

## *Introduction*

For learning to love any one is like an increase in property: it increases care, & brings many new fears lest precious things should come to harm.

George Eliot to the Hon. Mrs. Robert Lytton (*GEL*, 5:106)

Upon his arrival in Cape Town on October 14, 1866, George Henry Lewes's youngest son wrote to his parents in London that he had visited the local library: "I saw the *Fortnightly Review* and all Mutters Books. They had also Felix Holt."<sup>1</sup> Herbert (Bertie) Lewes was waiting in Cape Town for a steamer that would transport him to Durban, where he would join his older brother Thornton (Thornie) and begin a new life. Bertie would never return to England and would die in 1875 – six years after the death of his brother – at the age of twenty-nine.

During their time in South Africa, the Lewes boys wrote dozens of letters to their father and George Eliot. Though Marian Evans had been living with Lewes since 1854, Lewes did not tell his sons about her or about his estrangement from their mother Agnes Lewes until 1859. They began to write to Miss Evans – who now called herself Mrs. Lewes – as "Mother" and to Agnes – who was still married to their father – as "Mamma." Rosemarie Bodenheimer has written in detail about Marian Lewes's "struggle to answer to the demands of her stepmotherhood," arguing that "to love Lewes perfectly was both to nurture his sons and to ensure at least Thornie's and Bertie's absence from the life of 'dual egoism.'"<sup>2</sup> This crucial familial context for Eliot's fiction is part of a larger social pattern of English life in which the decision was made to expatriate these young men. In her stepsons' letters from South Africa, Eliot read descriptions of landscapes and peoples she would never see. She followed their failures with the care of one who had invested emotionally and financially in their success. She knew a great deal about life in South Africa, and she had possessions there as well: she was a shareholder in

the Cape Town Railroad, which gave her further cause to care about the South African colonies.

It is significant that one of Bertie's first sights in South Africa was the complete works of George Eliot, including the newly published *Felix Holt* (1866). These novels provided South African colonists with a nostalgic vision of England as well as a connection with the latest contemporary fiction. The *Fortnightly Review*, which Lewes edited from January 1865 through December 1866, brought them up to date on political and cultural issues at home. As a new and permanent emigrant, Bertie described the South African landscape and architecture to his parents. He also imagined sending someone home, as if in his place: "I should like to send you home a little nigger boy for a flunkey. They are such pretty little things."<sup>3</sup> The presence of new English writing and of new English colonists in South Africa is emblematic of the exchanges between England and its colonies in the 1860s – of books, people, and capital.

In 1870, when Eliot wrote to Mrs. Robert Lytton (Edith Villiers) – wife of the future Viceroy of India – that "learning to love anyone is like an increase in property," she confessed to a "proprietor's anxiety" for her friend's well-being. This metaphor in a letter that describes her sorrow over Thornie's death the year before highlights her association of ownership and affection at a time when her identity as a wealthy shareholder and stepmother was thoroughly established. The English had a proprietor's anxiety about their colonies – an emotional as well as material investment in life overseas – which matched in intensity, if not in character, the investment of English colonists at home.

There is no apparent warrant for associating Eliot's shares in Cape Town Rail with her stepsons' emigration or the sale of her novels to the colonies. Yet all are linked both to her domestic finances and to the consolidation of the South African colonies. The export of English literature, money, and sons to the colonies formed a pervasive and diverse culture of empire in mid-nineteenth-century England. But the systemic totality of that culture was not perceived or articulated by those who were implicated in it. *George Eliot and the British Empire* assumes the existence and coherence of nineteenth-century British imperialism, but only as a retrospective construction. In the years covered by this study (1850–1880), the Victorian experience of the empire was local and fragmented. The benign pursuit of caring for family by providing financial security through investments and finding colonial careers for young men helped to consolidate notions both of imperialism and of Englishness. The social conditions that permitted the Lewes boys to end their lives in South

Africa, and Eliot to amass a portfolio of colonial stocks, were the same social conditions in which she wrote her fiction – itself a valuable export to the colonies. Although there was no imperialist agenda behind either her actions or her writing, the empire and the domestic culture that sustained it are crucial to understanding both.

