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

David Carroll

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Two versions of George Eliot, both very influential, have emerged from the study of her life and work. One is the radical Victorian thinker, formidably learned in a whole range of intellectual disciplines, to which she made major contributions during her early years in London. The other is the reclusive novelist, enigmatic, sybilline, celebrating through her fiction the communal values which were being eroded in the modern world. This study brings the two together, and by placing her within the crisis of belief and value acted out in the mid-nineteenth century, it reveals the unity of her whole career.

George Eliot saw this crisis as one of interpretation, and the intensity of her writing comes from the vivid, almost apocalyptic, awareness that traditional modes of interpreting the world were breaking down irrevocably. This study shows how, in response to this, she redefined the nature of Victorian fiction – its presentation of character, the role of the narrator, the structure of narrative, the depiction of social and historical change. Each of her novels becomes an experiment which tests to the point of destruction a variety of Victorian myths, orthodoxies, and ideologies, as it moves towards its climax – the inevitable contradiction which disconfirms all theories of life.

George Eliot and the conflict of interpretations articulates the tension, novel by novel, between the writer's suspicion of orthodox creeds and her urgent need to restore values in a sceptical age. Each attempt to break through the conflict of interpretations acknowledges the urgency of the need and the provisional nature of any resolution.

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For Dorothy, Sara, and Helen

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Preface

The idea for this study of George Eliot's fiction came initially from the scene at the end of *Romola* in which the heroine seeks to interpret Savonarola's confession. With great care she examines the unreliable documents, listens to the reactions of the Florentines, and re-lives her own experience of the priest as she carries out her agonised exegesis. It is a many-layered episode in which Romola not only identifies herself with Savonarola but also comes to represent the author, the narrator, and the reader. Everyone is engaged in the difficult act of interpretation. The scene seemed to epitomise vividly a crucial and characteristic aspect of the novels and, at the same time, to place George Eliot firmly within the context of mid-nineteenth-century hermeneutics, where a crisis of interpretation was being acted out in a variety of intellectual disciplines.

This was not, of course, a new discovery. In recent years, several critics have studied the influence of many of these branches of knowledge on the form and language of George Eliot's fiction. I am thinking of such revealing studies as E. S. Shaffer's examination of the effects of biblical criticism on secular literature which culminates in a detailed analysis of *Daniel Deronda*; or Gillian Beer's tracing of the interactions between Darwin's evolutionary theories and narrative process in the last two novels. Others have examined, for example, the influence of psychology, mythology, and sociology on the fiction. All of these works demonstrate the novelist's intimate and formidable engagement with those disciplines which were at the forefront of Victorian radical thought. But my aim, which is both more general and more specific, is not to try to emulate such studies, but to show that George Eliot was fundamentally concerned with all these branches of learning because each was grappling in its different way with hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation. Consequently, I maintain that any reading of the novels should pay special attention

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to the various and complex ways in which the characters, communities, the narrator, and, of course, the reader, seek different and conflicting forms of coherence through the act of interpretation.

This study attempts such a reading. Though I have found some contemporary writing on interpretation theory helpful, my aim has been to assimilate this without technical language to an account of George Eliot's own hermeneutic and then to a reading of the separate novels. My main indebtedness is to the scholars and critics through whom George Eliot studies have been so well served during the last thirty or so years. I acknowledge, amongst many others, my particular debts to Gillian Beer, Felicia Bonaparte, the late Gordon Haight, Barbara Hardy, U. C. Knoepffmacher, George Levine, E. S. Shaffer, and Alexander Welsh. I am indebted to Andrew Brown for his sustained interest, to the Humanities Research Committee of Lancaster University for research funds at an opportune time, and to the staff of the libraries at St Deiniol's and Lancaster University for their assistance. My special thanks are to Michael Wheeler for his encouragement and support over many years.