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Introduction: George Eliot and the art of realism

By the time George Eliot died on December 22, 1880, she was celebrated as the greatest of contemporary English novelists. But unlike the most famous of literary Victorians, Charles Dickens, whose popularity – if not his literary reputation – survived the sophisticated ironies of literary modernism, George Eliot fell into the disrepute that attended almost all things Victorian in the early twentieth century. The two great writers were, in most respects, polar opposites; Dickens the great popular entertainer, George Eliot the voice of a higher culture, learned, self-reflexive, tormented by her own aesthetic and moral aspirations. It was her deep seriousness and determined pursuit of respectability that, ironically, turned modernist writers – many of them, clearly, her direct literary descendants – away from her. Dickens survived their condescension because his popularity never flagged, his comic and melodramatic energy seeming almost to transcend their wide appeal. But George Eliot – half refusing that kind of spectacular popularity, hoping that it might be achieved without compromising her strenuous moral and aesthetic standards – became for almost half a century something of a monument to an era whose name, Victorian, is almost synonymous with prudishness and humorless solemnity.

The distance of time and enormous social changes have made it possible for readers in the last half of the twentieth century to rediscover the pleasures of George Eliot's fiction and the Oedipal inevitability – and inadequacy – of modernism's rejection of her. Since the end of the Second World War, critics – and readers, and viewers of *Masterpiece Theater*, that American rebroadcast usually of BBC dramatizations of Victorian novels – have been discovering that her modern reputation belies the formal brilliance and intellectual depth of her fiction, and that the respectability she herself sought and for which posterity had seemed to condemn her was an aspiration rather than a fact. The case may now reasonably be made, even despite the massive energy and genius of Dickens, that George Eliot was indeed the greatest of Victorian novelists. It is yet less controversial that *Middlemarch* is the

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greatest of Victorian novels. Looking back, we can now recognize that her art anticipated the modernist experiments of writers like Henry James and the epistemological skepticism of postmodernism. If George Eliot the woman was susceptible to the conventions and comforts of respectability, George Eliot the writer built her art from a refusal of such conventions, in resistance to the very kind of moral complacency and didacticism of which she has often, in the years following her death, been accused.

Certainly, she disguised it, compromised it, resisted it; but George Eliot created her art out of a cluster of rebellions, particularly against reigning social, moral, and aesthetic conventions. In England she was the single most important figure in transforming the novel from a predominantly popular form into the highest form of art – in the tradition that Henry James was to develop. (This, perhaps, for the most recent critics, is a point against her since while for modernism the notion of high art was highly valued, in post-modern culture high art is under suspicion, its “cultural capital” spent, its superiority to popular culture an effect of power and class.) She was a romantic organicist, opposed to revolution, disturbed at any sudden tear in the social fabric, and she dramatized the dangers of political violence often – in *Romola*, *Felix Holt*, and *Middlemarch*, in particular: she was, as she thought of herself, a conservative-reformer. The foundation for this position was sharply articulated in her essay on the anthropologist Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl: “What has grown up historically can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws” (Pinney, p. 287). But she also saw clearly enough to represent with great force the grounds and the temptations to violence. Again, although she would not formally support the feminist cause, she was a model for women’s achievement; although she did not portray successful women who resisted the conventions of their culture, she brilliantly and sympathetically traced their defeats. (On these questions, see the chapters in this volume by Kate Flint and Alexander Welsh.) Although from her first stories forward she wrote about the church and clergy with a compassionate knowingness, she built a powerful case against Christianity; and while she constantly celebrated the value of childhood experience, traditional community, and traditional family structures, she almost bitterly portrayed the failures of community and family. Against the judgments of a complacent society, she wrote of the unnoticed heroism of those it defeated.

She could not be buried in Westminster Abbey in the “Poet’s Corner” where the great English writers had frequently found their hallowed place, although, as the famous scientific naturalist John Tyndall claimed, she was a “woman whose achievements were without parallel in the previous history of womankind,”¹ and many of the leading intellectuals of the day agreed. But George Eliot had lived out of wedlock with a married man, George