*George Eliot and the British Empire* reexamines some of the assumptions of post-colonial criticism about Victorian fiction. Among them is the notion that the author's experiences are irrelevant to understanding her writing. Another is that we can explain the presence of the empire in British fiction through the retrospective imposition of terms such as "imperialist ideology" or even the concept of imperialism itself. As Richard Koebner argued in his classic study of the word "imperialism," between 1852 and 1870 the British public "was not conscious of the idea that the problems of British rule could be surveyed or made the subject of criticism on the basis of so comprehensive a notion as the term *imperialism* implied."<sup>4</sup> Eliot's comments about various aspects of British colonial rule around the world in her letters, as well as her essays and fiction, support this claim. Imperialism was associated with others – the Turks, the Russians, the French. Even as they began to formulate the broad objectives of English rule, the English did not yet see their rule as imperialism. As C. K. Dilke wrote in his *Greater Britain* (1869), "not only is our government in India a despotism, but its tendency is to become an imperialism, or despotism exercised over a democratic people, such as we see in France, and are commencing to see in Russia."<sup>5</sup>

Eliot was aware of colonial reform movements, and of anti-colonialist views, such as those of the radical politicians Richard Cobden and John Bright.<sup>6</sup> Yet while she was critical of what she read about the empire, she could not formulate a critique of British "imperialism" as it would later be defined. Just as she reacted against fiction that seemed to depart fancifully from the observed details of daily life, her conscious response to the pervasive writing about the colonies confirmed her belief in realistic representation. The fact that she turned to the colonies to establish careers for her stepsons and to maximize her income from writing does not mean that she was subject to a monolithic "imperialist ideology." With the advantage of hindsight, *George Eliot and the British Empire* brings the various aspects of her experience together, and also elucidates the fragmentary nature of the empire as perceived by Victorians at home during her lifetime.

Eliot wrote her fiction between 1857 and 1878, during the phase of British colonialism that preceded the New Imperialism and "scramble

for Africa” that began in the decade after her death in 1880. She began “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton” in 1856 – a year in which she wearied of reading about “Indian mutinies” (*GEL*, 2:383). She published her last novel, *Daniel Deronda* in 1876, when Queen Victoria was crowned Empress of India. Colonial events such as the Indian Mutiny, the crowning of Victoria as Empress, and the Governor Eyre controversy (contemporary with the action of *Deronda*) receive just enough attention in her letters and fiction to assure us of her familiarity with them. While some critics have noted correspondences between British colonial activity and Eliot’s fiction, the more immediate aspects of her colonial knowledge and experience have gone unrecognized.<sup>7</sup>

In 1860, she purchased her first shares in The Great Indian Peninsular Railway. In the same year, she helped Thornie Lewes to prepare for his Indian civil service examination, the failure of which would lead him to the colony of Natal. These domestic decisions influenced Eliot’s perspective on English society and her portrayal of characters facing similar familial and financial pressures. Whereas her earliest use of the colonies as a narrative solution is the transportation of Hetty Sorrel to the penal colony of Botany Bay, Australia in *Adam Bede* (1859), characters such as David Faux in “Brother Jacob” (1864), Will Ladislaw in *Middlemarch* (1871–2), and *Daniel Deronda*’s Rex and Warham Gascoigne look to the empire – in all but the last case fancifully – as a career.

*George Eliot and the British Empire* argues for the importance of the colonial context to our understanding of Eliot’s fiction and to a fuller and more accurate picture of her situation within Victorian culture. To this end, it combines cultural studies, literary criticism, and biographical analysis. All lives are unique; they are also typical. I read the particulars of Eliot’s life as instances of patterns and habits among the upper-middle-class London society to which she gained access by virtue of her success as a novelist. Such a perspective on Eliot’s quotidian relationship to the empire may demystify her status as an artistic genius, but it need not neglect or oversimplify the exquisite complexity that sustains our ongoing attempt to interpret her fiction. With a fuller understanding of her typicality, we can see more clearly her popularity among Victorian readers, who appreciated the realism of her representations in ways that are frequently lost to us.

