in the dew-drop – that great faith
> Is but the rushing and expanding stream
> Of thought, of feeling, fed by all the past.
> Our finest hope is finest memory,
> As they who love in age think youth is blest
> Because it has a life to fill with love.
> Full souls are double mirrors, making still
> An endless vista of fair things before
> Repeating things behind; so faith is strong
> Only when we are strong, shrinks when we shrink.
> It comes when music stirs us, and the chords
> Moving on some grand climax shake our souls
> With influx new that makes new energies.
> It comes in swellings of the heart and tears
> That rise at noble and at gentle deeds –
> At labours of the master-artist's hand
> Which, trembling, touches to a finer end,
> Trembling before an image seen within.
> It comes in moments of heroic love,
> Unjealous joy in joy not made for us –
> In conscious triumph of the good within
> Making us worship goodness that rebukes.
> Even our failures are a prophecy,
> Even our yearnings and our bitter tears
> After that fair and true we cannot grasp;
> As patriots who seem to die in vain
> Make liberty more sacred by their pangs.[13]

Noteworthy in this credo is its idealistic vision, its fervent commitment to the possibilities of progress – a disposition so out of date in modern intellectual circles as to make it sound, pejoratively, "Victorian." Its emphasis on the relevance of past experience in directing human enterprise is devoid of nostalgia; though this sense of the past is imbued with reverence and love, it enables us to envision "an endless vista of fair things" without "repeating things behind." This is also a humanism that, while indulging in abstractions like "order, justice, love," focuses on personal determination: "faith is strong / Only when we are strong." It supplies ample space for the positive influence of art, here exemplified by the evocative power of music. And it has room for the politically idealistic: "patriots who seem to die in vain / Make liberty more sacred by their pangs." This "presentiment of better things on earth" (to extend the quotation) is so out of keeping with

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the postmodern temper that it is no wonder that it has been all but ignored in Eliot criticism.

Other aspects of Eliot's humanism call for attention, even at this preliminary stage. One is the belief in a human essence, another tenet at odds with the postmodern belief in the almost exclusive influence of culture rather than human nature in determining what we are and do. (Neurobiological research is helping to dispel this illusion.) Eliot had no trouble speaking of "the state of mind which cares for that which is essentially human in all forms of belief" (*Letters* III, 111). Hence her appreciation of the varieties of religious experience well before that phrase was established in the canon. Multicultural variety was attractive to her not in and for itself but rather as it speaks to the manifold forms of innate human aspiration toward things of the higher life.

A second such principle is her tragic sense of life, whose relation to her optimism is a problem "clear to no man who is capable of apprehending it" – as she says of another such crux in *The Mill on the Floss*.[14] Thus her ars poetica: "the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures" (*Letters* III, 111; this is the letter in which she also speaks of "that which is essentially human in all forms of belief"). Eliot's imaginative sympathy in her individual portrayals and her inducement of personal responsiveness among her readers have been rightly judged the high moral burden of her writings, but their evocation of mankind as a band of "struggling erring human creatures" must be regarded as having equal, tragic force.

George Eliot, it is not too much to claim, was the first tragic novelist; others, like Goethe, had produced instances of the tragic novel (in his case, *Die Wahlverwandschaften* [*Elective Affinities*]), but Eliot's work in this vein includes *Adam Bede*, *The Mill*, *Romola* and important elements of *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. All of these have lighter tones throughout and redemptive features in their denouements, to be sure, but in each the tragic sense of life – especially for the female protagonists, Hetty, Maggie, Romola, Mrs. Transome, Gwendolen (Dorothea is the exception) – is predominant. (That these women's tragedies derive from their dysfunctional relations with men – or their relations with dysfunctional men – adds a piquant note of modernity to this version of tragedy.) Eliot can be placed with the classical tragedians on the one side and with Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad on the other, placed among those who would join Hardy in declaring, "if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst" ("In Tenebris II").[15]

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These elements of a tragically idealistic mentality – the "main bias of [her] mind," I would claim – represent only the underpinnings of a continual mental development, the "enlargement and clarifying of thought" (to employ phrases from the epigraphs to this Introduction). The stages of this process, following her initial de-conversion, include: her absorption of the positivistic view of knowledge and its application to social progress exemplified by Mill, rather than by the rationalistic utopian program of Comte; her qualifying of positivism's social-scientific generalizations by drawing on early knowledge of rural folk and folkways (which the work of Wilhelm von Riehl served merely to crystallize); her expanding sense of the complexity of human behavior, enriched by her readings in the emergent sciences of anthropology and sociology; and her late resort to the idealistic element involved in national aspirations (rather than to that ideology itself), given her increasing despair of the power of her own or anyone else's altruistic teaching to modify contemporary England's individualist ethos. In her last years, she turned to the role of culture critic, making intellectual critique her object in published and unpublished writings. Thus, although her thinking and writing initially and primarily operate at the level of personal experience, they develop larger resonance in the culture of her time.

Two further aspects of the current project should be specified early on. One concerns the variety of evidence to be employed in the following narrative. This study will try to assess the effect of Eliot's experience, both intellectual and non-intellectual, on her fiction and other writings. The effect was subtle and diffuse, rather than concentrated in a select number of strands that could be called influences. Transmitted ideas were thoroughly mixed with and modified by less lofty acquisitions. The resonances of her early "Evangelical" phase (the quotation marks to be explained below) carried into the portrayal of religious protagonists throughout her oeuvre. But the ideas and emotions of her initial orientation were supplemented by casual and interpersonal resources, for example, "my aunt's story" in *Adam Bede*, or personal reports of anti-Evangelical agitation in "Janet's Repentance." Writing fiction was, of course, guided by her reading of fiction, and her favorites – Goethe, Scott, Sand, Balzac, et al. – became models of fiction's range and power. But she also took negative guidance, learning from reviewing what she called "silly novels" how not to write one. Her experience of Germany and German culture was both broadly meaningful and subtly pointed: in an alien space, she could begin to grasp the total scope and complexity of a social organism, while reflecting on the peculiar aspects of her own society brought to mind by the contrast. Again, her reading of and even some casual activity in science made few direct

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