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# "The Sudden Thrill of That Change": Framing George Eliot's Social Vision

## Abstract

Although scholarly commentary of the last decade has engaged more intensively than ever with the content of George Eliot's ideas concerning nineteenth-century British culture, the devices and techniques Eliot employs in the transmission of those ideas remain less explored. Consequently, room exists for a study as attentive to the formal characteristics of Eliot's messages as recent scholars have been to the content of those messages. This dissertation seeks to elucidate the ways in which specific formal techniques that characterize Eliot's fictional work evince her engagement with the thinking of social theorists, particularly Ludwig Feuerbach. The project contends that Eliot internalizes Feuerbach's view that "man is God to man," injects that view into the formal techniques of her fiction, and then wields those techniques in an effort to elicit a sympathetic response from her audience, thereby initiating societal change. Unlike other critical commentary that treats the breadth of Eliot's views, this project restricts its focus to analyzing the ways in which the formal innovations Eliot deploys shape their author's complex and sometimes contradictory social vision. In the process of examining Eliot's efforts to change her audience, our understanding of her social project changes as well, as the provincial chronicler of *Adam Bede* becomes the student of the future in *Daniel Deronda*.

## Document Type

Dissertation

## Degree Name

Ph.D.

## Department

English

## First Advisor

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## Keywords

England, Fiction, Literature, Victorian

## Subject Categories

English Language and Literature | Literature in English, British Isles

## Publication Statement

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“The sudden thrill of that change”:  
Framing George Eliot’s Social Vision

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of Arts and Humanities  
University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
Cyrus Seaberry Frost  
June 2017  
Advisor: Dr. Jan Gorak

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Author: Cyrus Seaberry Frost  
Title: "The sudden thrill of that change": Framing George Eliot's Social Vision  
Advisor: Dr. Jan Gorak  
Degree Date: June 2017

## Abstract

Although scholarly commentary of the last decade has engaged more intensively than ever with the content of George Eliot's ideas concerning nineteenth-century British culture, the devices and techniques Eliot employs in the transmission of those ideas remain less explored. Consequently, room exists for a study as attentive to the formal characteristics of Eliot's messages as recent scholars have been to the content of those messages. This dissertation seeks to elucidate the ways in which specific formal techniques that characterize Eliot's fictional work evince her engagement with the thinking of social theorists, particularly Ludwig Feuerbach. The project contends that Eliot internalizes Feuerbach's view that "man is God to man," injects that view into the formal techniques of her fiction, and then wields those techniques in an effort to elicit a sympathetic response from her audience, thereby initiating societal change. Unlike other critical commentary that treats the breadth of Eliot's views, this project restricts its focus to analyzing the ways in which the formal innovations Eliot deploys shape their author's complex and sometimes contradictory social vision. In the process of examining Eliot's efforts to change her audience, our understanding of her social project changes as well, as the provincial chronicler of *Adam Bede* becomes the student of the future in *Daniel Deronda*.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the director of this dissertation, Jan Gorak, for his encouragement, guidance, and helpful criticism so generously extended from the earliest planning stages of the project through the final revisions. I'm grateful also to the members of the committee, Maik Nwosu and Bin Ramke, and the outside chair, Tracy Mott, for their constructive suggestions and fine cooperation. I must also thank Bradford Mudge, whose high standards and advocacy have played a pivotal role in my educational life. Finally, I am especially grateful to Barbara for her abiding generosity of spirit, patient optimism, and ardent support offered throughout this and other endeavors.

