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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 contemporary English novelist. But her work fell into the disrepute that attended almost all things Victorian in the early twentieth century. The two great writers of the time were, in most respects, polar opposites: Charles 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, ironically, her deep seriousness that turned most 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 triumphing over the “luminous brooding” that Henry James identified as George Eliot’s dominant literary mode. Half refusing Dickens’s kind of spectacular popularity, hoping that it might be achieved without compromising her strenuous moral and aesthetic standards, she became for almost half a century something of a monument to an era whose name, Victorian, had become almost synonymous with prudishness and humorless solemnity.

Distance of time and enormous social changes made it possible for readers in the last half of the twentieth century to rediscover the marvels of George Eliot’s fiction and grow out of the Oedipal inevitability of modernism’s rejection. Since the end of the Second World War, critics and readers have been discovering that her modern reputation belies the formal brilliance, the comic virtuosity, and the intellectual depth of her fiction. 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, despite the massive energy and genius of Dickens, that George Eliot was indeed the greatest of Victorian novelists. It is less controversial that *Middlemarch* is the greatest of Victorian novels. We now recognize that her art not only influenced the modernist experiments of writers like Henry James but it anticipated the epistemological skepticism of postmodernism. If George Eliot the woman was susceptible to the conventions and comforts

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of respectability, George Eliot the writer built her art from a refusal of such conventions, resisting the moral complacency and didacticism of which she has often been accused.

Eliot fits neither conventionally defined aesthetic nor political positions. She created her art out of a cluster of rebellions, particularly against reigning social, moral, and aesthetic conventions, yet she considered herself a “conservative-reformer.” 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 James was to develop. 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. 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 understand and represent with great force temptations to violence. Again, modern feminism has had its difficulties with her. She never represented women successful outside the household, who resisted the conventions of their culture, but she brilliantly and sympathetically traced their defeats in a world that severely undervalued their powers. (On these questions, see the chapters in this volume by Kate Flint and Alexander Welsh.) Although from her first stories she wrote about the Church and clergy with a compassionate knowingness, she built a strong case against Christianity; and while she constantly celebrated the value of childhood experience, traditional community, and traditional family structures, she almost bitterly portrayed 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 But she had lived out of wedlock with a married man, George Henry Lewes; she had, as the young Mary Ann Evans, renounced Christianity. Before writing novels, she 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 projects entirely human ideals on a falsely imagined supernatural God. (For a discussion of these ideas see the chapters by Suzy Anger and Barry

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Qualls.) Even after an enormously successful career in which she fought to regain the respectability that scandal had cost her, Eliot earned no space in Westminster Abbey. T. H. Huxley, a friend of Lewes and Eliot, and renowned as a soldier in the wars against the clergy, justified the rejection. "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 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 It seems as though, in the end, Eliot was the greater sinner.

Although it is worth remembering that what we value now was contentious then, we care about Eliot now because of her novels. It helps in our appreciation of them to keep in mind that she took great risks. Her legacy would be badly distorted if we were to look at the novels as frozen "classics," rather than as works created by an imagination deeply informed by the nitty-gritty of social engagement, of contemporary controversy, of anything but a pure life. The way the scandals and personal crises were transformed in the novels has left its 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. She wrote in the midst of the scandal of living openly with a married man. Although she was by then 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

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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)

Written just as Marian Evans was making her first attempts at fiction writing, the essay is almost a clearing of the grounds for the George Eliot who was to write the novels we now remember.

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 1857. 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” (Pinney, p. 322). Marian Evans was not going to be condescended to. The essay snaps with irony and anger, qualities that Eliot could repress but could not and did not eliminate from her great fictions.

But, of course, there were other reasons for the pseudonym. Her scandalous life and her avant garde writings would probably have seriously damaged the reception of her first novels. So George Eliot was born 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 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 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 sometimes 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.

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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 several 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 but part of Eliot’s determination to make art “true.” These essays are sometimes polemical (see Fionnuala Dillane’s chapter in this volume for discussion of the variety of stances she adapted in her journalism). She can be severe in her attacks on falsification, distortion, sentimentality, and pomposity. But like her novels, they are directed at problems that plagued her own life, turning private experience into a way to insist on higher standards, both of morality and of intellect. 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” (Pinney, p. 162). This critique of Cumming is paralleled and dramatically developed in the 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 were “not checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot” (*MF*, VII:2:498). The narrator of *Middlemarch* will similarly 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*, 61:506). George Eliot’s implicit defense of Marian Evans’s scandalous behavior is articulated also 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 (as in her life, in which she was condemned for her relations with Lewes), 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 neither morality nor religion. Focusing on the tension between private experience and social constraint, these essays suggest how Eliot defined her work against the distortions that pass for truth and justice.

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The tension between abstract reason and individual experience 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 War” – she retreated from the apparently necessary consequences of her intellectual rejection: what mattered in the end was what she called “truth of feeling,” which allowed her to return to church without believing in its doctrine, for the sake of her love of her father (see Bodenheimer’s chapter in this volume.) In the essay on Cumming, she wrote 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).

The energizing principle of Eliot’s art was realism, 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 Eliot, simply accuracy in representing things as they are, although it is always that, too. (Like the modernist writers who followed her, she has quite complicated notions about the possibility of such representation.) It is also, necessarily, a kind of authenticity, an honest representation of one’s own feelings and perceptions; otherwise accuracy of representation would 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” (Pinney, p. 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 Eliot, in her life and her art, is closely linked with her chosen literary method. Realism has always been a contentious program. Eliot was self-conscious enough about it that in two of her first fictions, “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 is for Eliot a moral project: representing and dramatizing the value of the ordinary. With her first profoundly inadequate protagonist, Amos Barton, Eliot pauses to show that she is quite aware of his inadequacy: he was “in no respect an ideal or exceptional character; and perhaps I am doing a bold thing to bespeak your sympathy on behalf of a

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man who was so very far from remarkable" (*SCL*, 5:36). The strategy of what has been called Eliot's "moral realism" is Wordsworthian, to evoke the romantic side of familiar things. 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 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" (*SCL*, 5:37).

