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0521403669 - George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Reading of the Novels

David Carroll

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Introduction: a working hypothesis

At the climax of *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver sits alone in an agony of complete uncertainty. Her life has reached an impasse in which the opposing claims on her are so finely balanced that decision is impossible. In the silence she listens to two voices, two texts which she knows by heart and which speak through her, offering conflicting interpretations of her dilemma. Stephen Guest's letter calls her out of her penance 'back to life and goodness', to which in counterpoint she murmurs the words of the *Imitation of Christ* like a prayer: 'I have received the Cross'. There is no possible resolution of the conflict between passion and duty, for the terms themselves have by now become interchangeable. 'Am I to struggle and fall and repent again?' asks Maggie, as she listens to each voice in turn through the rising storm. Oscillation has taken the place of narrative progression and any kind of closure seems impossible. At this moment the flood-waters rise around her and the novel proper ends as the heroine breaks through into a different fictional reality: 'She was not bewildered for an instant – she knew it was the flood'.¹

This is the kind of culminating episode we are familiar with in novels by George Eliot. The central character, usually the heroine, experiences a moment of extreme oscillation, contradiction, or vertigo. It is a privileged moment towards which the whole narrative has been moving and it announces that the search for a coherent view of the world has finally broken down. Every possible scheme of meaning within the novel has been found partial and inadequate. Such episodes indicate the limits of intelligibility. Like Maggie, Romola is unable to make sense of her conflicting loyalties and so abandons Florence in despair, drifting away in her boat; in *Felix Holt*, Esther Lyon, appropriated in turn by the male protagonists, awaits in uncertainty for the appearance of the ghost of Transome Court; while Gwendolen Harleth, with all her escape routes finally blocked, sees

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herself sailing eternally on, under Grandcourt's surveillance, like the Flying Dutchman. Such highly charged moments not only question conventional morality, they also dissolve the normal co-ordinates of space and time and so challenge the verisimilitude of the fictions to which they belong. They demand a breakthrough into another kind of fictional reality.

The main purpose of this study is to examine the crisis of interpretation which these moments epitomise and upon which George Eliot's career as a novelist was based. She saw her fictions as 'experiments in life'² and, as such, each experiment proceeds by the testing, juxtaposing, comparing, and contrasting of different ways of making sense of the world until coherence reaches its limit and breaks down into incoherence. This process is, in fact, what life is and it is never-ending. 'None of our theories,' says the narrator in *Felix Holt* laconically, 'are quite large enough for all the disclosures of time.'³ And in a well-known letter of 1848, before she began writing fiction, George Eliot states clearly how this lack of symmetry both energises our lives and accounts for their pathos:

Alas for the fate of poor mortals which condemns them to wake up some fine morning and find all the poetry in which their world was bathed only the evening before utterly gone – the hard angular world of chairs and tables and looking-glasses staring at them in all its naked prose. It is so in all the stages of life – the poetry of girlhood goes – the poetry of love and marriage – the poetry of maternity – and at last the very poetry of duty forsakes us for a season and we see ourselves and all about us as nothing more than miserable agglomerations of atoms – poor tentative efforts of the Natur Princip to mould a personality. This is the state of prostration – the self-abnegation through which the soul must go, and to which perhaps it must again and again return, that its poetry or religion, which is the same thing, may be a real ever-flowing river fresh from the windows of heaven and the fountains of the great deep – not an artificial basin with grotto work and gold fish.⁴

This vivid account defines some of the crucial characteristics of the moment I am seeking to isolate and also generalises it into a description of the disruptive rhythm of life itself. This rhythm consists, first, of the creation of a theory of life, a philosophy, a world-view, 'poetry or religion', whatever one calls it, which reconciles the self and the world. Inevitably and essentially, each paradigm proves to be inadequate when subjected to the 'disclosures of time' and collapses. Then, both the self and the world simultaneously become fragmentary and meaningless: the former becomes simply a heap of atoms and

the latter a collection of objects. But the process must continue unless the self is to contract and rigidify, and so each phase of wholeness and coherence is succeeded by the prostration of meaninglessness. This basic pattern informs George Eliot's thinking about life at its most prosaic level and at its most apocalyptic. It is a model which accommodates both a gradualist and a catastrophist view of the world.