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## Abbreviations

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| <i>AB</i>     | George Eliot, <i>Adam Bede</i> , ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: Penguin, 2008).   |
| <i>CA</i>     | <i>George Eliot Critical Assessments</i> , vol. 1., ed. Stuart Hutchinson (The Banks, Mountfield: Helm Information, Ltd, 1996). |
| <i>CH</i>     | George Eliot: <i>The Critical Heritage</i> , ed. David Carroll (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971).                          |
| <i>DD</i>     | George Eliot, <i>Daniel Deronda</i> , ed. Terence Cave (New York: Penguin, 2003).   |
| <i>Essays</i> | <i>Essays of George Eliot</i> , ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia U P, 1963).   |
| <i>FH</i>     | George Eliot, <i>Felix Holt, the Radical</i> , ed. Lynda Mugglestone (New York: Penguin, 1995).                                 |
| <i>GEL</i>    | <i>The George Eliot Letters</i> , 9 vols., ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale U P, 1954-78).                                 |
| <i>GEJ</i>    | <i>The Journals of George Eliot</i> , ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (New York: Cambridge U P, 1998).                  |
| <i>MM</i>     | George Eliot, <i>Middlemarch</i> , ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2008).  |
| <i>MF</i>     | George Eliot, <i>The Mill on the Floss</i> , ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).                             |
| <i>R</i>      | George Eliot, <i>Romola</i> , ed. Dorothea Barrett (New York: Penguin Classics, 1997).  |
| <i>SCL</i>    | George Eliot, <i>Scenes of Clerical Life</i> , ed. Jennifer Gribble (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998).                         |
| <i>SM</i>     | George Eliot, <i>Silas Marner</i> , ed. Q. D. Leavis (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1967).                             |
| <i>TEOC</i>   | Ludwig Feuerbach, <i>The Essence of Christianity</i> , tr. George Eliot (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1989).                        |
| <i>TS</i>     | George Eliot, <i>Impressions of Theophrastus Such</i> , ed. Nancy Henry (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1994).                         |



## Introduction

In 1868, when George Eliot published *The Spanish Gypsy, A Poem*, she forewarned her readers to expect a change. The moment they opened the book, they encountered new subtitles that attached occupational descriptors to titles of her prior novels—*Silas Marner, the Weaver of Raveloe*, for example, or *Felix Holt, the Radical*. This time, Eliot boldly announced, form stands front and center.

Close attention to George Eliot's language suggests that, whether critics have recognized it or not, her brandishing of a distinctive range of formal techniques contributes to an understanding of nineteenth-century England as a nation struggling to reconcile concepts of individualism and community.<sup>1</sup> Eliot maintains a strong interest in the relationship between

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<sup>1</sup> For a cogent examination of the nineteenth-century forces operative upon Eliot, see *George Eliot in Context* (2013), edited by Eliot scholar Margaret Harris. The volume identifies a range of "relevancies" that form the various contexts pertinent to understanding and appreciating George Eliot as an acute observer of the massive social changes of her time. The work reveals Eliot, defiant of many Victorian orthodoxies, to be at once chronicler and analyst, novelist of nostalgia, and formidable thinker about the social issues that dominated Victorian England. The volume contains analyses of Eliot's critical history and of the conditions of production and distribution of her novels and journalism. However, Harris's work stops short of connecting its authoritative discussion of George Eliot's intellectual and social context to the narrative strategies of her imagined world. I seek to elucidate this connection in the following pages.

her fictional communities and a tradition of social thought in which community becomes an abstraction, a qualitative ideal rather than a perceived reality—but an ideal that addresses an actual world, immediately present, dominated by individualist values and lobbying to recover communal ones.

This dissertation presents a case that George Eliot's formal elements of descriptive language—her techniques of diction and modes of direct and indirect address—express in previously unexamined ways certain ideas that Eliot inherited from Strauss, Comte, Spinoza, and Feuerbach. Eliot exploits these techniques in order to explore the limits and potential of sympathetic ideals as well as to reflect upon the role that realist fiction plays in the production of social vision. The project finds these formal techniques concentrated most emphatically in her fictional works, particularly her novels, wherein Eliot attempts to engender within her readership an appreciation of and desire for the advancement of the community of humankind. By marshaling an arsenal of narrative strategies and formal innovations, Eliot seeks to awaken her audience's sensibilities and initiate a slow but steady transformation of nineteenth-century culture.

Because George Eliot engaged in a Victorian tradition of social thought preoccupied with the regeneration of community, this study first sets her fiction within the context of a group of social theorists who discuss the major issues raised in contemporary debates about community and the individual: the place of traditional belief and custom; the relation of individualistic to societal values; and the difficulty of creating new forms to counteract the fragmented, self-serving, and isolating tendencies of increasingly heterogeneous and complex societies. The most distinctive and representative qualities of this tradition of social thought derive precisely from its commitment to social regeneration through a reshaping of thought and feeling.