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Henry Lewes; she had, as the young Mary Anne Evans, renounced Christianity. She had translated two books central to the rejection of Christianity by the intellectual avant garde: David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus*, the key book in the Higher Criticism of the Bible, which in its quest for the historical Jesus naturalized Christianity; and Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, which argued that Christianity worships what are in fact entirely human ideals. The Deity is a projection; the reality is the human ideal. (For a discussion of these ideas see the chapters by Suzy Anger and Barry Qualls.) Even after an enormously successful career in which she fought to regain the respectability that scandal had cost her, George Eliot, it seemed, deserved no space in Westminster Abbey although Charles Darwin, of all people, was buried there two years after her death. T. H. Huxley, a friend of Lewes and George Eliot, and renowned as a soldier in the wars against the clergy, rejected the idea of burying George Eliot in the Abbey. "One cannot," he wrote, "eat one's cake and have it too. Those who elect to be free in thought and deed must not hanker after the rewards, if they are to be so called, which the world offers to those who put up with its fetters."² The degree of George Eliot's sins against society can be measured by the fact that Huxley warmly supported Darwin's interment in the Abbey, although Darwin's name even now remains anathema to fundamentalist Christianity. "But," write Darwin's biographers, "Darwin had not lived openly in sin as Eliot had."³ Like good Victorians, both Darwin and George Eliot aspired to public respectability and wanted to be buried in the Abbey. It seems as though, in the end, George Eliot was the greater sinner.

We are a long way from the scandals of mid-Victorian Britain. What matter now are the works of those who might have been objects of scandal, though it is worth remembering the degree to which what we value now was contentious then. We care about George Eliot now because of her novels, but it helps to keep in mind that in her moment, she took great risks and worried constantly about them. She has left a legacy that is badly distorted if we look at the novels as "classics," frozen in time, rather than as works created by an imagination that was deeply informed by the nitty gritty of social engagement, of contemporary controversy, of anything but a pure life. The scandals and personal crises were transformed in the novels in ways that have left their mark on the history of English fiction and on many generations of readers. It is worth noting that Marian Evans (the exact shape of whose constantly changing name is traced in Rosemarie Bodenheimer's chapter in this volume) only began writing the fiction that made her famous as George Eliot in 1856, when she was already thirty-seven years old. Surely, a condition of her writing was just that living openly in scandal that, ironically, was also to keep her out of Westminster Abbey. Although Marian Evans was by then

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well established among the London intellectual avant-garde, her elopement with Lewes had cast her out of respectable society. It was Lewes, nevertheless, who gave her the encouragement and the time to turn to the writing of fiction.

She had long prepared herself for the move. Her dazzling and ironic essay, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1856), in which, in effect, she separated Marian Evans from run-of-the-mill “lady novelists,” laid the ground for the kind of novel she was to write and might serve as a useful introduction to her fiction. A “really cultured woman,” she argues, is distinguished from those run-of-the-mill lady novelists, by being

all the simpler and the less obtrusive for her knowledge; [true culture] has made her see herself and her opinions in something like just proportions; she does not make it a pedestal from which she flatters herself that she commands a complete view of men and things, but makes it a point of observation from which to form a right estimate of herself. She neither spouts poetry nor quotes Cicero on slight provocation; not because she thinks that a sacrifice must be made to the prejudices of men, but because that mode of exhibiting her memory and Latinity does not present itself to her as edifying or graceful. She does not write books to confound philosophers, perhaps because she is able to write books that delight them. In conversation she is the least formidable of women, because she understands you, without wanting to make you aware that you *can't* understand her. (Pinney, p. 316)

Although this was written before Marian Evans had created George Eliot, it clearly creates – or attempts to create – the George Eliot who was to write the novels we now remember. As her career advanced, critics of the later novels, from *Romola* on, might have felt as Henry James did about that book: “it is overladen with learning, it smells of the lamp, it tastes just perceptibly of pedantry.” Starting her career, George Eliot worked effectively to be “edifying and graceful,” to write novels that “delight” (*CH*, 500).

She invented the name (a good “mouth filling name,” she explained) in order to protect her anonymity when she published *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1856. The essay on silly novelists revealed a strong sensitivity to the kind of condescension frequently shown to women novelists, a condescension that assumed their natural inferiority. “By a peculiar thermometric adjustment,” Marian Evans wrote, “when a woman’s talent is at zero, journalistic approbation is at the boiling pitch; when she attains mediocrity, it is already at no more than summer heat; and if ever she reaches excellence, critical enthusiasm drops to the freezing point” (322). Marian Evans was not going to be condescended to. The essay snaps with irony and anger, qualities that George Eliot could repress but could not and did not entirely eliminate from her great fictions.