Such an account of the individual life is a commonplace of romantic thought: life is a vale of soul-making, periods of holistic joy alternate with the aridities of dejection as the evolving self continues its search for, and creation of, more and more comprehensive meanings. The model was most memorably redefined for the Victorians by Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* (1833–4). My aim is to show that in George Eliot's novels this view of life is assimilated, refined, and extended to a whole new range of experiences by means of her special awareness of the crisis of interpretation which the Victorians were experiencing. She was uniquely fitted to express the implications of this crisis since her own life was a sustained response to the orthodox creeds she had rejected. As one of her contemporaries commented: 'The sleepless sense that a new code of duty and motive needed to be restored in the midst of the void left by lost sanctions and banished hopes never ceased to stimulate her faculties and to oppress her spirits'.⁵ As an intellectual of formidable learning she was fully aware of the latest developments in a whole range of intellectual disciplines undergoing radical change: biblical studies, philosophy, biology, psychology, historiography, mythology, philology, sociology, and anthropology. As a novelist she could deploy her fictions to domesticate these revolutionary ideas in the lives of ordinary people. In acknowledgement of this, critics have studied the effects of many of these branches of knowledge upon the form and language of her fiction.⁶ My aim is to suggest that George Eliot was fundamentally concerned with all these branches of learning because each was grappling in its own way with the problem of interpretation.

Another way of expressing the same idea is to say that George Eliot's career and fiction can best be understood in the context of nineteenth-century hermeneutics. It was during her lifetime that hermeneutics developed from a body of rules for the translation and understanding of ancient texts, biblical and classical, to the recognition that interpretation was a foundational activity in which everyone was inescapably involved. The history of this philosophical tradition,

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originating in Schleiermacher and Coleridge at the beginning of the century, developing through Dilthey and Heidegger, and culminating in the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur in our own time has been described on several occasions.⁷ George Eliot was not only familiar with the works of the German nineteenth-century philosophers working within the tradition, but she and Lewes also knew many of them personally. And it is significant that her first two major works were examples of that central hermeneutic activity, translation, and – more significantly – translations of German works exploring radically new ways of interpreting the life of Jesus and the essence of Christianity. It was, of course, in the field of theology that some of the most innovative and radical Victorian thinking was being carried out. But my concern is not with the history of ideas. It is rather to explore the larger implications of what I see as this central concern of George Eliot, namely, that it was because of her awareness of the fundamental role of interpretation in all areas of life that she was able to redefine the nature of Victorian fiction: its presentation of character, the role of the narrator, the structure of its narrative, the depiction of social and historical change. The intensity of her career as a novelist comes from her vivid, almost apocalyptic, sense that traditional modes of interpretation – making sense of the world – were breaking down irrevocably. Each of her fictional experiments as it moves towards the inevitable episode, the contradiction, the gap which disconfirms its hypothesis, is enacting that crisis with increasing urgency.

What evidence is there in George Eliot's novels that she was aware of what I am calling the Victorian crisis of interpretation? I have already suggested that her protagonists invariably experience a series of crises which arise essentially from the difficulty of interpreting their situation in the world. This, of course, is integral to much nineteenth-century literature. But one can point to elements in her fiction which are more specifically concerned with the traditional problems of hermeneutics.⁸ *Scenes of Clerical Life* parodies and then re-deploys biblical exegesis in the lives of her chosen clergymen, with particular emphasis on typology, a means of linking past, present, and future which is developed in new directions through Mordecai and the Cabbala in *Daniel Deronda*. Typology is also used as a structuring device in *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*, as Dinah's sermon and the legend of St Ogg's are fulfilled in their antitypes at the climax of those novels. Then there is legal hermeneutics. The law-court scenes