It is my contention that biographical analysis is essential to any form of literary studies that seeks to place literature in historical context, and that evading facts and issues that are central to the author’s life can lead to misinterpretations of both texts and contexts. Biographical analysis as I

use it makes no attempt to link an author to the interpretation of a text via psychological speculation, or to limit interpretations of her fiction to what we know about her “intentions.” Though the “intentional fallacy” does not create the anxiety it once did, it is nonetheless a legacy, the effects of which literary scholars and critics continue to feel. The methodological developments of New Historicism and Cultural Studies, while breaking away from New Criticism and rediscovering history by acknowledging all forms of discourse as legitimate material for illuminating literary texts, have nonetheless incorporated a belief in the “death of the author,” which persists even in literary criticism for which establishing historical context is the stated aim.

In questioning the assumption that the author is irrelevant to her writing, I want to make clear that the biographical facts that interest me are not the subjective marks of authorial personality. What can and should be gained from biography is an appreciation of the framework in which lives were led, issues debated, and decisions made. In the nineteenth century, colonialism is part of that framework. The known facts about Eliot’s active role in her society’s promotion of colonialism can provide insights into the knowledge and expectations shared by readers, writers, and even fictional characters.

We are fortunate to have a great deal of historical documentation of Marian Evans Lewes’s life. Her daily activities and impressions are recorded in her surviving letters and journals. Bodenheimer argues that letters as well as novels are “acts of self-representation in writing” and both may be taken as fictions.<sup>8</sup> While letters and even private journals are acts of self-representation, they are also cultural artifacts – texts that provide clues to the broader cultural contexts in which authors wrote. Together with the letters and journals of Lewes, with whom she lived for twenty-four years, these documents show the continuity of private and professional lives – of Marian Evans Lewes and George Eliot. They reveal her concerns about family, friends, and finances, as well as her engagement with the intellectual and political issues of her time. The development of her art is central in this material, which has been mined for its relationship to her fiction since the publication of John Walter Cross’s *George Eliot’s Life as Related in her Letters and Journals* (1885). Certain events in her life have become canonical in the study of her work. “Originals” have been discovered for characters in *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* since their publication. Her break with her brother Isaac Evans over her relationship with the married Lewes is accepted as the impetus for her perspective on their childhood together as recalled in

*The Mill on the Floss*. The evangelical phase of her young adult life is thought to be a model for Dorothea Brooke's religious ardor. These sometimes reductive equations, which focus on her early life and assume that her memory of the past was more important than her experience of the present, draw on a standard biographical narrative that has become as familiar to contemporary students of her writing as any of her novels.<sup>9</sup> I am presenting a new George Eliot, whose imagination and aesthetic principles were shaped by her experiences as a reader and reviewer of colonial literature, a colonial shareholder, a stepmother to colonial emigrants, and, ultimately, a critic of colonial war. This new focus clarifies her metaphoric and her explicit references to the empire, as well as her realism, moral perspective, and sense of English identity.

Eliot's novels preserved a distinctive Englishness and provided a touchstone of national identity for colonial emigrants and readers throughout Great Britain. In her late works, she perceived this Englishness to be in a state of transformation under the pressures of colonial dispersion and cosmopolitanism at home. Her last book, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), self-consciously reconciles the fragmenting intrusions of colonial knowledge and the need to consolidate Englishness. Theophrastus, in making an analogy between Englishmen and Jews, observes that "our own countrymen who take to living abroad without purpose or function to keep up their sense of fellowship in the affairs of their own land are rarely good specimens of moral healthiness," yet the consciousness of having a motherland preserves these "migratory Englishmen from the worst consequences of their voluntary dispersion" (156). As Eliot's only contemporary fiction, *Impressions* defines character types as products of late nineteenth-century culture, assessing the future of England and Englishness in an era of "cosmopolitan indifference" and an English diaspora to the colonies of which she had direct experience.

Critics have noted the role Eliot's fiction played in consolidating English identity. Some have touched on the empire as a disruption to visions of rural England. Elizabeth Helsinger argues that Eliot's novels "contradict their own project of creating a cohesive national identity because they register painful memories of exclusion, and still more dangerously, of complicity in excluding others, at the center of images meant to bridge difference and construct new national communities."<sup>10</sup> In fact, Eliot's fiction is conscious of the distinctions between self and other. Theophrastus writes: "It is my way when I observe any instance of folly, any queer habit, any absurd illusion, straightway to look for something of the same type in myself, feeling sure that amid all differences there

will be a certain correspondence” (104). And he extends the individual case to the general, the geographic and geological differences by which England defined itself – “just as there is more or less correspondence in the natural history even of continents widely apart, and of islands in opposite zones” (104).