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But, of course, there were other reasons for the pseudonym. Her scandalous life and her avant-garde writings would probably have damaged quite seriously the reception of her first novels. So George Eliot was born, characteristically for her, out of a mixture of motives, as a defense of her respectability, out of a desire to become a popular success, out of her refusal to be “a silly novelist,” and as an ideal to which Marian Evans aspired and which, one might say, she almost became. Although it is hard not to think of George Eliot as the sage and enormously respectable woman, sympathetically presiding over solemn Sunday afternoons to which distinguished visitors and young idolaters were regularly invited, the George Eliot who wrote the novels we are still reading was an amalgam (and attempted purification) of the multiple facets of a deeply intelligent and troubled woman. She was at one and the same time the avant-garde intellectual, the learned, ironic, witty, and even caustic reviewer, the translator of heavy but intellectually radical German philosophy and history, the young provincial woman who had nursed her father through a long illness and revered the Midlands countryside, the sophisticate who risked scandal and suffered the consequences of her desire, and an enormously learned aspirant toward an ideal of intellectual and moral excellence that threatened throughout her career to cripple her emotionally.

The degree to which this remarkable amalgam, summed up in the name “George Eliot,” had prepared herself for her vocation as novelist is evident in the essays she wrote during the years she was closely associated with the *Westminster Review*. The ironies of “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” are no mere occasion for easy hits against bad novelists; they are part of George Eliot’s determination to make art “true.” Her essays are often polemical, severe, brilliant attacks on falsification, distortion, sentimentality, pomposity, and their rhetoric is distinctly polemical. But like her novels, they are directed at problems that plagued her own life, turning the private experience into a way to insist on higher standards, both of morality and intellect, that she thought popular audiences were prepared to accept. Her stunning attack on the evangelical preacher, John Cumming, exposes the heartlessness and stupidity of intellectual pretension, the inadequacy of doctrine in relation to the particularities of human life and feeling – a theme that recurs through virtually all of her novels. She has no patience with this man of “moderate intellect,” with “a moral standard not higher than the average,” who condemns in righteous anger sinners who fail to adhere to the letter of doctrine: “he insists on good works and signs of justifying faith, as labours to be achieved to the glory of God, but he rarely represents them as the spontaneous, necessary product of a soul filled with Divine love” (162). The critique of Cumming here is paralleled and dramatically developed in the

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rejection of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* by the community of St. Oggs, after her reluctant elopement with Stephen Guest. Cumming was certainly a “man of maxims,” someone whose moral judgments are “not checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot” (*MF*, VII:2:498). The anger of the Cumming essay filters through all of the novels, and the narrator of *Middlemarch* will say, many years later, “There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men” (*M*, VI:61:506). George Eliot’s implicit defense of Marian Evans’s scandalous behavior is similarly articulated in the Riehl essay: “The more deeply we penetrate into the knowledge of society in its details, the more thoroughly we shall be convinced that a *universal social policy has no validity except on paper*” (Pinney, p. 289). In the novels that follow the essay (as in her life, in which she was condemned for her relations with Lewes), George Eliot and Marian Evans appeal to authenticity of feeling, to the higher morality “of a love that constrains the soul, of sympathy with that yearning over the lost and erring which made Jesus weep over Jerusalem.” Morality and dogma without mercy and love are no morality and only bad religion. Focusing on the tension between private experience and social constraint, these early essays suggest how George Eliot defined her work against the distortions that pass in the culture for truth and justice.

The tension between abstract reason and concrete feelings is one of the core subjects of both Marian Evans the essayist and George Eliot the novelist. She sought always to bring together intellect and feeling. In the days in which she renounced Christianity and thereby offended her father – the “Holy Wars,” she called them in a letter – she retreated from the apparently necessary consequences of her intellectual rejection, for what mattered in the end was what she called the “truth of feeling,” a truth that allowed her to return to church without believing in its doctrine, for the sake of her love of her father. In the essay on Cumming, she was to talk of the “cooperation of the intellect with the impulses,” a cooperation only available to “the highest class of minds” (Pinney, p. 166). “So long,” she would argue, “as a belief in propositions is regarded as indispensable to salvation, the pursuit of truth *as such* is not possible, any more than it is possible for a man who is swimming for his life to make meteorological observations on the storm which threatens to overwhelm him” (Pinney, p. 167).