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in *Adam Bede* and *Felix Holt*, and the trial scenes in *Silas Marner*, explore the difficulties of applying legal principles to the details of human circumstance and motivation. Even where there are no formal trial scenes, one senses repeatedly in George Eliot the need to confront received truths, assumptions, and conventions, with the insoluble dilemmas of her major figures in a kind of surrogate trial. The most sustained case of this occurs in the final chapters of *The Mill on the Floss* when everyone in St Ogg's 'passes judgment' on Maggie, according to their own premises. Closely related to these are those crucial confessional scenes where the mentors – such as Mr Gilfil, the Rev. Tryan, or Daniel Deronda – seek to assess the heroines' guilt or innocence by interpreting their garbled narratives. Then, there is the evidence in the novels of George Eliot's fascination with the hermeneutics of literary and historical research: in *Romola*, for example, Bardo and Baldassarre seek to recover the classical roots of the Renaissance, one through editorial reconstruction, the other through epigraphy. But perhaps the novelist's most overt acknowledgement of the centrality – and the pitfalls – of the interpretative enterprise can be found in *Middlemarch*, in the juxtaposition of Casaubon and Lydgate: one searching for the founding religious myth, the other for the original organic tissue. And finally, one could point to the end of *Romola* where, after Savonarola's trial by fire and subsequent interrogation under torture, the heroine scrutinises his printed confessions to separate, with lengthy and tortuous exegesis, the genuine from the corrupt text in order to assess his claim to martyrdom. The model here is the biblical criticism of the Gospel narratives.

These, however, are simply particular episodes and devices in the novels where interpretative activity is crystallised. My argument is that they are symptomatic of profound tendencies which affected George Eliot's fiction in more pervasive and fundamental ways. One of these is to be found in her development of that crucial convention of Victorian fiction, the omniscient narrator, into a more and more subtle means of interpretative commentary within the novels themselves. As J. Hillis Miller has pointed out, 'omniscient' is a misnomer since the narrators in this tradition, far from being divinely transcendent, 'identify themselves with a human awareness which is everywhere at all times within the world of the novel'.⁹ This is certainly true of George Eliot where the sympathetic identification of commentator and the characters is stressed. And this is directly related to the

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increasing difficulties the narrator experiences in seeking to judge or interpret the narrative. At the end of *The Mill on the Floss*, for example, the narrator acknowledges that there is no simple interpretation of Maggie's dilemma, 'no master-key that will fit all cases', and that in the absence of 'general rules [which] . . . will lead them to justice by a ready-made patent method', the casuist is to be preferred to the man of maxims.¹⁰ And, as a casuist, the narrator is more intent on unravelling a few human lives and 'seeing how they were woven and interwoven'¹¹ than in grand theory or general principles. It is true that in the later novels she appeals increasingly to science, philosophy, and historiography for illumination, but such analogies have a disturbing habit of undermining themselves. In *Middlemarch*, for example, the pier-glass analogy at the beginning of chapter twenty-seven both philosophically asserts and solipsistically questions any attempt to understand other people; while the analogy of the microscope directed on a water-drop in chapter six prompts 'interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse' when a stronger lens is used.¹² By the time of *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot is using her commentary to express these uncertainties even more emphatically. The paradoxical problem is, how do you assert undogmatically the unquestioned truth that things appear different in different perspectives? The narrator finds it more and more difficult to link general observations about the world and human nature to the details of the narrative; when they occur, they appear as ambiguous commonplaces protected by a kind of ironic self-deprecation. There is a growing sense that the convention of authorial omniscience is at risk if the act of interpretation itself needs continual explanation and justification.

Another area where George Eliot's hermeneutic awareness finds expression is in the representation of character. One of the most vivid acknowledgements of this was made by the historian Lord Acton on the news of her death in 1880. His own life has been spent, he wrote, 'in endless striving to make out the inner point of view, the *raison d'être*, the secret of fascination for powerful minds, of systems of religion and philosophy, and of politics'. But the problem – which neither the historians nor the poets have solved – is in knowing 'how to think or feel as men do who live in the grasp of the various systems'. The novelist, he maintains, had this ability.

George Eliot seemed to me capable not only of reading the diverse hearts of men, but of creeping into their skin, watching the world through their eyes, feeling their latent background of conviction, discerning theory and habit,

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influences of thought and knowledge, of life and descent, and having obtained this experience, recovering her independence, stripping off the borrowed shell, and exposing scientifically and indifferently the soul of a Vestal, a Crusader . . . without attraction, preference, or caricature.¹³

The terms of praise are significant. The novelist has confronted the problems of the historian and solved them in her fiction. How do people make sense of the world? What is their point of view, their *raison d'être*, their system of thought, by means of which they interpret reality? In other words, Acton implies, George Eliot depicts character as an act of interpretation.