Eliot’s fiction was trained from the start on representing life in England, and the moral imperative of her realism had its nationalist component: to expand limited notions of Englishness by including “otherness.” “The Natural History of German Life” (1856) is one of her most important aesthetic statements preceding the realist fiction she would begin writing in 1856. In it she describes the “picture-writing of the mind,” the psychological process by which we associate images with abstract words or concepts. She is interested in *how* we imagine in relation to what we know, speculating that “the fixity or variety of these associated images would furnish a tolerably fair test of the amount of concrete knowledge and experience which a given word represents” (Pinney, p. 267). Although we are all in the habit of visualizing what we have not seen, such mental pictures depart from reality and are not to be trusted. To illustrate her point, she chooses a word familiar to all her contemporaries:

The word *railways*, for example, will probably call up, in the mind of a man who is not highly locomotive, the image either of a “Bradshaw,” or of the station with which he is most familiar, or of an indefinite length of tram-road; he will alternate between these three images, which represent his stock of concrete acquaintance with railways. But suppose a man to have had successively the experience of a “navvy,” an engineer, a traveller, a railway director and shareholder, and a landed proprietor in treaty with a railway company, and it is probable that the range of images which would by turns present themselves to his mind at the mention of the word “railways,” would include all the essential facts in the existence and relations of the *thing*. Now it is possible for the first-mentioned personage to entertain very expanded views as to the multiplication of railways in the abstract, and their ultimate function in civilization. He may talk of a vast network of railways stretching over the globe, of future “lines” in Madagascar, and elegant refreshment-rooms in the Sandwich Islands, with none the less glibness because his distinct conceptions on the subject do not extend beyond his one station and his indefinite length of tram-road. But it is evident that if we want a railway to be made, or its affairs to be managed, this man of wide views and narrow observation will not serve our purpose. (Pinney, pp. 267–8)

The tendency to entertain expanded views exists in inverse proportion to experience – that is, the less one has observed of a thing, the easier it is to generalize. In 1856 railways signified not only progress within Great Britain but the spread of “civilization” around the globe, particularly



in those parts where the British were laying the “lines.” The familiarity of railways made them a conceptual link between the concrete and the abstract – the local tram-road and the vaguely imagined tracks emerging from jungles and passing through deserts.

The invocation of railways in an essay that argues for social realism in fiction reveals a connection between the geographical and imaginative expansion of England to the empire and Eliot’s narrowing of the field of fictional representation to what has been observed by the author. The unlikely advent in 1856 of lines in Madagascar and the absence of railways in the Sandwich Islands (i.e. Hawaii) make her hypothetical first man’s wide views an apt illustration of the inaccurate associations against which her theory and practice of fiction developed, as she goes on to suggest by comparing “railways” to “the masses” and elaborating on misconceptions about the peasant classes as presented in art.

With railway investment such a prominent part of English life, it is worth asking whether and how Eliot and others visualized the colonial railroads they were helping to build. Anthony Trollope, who owned colonial stocks and was a frequent traveler on colonial railways, described the South Central Pacific and Mexican Railway scam in *The Way We Live Now* (1875). Eliot’s fellow realist took the consequences of misrepresentation to their logical extreme. His imaginary railway was invented to defraud English investors, who were only too willing to speculate on what did not exist. Eliot, too, was anxious about the English habit of imagining foreign places on the basis not of observation but of fanciful associations to which they were all the more susceptible for being ignorant.

Eliot’s notion that images invoked in speech and writing are a test of “concrete knowledge and experience” raises the question of what counted for her as concrete knowledge. Her aesthetic position and its relationship to her own representations challenge us to understand the world she knew. The narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* remarks that, “our instructed vagrancy . . . is nourished on books of travel and stretches the theatre of its imagination to the Zambesi” (263). In her fiction, Eliot redirected the “theatre of the English imagination” to commonplace reality within England. The empire was an inherent if abstract part of that reality and thus was present even in Eliot’s domestic fiction. The imaginative vagrancy of her contemporaries was extended through books of travel that Eliot read and reviewed. She could not hope to curtail that instruction, but sought rather to concentrate her readers’ attention on the English landscape and on knowable ways of life overlooked in the vagrant passion for exploration and travel.