But this particular goal of reshaping suggests, in turn, how inadequate to the task social theory by itself was likely to be and how absolutely central to that task works of imaginative literature might become. George Eliot's fiction attained this kind of centrality.<sup>2</sup> This project explores the nature of that achievement by viewing Eliot's formal

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<sup>2</sup> In *Modernizing George Eliot: The Writer as Artist, Intellectual, Proto-Modernist, Cultural Critic* (2011), K.M. Newton examines Eliot's credentials as a radical thinker and social novelist and argues against relegating her to a literary tradition designated as "Victorian." Opening with Eliot's relationship to the Romantic movement, Newton makes a vigorous case for Eliot as a strident critic of Victorian values who anticipates modernism in her narrative sophistication and who resembles Derrida more than Dickens in understanding the undecidable nature of ethical questions. As formal evidence, Newton points out that although Eliot's narrators radiate an air of omniscience, Eliot explicitly represents them as interpreters rather than all-seeing, all-understanding consciousnesses.

techniques in light of nineteenth-century social theories and by analyzing how she endeavored by using those techniques to influence the attitudes of her contemporary readers.

Chapter 1 of the dissertation looks closely at the philosophical and political concerns—those of Comte, Strauss, Spinoza, and, especially, Ludwig Feuerbach—that preoccupy Eliot in the earliest, most formative stages of her career. The chapter concentrates on the manner in which these interests congeal into a discourse of philosophical liberalism that triggers Eliot's strategic coupling of social commitments and imaginative writing.

Chapter 2 focuses tightly on the ways in which Eliot deploys the languages of hierarchy and deliverance in order to fictionally inscribe Feuerbach's I-Thou concept, a concept that flows from his most conspicuous assertion in *The Essence of Christianity* that "man is God to man."<sup>3</sup> The chapter demonstrates how in her fiction Eliot imaginatively recasts this I-Thou formulation in order to instantiate and promote the central concern of humankind-as-community.

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<sup>3</sup> Known principally for his captivating mid-nineteenth century criticism of Christianity, Feuerbach has been regarded by many critics as relevant only because he prefigured the views of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. Van A. Harvey's *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought) (1997) characterizes this interpretation of Feuerbach's significance as limited and inadequate, especially vis-à-vis his view of religion. By exploring the largely ignored works of Feuerbach, Harvey finds their ongoing pertinence. Harvey argues that Feuerbach's philosophical development led him to a more complex and interesting theory of religion that has been acknowledged or understood.

Chapter 3 proceeds to examine the function played by Eliot's techniques of direct and indirect address in shaping passages marked by an extraordinarily subtle movement between fictional character, narrator, and reader. These passages create an interaction especially appropriate to a novelistic approach in which Eliot demands that readers become empathizers—intimately involved and identifying with her fictional characters and therefore feeling and experiencing from a number of different centers of consciousness.

By identifying the most distinct forms of Eliot's formal techniques, the project builds on a theory that studying the manner and ability with which Eliot uses these methods can reveal how fictional identities become constructed, how power translates into relationships, and how a charitable aesthetic and humanitarian goals take shape through fictional words.

This study does not treat George Eliot as a systematic social theorist but instead suggests that she grappled with the problem of social renewal in different yet analogous ways.<sup>4</sup> Thus the project sets out not to

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<sup>4</sup> In *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance* (1994), Bernard Semmel offers a forceful counter argument. Semmel maintains that Eliot expresses her social views only tentatively and obliquely and does so almost inadvertently through the secondary concept of inheritance. For Semmel, Eliot views herself as intellectually "disinherited," writing as she does at a time when much of England is being transformed from a traditional community to an alienating modern society. Semmel explores the relationship between Eliot's variations on the theme of inheritance and what he regards as her conservative acceptance of Britain's traditional policies of compromise and reform.

track “influences” but rather to show how certain nineteenth-century ideas about humanity informed George Eliot’s sense of purpose as novelist and helped to shape both the form and the content of her fiction. Many of the formal devices and structural patterns characteristic of Eliot’s imaginative writing echo the innovative methods and ideas of the theorists she studied. Just as their new ideas provoke her to refine and recapitulate those ideas in the form of her work, George Eliot in turn challenges her readers to confront the necessity and difficulties of a gradual social transformation of nineteenth-century Britain, a transformation that Eliot seeks to initiate with a revolution in the individual sensibilities of her readers.