But if, in the essay on Cumming, Marian Evans is severe about the way in which general ideas miss the particularities of feeling, in her essay on Young, she condemns his “*radical insincerity as a poetic artist*.” Here the problem is not a heartless imposition of ideas in moral judgment of living humans,

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but the determination to produce “a certain effect on his audience” rather than to say “what he feels or what he sees” (Pinney, p. 367). The separation of feeling and intellect takes another shape here, but it too produces falsification. If Cumming lacks compassion and thus misses “truth of feeling,” Young falsifies by failing to consult his own perceptions and feelings. The two produce different versions of untruth, and are both, then, unrealistic.

The energizing principle of George Eliot’s art was realism. And realism is a mode that depends heavily on reaction against what the writer takes to have been misrepresentation. Thus, even for those “realists” whose politics might have turned out to be “conservative,” it is a rebellious mode. It is rarely, and certainly was not for George Eliot, simply accuracy in representation of things as they are, although it is always that, too. (Like the modernist writers who followed her, she has, as I will try to suggest, quite complicated notions about the possibility of such representation.) It is also and necessarily a kind of authenticity, an honest representation of one’s own feelings and perceptions; otherwise accuracy of representation would itself be impossible. Thus, she claims, “The fantastic or the boldly imaginative poet may be as sincere as the most realistic: he is true to his own sensibilities or inward vision, and in his wildest flights he never breaks loose from his criterion – the truth of his own mental state” (367). As Lewes put it in a review he wrote two years later, “the antithesis” of Realism is not “Idealism, but Falsism.” “Art,” he claims, “always aims at the representation of Reality, *i.e.* of Truth.”⁴

The resistant element in George Eliot, in her life and her art, is closely linked with her chosen literary method. Realism has always been a contentious program. George Eliot was self-conscious enough about it that in each of her two first fictions, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (in the story, “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton”) and *Adam Bede*, she paused within the narratives to explain and justify that method. Representing the world adequately means representing its very ordinariness, and the moral project of realism is – in resistance to conventional art – to dramatize the value of the ordinary. So, with her first profoundly inadequate protagonist, Amos Barton, George Eliot pauses to show that she is quite aware of his inadequacy: he was, the narrator says, “in no respect an ideal or exceptional character; and perhaps I am doing a bold thing to bespeak your sympathy on behalf of a man who was so very far from remarkable” (*SCL*, 5:36). The strategy of what has been called George Eliot’s “moral realism” is deliberately Wordsworthian, to evoke the romantic side of familiar things, but the project is moral as well as aesthetic. To represent the ordinary honestly is to represent what is hidden from those like Cumming or Young – the richness of human feeling, the grandeur of what we take for granted. So, she

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continues in “Amos Barton,” “Depend upon it, you would gain unspeakably if you would learn with me to see some of the poetry and the pathos, the tragedy and the comedy, lying in the experience of a human soul that looks out through dull grey eyes, and that speaks in a voice of quite ordinary tones” (5:37).

George Eliot’s most famous justification of her realism comes in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*. There she develops more fully the arguments sketched in “Amos Barton,” but that she had earlier made in the essay on Riehl. The aesthetic and the moral were for George Eliot entirely intertwined: to treat art lightly, to indulge mere triviality, to allow the exaggerations and pretensions of the silly novelists or the poet Young, was to fail not only aesthetically, but morally. And in a now well-known review of Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*, volume III, she wrote: “The truth of infinite value that he teaches is *realism* – the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality.”⁵

Unquestionably, her theoretical arguments for realism and the weight of significance she imposed on the practice in her art give to some of George Eliot’s work a quality of high seriousness – perhaps solemnity – that can help account for the way in which modernist artists rejected her. Yet this solemnity was an aspect of a mind that was extraordinarily agile, subtle, learned, and if she was uneasy with popular entertainment (though she took any lapse in her own popularity as evidence of her aesthetic failure), she was equally opposed to moralizing didacticism. Everything depended on getting her art aesthetically right (and that was also to be the overriding project of modernism). “Art,” she wrote,

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. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. It is not so very serious that we should have false ideas about evanescent fashions – about the manners and conversation of beaux and duchesses; but it *is* serious that our sympathy with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humour in the life of our more heavily-laden fellow-men, should be perverted, and turned towards a false object instead of the true one. (Pinney, p. 271)

This is a kind of manifesto of moral realism. But it is important not to mistake George Eliot’s commitment to the moral vocation of art and realism for a disregard of formal concerns. Art works morally only, she would insist, if it is aesthetically effective. As she was to tell her young friend Frederic

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Harrison many years later in a much-quoted letter, she would not, in her novels, “lapse from the picture to the diagram” (*GEL*, IV:300).