Eliot's most famous justification of her realism comes in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*. Developing more fully the arguments sketched in "Amos Barton," which she had earlier made in the essay on Riehl, she requires that the aesthetic and the moral be 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 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

These attitudes give to some of Eliot's work that quality of high seriousness that modernist artists rejected. But her work can be hilarious, as well. Her solemnity was an aspect of a mind that was extraordinarily agile, 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. "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)

It is important, however, not to mistake Eliot's commitment to the moral vocation of art and realism as implying disregard of formal concerns. Art works morally, she would insist, only if it is aesthetically effective. As she

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was to tell her young friend Frederic Harrison many years later, she would not, in her novels, “lapse from the picture to the diagram” (*GEL*, 4:300).

Among the many objections of twentieth-century writers and critics to the tradition of literary realism – putting aside epistemological issues and the inevitability of mediation – is that realism is just one damned thing after another. It is simply a pile of facts. Virginia Woolf’s famous essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” is perhaps the most delightful as it is the most representative dismissal of this realism. 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 Eliot’s realism, while it is certainly attentive to the external details of the world her characters inhabit, is not like Arnold Bennett’s. Details reverberate with significance and images are as much part of the consciousness of the characters as representations of material reality. The very possibility of meaning is one of the questions Eliot’s novels directly encounter: “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). 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. Eliot’s realism extends from the external world to individual consciousnesses; like James and the psychological novelists who followed, she threw the action inside. The question of who is perceiving the external fact and under what conditions becomes an indispensable aspect of her realist project.

The intensity and formal complexity of Eliot’s novels must be credited in part to her refusal to disentangle representational precision, psychological states, formal coherence, and moral significance. Getting it right was no simple matter of recording external fact, but was a case of being capable of the most complete possible honesty by opening mind and feelings to otherness – 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. The narrator of *Adam Bede* tells us that she aspires

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)

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The strenuousness of 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. "Signs," says the *Middlemarch* narrator, "are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable" (*M*, 3:21). Her novels explore with a subtlety new to English literature the devious ways of the mind, the natural, psychological, and social impediments to knowing or speaking the truth. "So," proceeds the narrator of *Adam Bede*, "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" (*AB*, 17:176). Eliot was alert to the complications of society, and to the subtle difficulties of the medium, language itself. A narrative intervention in *The Mill on the Floss* suggests 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 thus the writer must be a kind of scholar of language and meaning, scrupulous, meticulous, unrelentingly attentive.

The "truth" Eliot insists on is a hard one: the world is not "mindful" of us. The sympathy her art is designed to evoke depends on recognizing 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 acceptance of the ordinary and of limitation, so that her novels regularly narrate her protagonists' education in renunciation. Their triumphs come in acceptance of limits through return to the ordinariness they had dreamed of transcending. In *Adam Bede*, Arthur Donnithorne's self-indulgently generous fantasies are thwarted by his incapacity to restrain sexual desire; even Adam succeeds only by curing his anger, and it is his capacity for self-sacrifice that earns the happy ending. More painfully, Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, having failed in the extreme self-denial she had learned from Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, learns true resignation after her near-elopement with Stephen Guest, and can only triumph in the death that follows her attempt to rescue her brother.

The contest between individual desire and moral responsibility is a recurring theme of all Eliot's work, and an almost inevitable corollary

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of the realist's program. In realism, as the Finale of *Middlemarch* puts it, "There is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (p. 682). She had made a similar point in *Felix Holt*: "there is no private life that has not been determined by a wider public life" (3:43). Formal and theoretical justification for the multiplot novel derives from this sense that every individual life is shaped by connections with conditions outside it, conditions of which the representative realist character is unaware. The novels often pause to remind the reader that character and selfhood are partly determined in relation to others. *Middlemarch* turns early on the juxtaposition of Dorothea and Lydgate, and on Lydgate's immediate inattention to her: "nothing could seem much less important" to him "than the turn of Miss Brooke's mind." "But," the narrator interposes, "any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look at our unIntroduced neighbour. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our *dramatis personae* folded in her hand" (11:78). Such a vision leads almost inevitably to the multiplot novel (seen usually as "loose and baggy" by modernist writers) and to the complications of point-of-view narration (indispensable to the development of modernist narration).

But in twentieth-century criticism, this centrally nineteenth-century recognition of the ways in which every individual can only be understood *in relation to* the social complex and the larger movements of history often evoked very negative responses. Feminist criticism, for example, long complained that Eliot never created a heroine like Marian Evans, who resisted the conventions of society and made a creative and original life for herself, living outside of wedlock with moral confidence. Such resistance, within Eliot's vision of ordinariness and determining conditions, must almost always be thwarted. Only someone of genuinely heroic stature (one would have to infer, only someone as exceptional as Marian Evans herself) could have achieved such a life.

Thus on feminist grounds and on many others, Eliot's realist program was more than potentially politically conservative. Although she allows her protagonists the liberty to follow their desires, they then tend to choose to renounce, and thus to restrain, the subversive and powerful pulls to mere personal satisfaction. That conservative-reforming impulse in Eliot is often read as entirely conservative, and her own political views at least half confirm this reading. By invitation from her publisher, Eliot wrote a political speech for her fictional radical, Felix Holt, as a direct intervention after the passage of the second Reform Bill in 1867. Characteristically, Felix moves