This aspect of her writing is most apparent in those sketches of minor characters which consist essentially of an interpretative scheme or rationale. Unlike the major figures, they are the embodiment of one rather than a sequence of paradigms. Mrs Cadwallader, an aristocrat living in provincial Middlemarch, 'believed as unquestioningly in birth and no-birth as she did in game and vermin'. As a result, 'her feeling towards the vulgar rich was a sort of religious hatred . . . such people were no part of God's design in making the world; and their accent was an affliction to the ears. A town where such monsters abounded was hardly more than a sort of low comedy, which could not be taken account of in a well-bred scheme of the universe.'¹⁴ The ironic over-statement makes the point clearly. By means of her well-bred scheme, based on blood, birth, and genealogy, Mrs Cadwallader cuts reality into her approved shape. These are the co-ordinates of her world-view, her scheme of the universe, her religion. The novels are, of course, full of such sketches, ranging from the assorted clergymen of *Scenes of Clerical Life* through the Renaissance types in *Romola* to the aristocrats of *Daniel Deronda*. George Eliot has helped to transform the Theophrastan character sketch and its later developments into a scheme by which the world is interpreted. It is worth noticing that even with such relatively minor figures the reader is provided with a double perspective; free indirect speech both enters the character's world-view and stands back from it. This fulfils, in Carlyle's words at the beginning of the Victorian period, the true methods of character depiction: 'to see into him, understand his goings-forth, decipher the whole heart of his mystery: nay, not only to see into him, but even to see out of him, to view the world altogether as he views it; so that we can theoretically construe him'.¹⁵ The sentiments anticipate Acton's fifty years later and point to a particular obsession in this great age of biography and fiction.

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The presentation of character as world-view is essentially dialectical, as these comments indicate. The self and the world are constituted simultaneously. In describing how a character shapes his world, the novelist is showing at the same time how his self takes shape; and even with minor figures this is made possible by the flexibility of omniscient narration as it enters and then disengages from the worlds being created. Explanation and understanding work together in the act of interpretation. With the major characters, the narrator's interpretative turn from explanation to understanding is announced publicly in a manner which becomes a hall-mark of George Eliot's fiction. Such a moment occurs in *Middlemarch* in the depiction of Mr Casaubon: 'Suppose we turn from outside estimates of a man, to wonder, with keener interest, what is the report of his own consciousness about his doings or capacity.'¹⁶ There is a medical quality to this kind of shift: after the diagnosis of symptoms the doctor asks the patient how he feels. The two, of course, never coincide fully. The discrepancy, the tension between the outside and inside estimate, is what character consists of and makes the future possible.

George Eliot's vivid awareness of this both vitalises and constrains her fiction. Interpretation by its nature is never definitive; illumination and concealment are inseparable and always in tension. If life consists of a never-ending series of crises of intelligibility, if character is 'a process and an unfolding', as she says in *Middlemarch*,¹⁷ then any attempted encapsulation – even in the terms praised by Lord Acton – is bound to falsify. There are always discrepancies between the characters' rationale of life, their feelings, and their actions; Mrs Cadwallader has, after all, married a provincial clergyman. This is also the reason why the reader-as-interpreter is warned against premature judgment. George Eliot concludes her sketch of her minor character's world-view in this way: 'Let any lady who is inclined to be hard on Mrs Cadwallader inquire into the comprehensiveness of her own beautiful views, and be quite sure that they afford accommodation for all the lives which have the honour to co-exist with hers.'¹⁸ For as well as the narrator and the characters, the reader too is involved in the hermeneutical enterprise and should be aware of the limited horizon of her own world-view. Inevitably, such problems of analysis, explanation, and depiction are multiplied when it comes to the major characters. The problems become such an integral part of the narrator's difficulty in fulfilling his role as commentator in any conventional sense, that by the time of *Daniel Deronda* they are being