Among the many objections of twentieth-century writers and critics to the tradition of literary realism – putting aside the epistemological issues and questions about the inevitability of mediation – is that realism is, as it were, just one damned thing after another. It is a pile of facts that add up to nothing but the facts. Virginia Woolf’s famous essay, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” is perhaps the most delightful as it is the most representative dismissal of the realist activity of merely recording external fact. Speaking of a detailed passage in Arnold Bennett’s *Hilda Lessways*, Woolf insists, “One line of insight would have done more than all those lines of description.”⁶ But George Eliot’s realism, while it is indeed attentive to the external details of the world her characters inhabit, is not like Arnold Bennett’s. The details reverberate with significance and the images are as much a part of the consciousness of the characters as representations of material reality. The very possibility of meaning is one of the questions George Eliot’s novels directly encounter. So the narrator remarks in *Adam Bede*, “if it be true that Nature at certain moments seems charged with a presentiment of the individual lot, must it not also be true that she seems unmindful, unconscious of another?” (*AB*, 27:292). And shortly afterward, Adam’s world darkens permanently at the moment he is calmly examining a large, double-trunked beech tree “at a turning in the road” (27:295). The tree, quite literally there and precisely represented, is more importantly the marker of a stage in Adam’s consciousness as he becomes aware that Hetty and Arthur Donnithorne are lovers. George Eliot’s realism extends from the external world to the world of individual consciousness – like James and the psychological novelists who followed, she threw the action inside; the question of consciousness, of who is perceiving the external fact and under what conditions, becomes for her an indispensable aspect of the realist project.

The intensity and formal complexity of George Eliot’s novels, even in the relatively expansive mode of her early works, must be credited in part to her refusal to disentangle representational precision, psychological states, formal coherence, and moral significance. Getting it right was for her no simple matter of recording external fact precisely, but of making herself capable of the most complete possible honesty by opening her mind and feelings to the otherness of things and people – precisely what she did not find in the poet Young. The point is not that she always succeeded, but that for her realism was a vocation. In that famous chapter 17, the narrator of *Adam Bede* tells us that she aspires

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to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath. (17:175)

The strenuousness of George Eliot's art is due not only to this commitment to tell the truth (as though in a trial at law) but to the awareness of how very hard it is to do so, to avoid being false. "Signs," says the *Middlemarch* narrator, "are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable" (1:3:21). Her novels explore with a subtlety new to the history of English literature the devious ways of the mind, the natural and psychological and social impediments to knowing or speaking the truth. "So," proceeds the narrator, "I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult" (27:176). George Eliot was alert not only to the complications of society, but to the subtle difficulties of the medium, language, itself. There is a famous narrative intervention in *The Mill on the Floss* that can suggest something of this alertness: "O Aristotle! If you had the advantage of being 'the freshest modern' instead of the greatest ancient, would you not have mingled your praise of metaphorical speech, as a sign of high intelligence, with a lamentation that intelligence so rarely shows itself in speech without metaphor, – that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else?" (11:1:140). Metaphor always threatens to escape the limits of its denotation and is at the heart of language; thus the writer must be, as George Eliot sought to be herself, a kind of scholar like the one described by Walter Pater some years later, a scholar of language and meaning, scrupulous, meticulous, unrelentingly attentive.

The yields of these labors of realism to resist the conventional simplifications of art or personal interest turned out often to be only partially compensatory. There are costs to the realist program, for the "truth" George Eliot insists on is, primarily, the hard truth that the world is not made in our interest, not "mindful" of us. Reality is largely what conventional art would treat as banal and dismiss in the name of heroism or elegance. The sympathy her art is designed to evoke depends on a recognition of our mutual implication in ordinariness and limitation. With satirical contempt, she mocks the injunction that if "The world is not just what we like; do touch it up with a tasteful pencil, and make believe it is not quite such a mixed, entangled affair" (*AB*, 17:176). She for her part is committed to the "faithful representing of commonplace things" (*AB*, 17:178). The direction of her novels and of realism itself is toward accommodation to the ordinary, toward