In Victorian culture and society, representations of the British colonies filled the imaginations of those at home with images that constituted a shared basis of knowledge. Beliefs about the indigenous inhabitants of colonies emerged into what Eliot, describing the traditions of representing the English peasantry, called “prejudices difficult to dislodge from the artistic mind” (Pinney, p. 269). The name that has been given to one form of nineteenth-century colonial discourse is “Orientalism.” Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) argues that nineteenth-century British and French writers, in attempting to represent the East, unconsciously reproduced a self-referential set of images which became intransigent prejudices in Western thought and art, and, as Said writes, created “not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe.”<sup>11</sup>

The representations of colonized people that post-colonial critics have shown to be instrumental in legitimizing imperialism were precisely the kind of romanticized misrepresentations that Eliot saw as distorting middle-class perceptions of the English peasantry. In *Adam Bede*, she wrote that the need to represent the “common, coarse people” as they really were was political and social: “It is so needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy, and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes” (Pinney, p. 178). Eliot applied the same analytic standards to representations of the empire, which she recognized as treacherous for readers who could not verify published accounts by their own observation. While she could not formulate her critique in the terms used by late twentieth-century post-colonial theorists, she saw the danger of looking to “literature instead of life” (Pinney, p. 269). She argued against English pastoralism as a “tradition” – the kind of cultural formation that Said, following Foucault, calls a “discourse.”<sup>12</sup>

This book explores a disjunction between the expressed politics of a realist aesthetic that did not permit Eliot to represent what she had not seen, and life in a society that encouraged practical decisions based on abstractions – “the colonies.” That is, contemporary sources of knowledge about the colonies were not reliable enough to form the basis of artistic representations but were sufficient to support the emigration of sons and the investment of capital. Eliot’s knowledge of what she was investing in was abstract. The exile of her sons to an unrepresentable world abstracted them too, rendering them unknowable except through letters that were themselves a patchwork of colonialist discourses mediating their lived experience.

Written in 1860 when she had just begun to invest the profits from *The Mill on the Floss* in Indian railways and was considering colonial careers for her stepsons, Eliot's story "Brother Jacob" displays a striking self-consciousness about the forms of representation we now call Orientalism. "Brother Jacob" addresses the consequences of false conceptions about the colonies. Under the assumed identity of Edward Freely, David Faux is able to dupe the Grimworth people on the basis of his experience in Jamaica. What they know of the West Indies comes from books, and Eliot registers the tendency of provincial villagers to conflate explicitly Orientalist images in ways that prepared them to believe canny travelers. For example, Freely's customer, Mrs. Steene, "knew by heart many passages in 'Lalla Rookh,' the 'Corsair,' and the 'Siege of Corinth,'" and regrets that her husband was "not in the least like a nobleman turned Corsair out of pure scorn for his race, or like a renegade with a turban and crescent" (245–6). In "Brother Jacob," Eliot not only refuses to represent what she does not know (Jamaica), but makes ignorant and false representations the subject of her fiction. Rather than encouraging stereotypes, she mocks them and suggests the immorality of exploiting them. David Faux is not only a thief and an imposter: this would-be colonizer and fortune-seeker is an absolute failure whose preposterous assumptions about Jamaican culture clash with colonial reality. Yet his fabrications are validated by his equally ill-educated listeners at home.

As examples of realism, Eliot's novels have come under criticism for generic properties which allegedly evince complicity in imperialism. In the late twentieth-century critique of realism, the realist novel is thought to have given form to the ideologies of bourgeois individualism, capitalism, and imperialism. The narrator who views the world as from a panopticon is thought to concentrate control in a single omniscient English individual in a manner that reflected and subsequently encouraged the control that England exerted over its empire. Firdous Azim summarizes the post-structuralist premise of this argument by explaining that the novel is "an imperial genre, not in theme merely, not only by virtue of the historical moment of its birth, but in its formal structure – in the construction of that narrative voice which holds the narrative structure together."<sup>13</sup> In addition to such formalist claims, there is an argument about representation: middle-class novelists unwittingly represented the world in a way that validated the politics and practices of British colonialists, even when their novels are not explicitly imperialist. Said argues: "It is striking that never, in the novel, is that world beyond seen except as subordinate and dominated, the English presence