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additionally foregrounded in George Eliot's own chapter mottoes. 'How trace the why and wherefore in a mind reduced to the barrenness of a fastidious egoism?', she asks, before attempting to dramatise another cryptic episode in Grandcourt's life.¹⁹ But the impossibility of the task has already been expressed in a previous motto. Since people have, like the planets, both a visible and invisible history, then 'the narrator of human actions, if he did his work with the same completeness, would have to thread the hidden pathways of feeling and thought which lead up to every moment of action'.²⁰ Such strict deduction is not possible in human affairs, and it is in the inevitable discrepancy between the desire for a comprehensive explanatory scheme and particular, recalcitrant circumstances that the energy and challenge of George Eliot's fiction are to be found.

The novelist's direct involvement in the changes transforming nineteenth-century hermeneutics in many areas of intellectual life and belief can be seen most vividly in her work as editor and reviewer at the beginning of her writing career, when she was most closely involved in the intellectual and literary life of London. An examination of her writings at this time will help us to understand her response to some of the major changes in nineteenth-century thought. Her persistent aim, it will be seen, was to define a state of mind appropriate to a crisis of interpretation.



In her essays and reviews, George Eliot shares with other Victorian thinkers the sense that the modern mind's predicament is a consciousness of its own belatedness. The past and its traditions had become remote and alien in a new way, to which the growth of hermeneutics in the nineteenth-century was a response. Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* expresses a vision of the individual and society through Professor Teufelsdröckh's old-clothes philosophy as a continual discarding of old, unfashionable beliefs and systems; while Matthew Arnold, in his essay on Heine, sees 'the sense of want of correspondence between the forms of modern Europe and its spirit' as an inescapable fact of life. This is no less than 'the awakening of the modern spirit'.²¹ And one of the most familiar expressions of this awareness in Victorian literature is that of lovers amidst the ruins of a past civilisation, a *topos* which reaches a kind of hermeneutical epitome in the Roman honeymoon scenes in *Middlemarch*. There, the

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idealistic bride and the scholar groom, both seeking ‘a binding theory’, are overwhelmed by the ‘stupendous fragmentariness’ of a Rome which had once been ‘the spiritual centre and interpreter of the world.’²² It is, however, in her non-fiction writings that George Eliot begins to explore the various responses of modern thought to this dilemma. What theories of interpretation are available to understand both the past and, by implication, the present which is its consequence?

Though the essays and reviews cover a wide range of subjects – philosophy, sociology, biblical criticism, mythology, and art as well as literary criticism – their persistent concern is to define a method of thought, a balanced, critical mental stance appropriate to the middle decades of the century. In all these areas of knowledge, George Eliot is seeking to alert her readers, principally of the *Westminster Review* and the *Leader*, to recent intellectual developments. Significantly, the major proponents of these ideas are German scholars whose thoroughness and sophistication are used to criticise the naivety and parochialism of English culture. Her most direct advocacy occurs in her essay, ‘A Word for the Germans’ (1865), where she seeks to revise John Bull’s caricature of these continentals as ‘cloudy metaphysicians’. In contrast to the ‘sound British thinker [who] kicks a stone to prove that matter exists’, George Eliot characterises ‘the German mind [which] possesses in a high degree two tendencies which are often represented as opposed to each other: namely, largeness of theoretic conception, and thoroughness in the investigation of facts’. She is fully aware that either tendency can lapse into eccentricity – cloudy metaphysics or mind-numbing pedantry – but this again is simply the vice of that German virtue, thoroughness. George Eliot refuses to be sidetracked from the quality she admires, that ability to combine painstaking research with theoretical self-consciousness. ‘Without them, historical criticism would have been simply nowhere; take away the Germans, with their patience, their thoroughness, their need for a doctrine which refers all transient and material manifestations to subtler and more permanent causes, and all that we value most in our appreciation of early history would have been wanting to us.’²³

On these grounds she praises the work of the philosopher Gruppe (‘The Future of German Philosophy’), the sociologist Riehl (‘The Natural History of German Life’), the biblical scholar Von Bohlen (‘Introduction to Genesis’), the classical scholar Böckh (‘The