## I

“The train of causes”:

### Historical Circumstances and Context

George Eliot’s social vision has a history. In late 1856, Mary Ann Evans began fashioning novels under her now-famous pseudonym. Before “George Eliot” came into existence, the thirty-year-old woman served as the clandestine editor of the *Westminster Review*, London’s leading intellectual journal founded by the utilitarian thinker Jeremy Bentham. The *Review* sought to publish thought provoking and reformist ideas and to function as an agent of change in the political, social, and moral spheres. By virtue of her affiliation with the journal and immersion in the cultural world of its London publisher, John Chapman, Evans interacted with many notable intellectuals of nineteenth-century Britain, including J.S. Mill, Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Harriet Martineau, and George Henry Lewes, later to become her companion.

Thirty-eight years old when publishing her debut short story, “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton,” Evans discovered fiction

writing late. By this time, she had spent much of her post-adolescent life studying, translating, and writing about the significant intellectual works of the time; she composed many *Westminster Review* pieces, including book reviews, commentary on political and social issues, and articles on contemporary European writing, especially writing from Germany. These experiences exposed her to the most current liberal thinking on religion, philosophy, politics, history, science and the arts, and immersed her in “most of the new ideas that have shaped the modern world” (*GEL*, I, xlv). Evans also established herself as an astute critic on assorted literary topics such as *Antigone* and a cultural observer on subjects as wide-ranging as religious history and the future of German philosophy.

In her early adulthood she translated David Friedrich Strauss’s *The Life of Jesus* in 1846, Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* in 1854, and Benedict de Spinoza’s *Ethics* in 1856, works that not only sounded the death knell for her own belief in a Christian God but also marked the great shift from religious to secular ethics in the nineteenth century. Feuerbach engaged in a humanistic version of Christianity that substituted man for the Divine. Eliot found value in this idea, viewing God not as a creator but as a creation of human beings, constructed by humans to fulfill concrete human needs. Eliot felt that people in society had an obligation to minister to each other through love,



which she regarded as a unifying force of humanity. Following Feuerbach's example, then, Eliot turned away from the concept of a spiritual being named "God" and adopted the belief that every individual possesses the capacity and has an obligation to give a God-like love to other human beings.

Feuerbach, and the German movement generally, regarded biblical writings as ancient evidence of humanity's effort to reconcile life, mortality, pain, and the status of human beings in the natural realm. Affected by Feuerbach, Eliot thought of religion as an anthropological record of the origin and evolution of human morals. The implications of biblical criticism on the one hand and evolutionary theory on the other combined effectively to undermine any confidence in the notion of a divinely inspired and ordained morality. According to Eliot, they compelled one to conclude that all notions of the ethical, and even of the divine, belonged properly to the realm of the human:

the fellowship between man and man which has been the principle of development, social and moral, is not dependent on conceptions of what is not man: and . . . the idea of God, so far as it has been a high spiritual influence, is the ideal of a goodness entirely human (i.e., an exultation of the human). (*GEL*, VI, 98)

Although she understood the linked phenomena of God and religion as functions of the imagination, she nonetheless advocated

certain ethical values rooted in Christianity. For Eliot, the challenge became grounding these standards within a natural context and validating them in the want of God. When Eliot began composing novels, she endeavored to demonstrate that the standards held as transcendent by the world's religions could be comprehended and enacted in naturalistic ways.

Reading Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, Eliot discovers the bridge that would carry her from transcendental spiritualism toward naturalism—from God to Man. And it was with a premonition of the crucial that she set about translating a work destined to be intricately bound up with her life and work.

In a memorable scene from *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot describes how, at a critical time early in life, the heroine Maggie Tulliver reads Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* and as a result converts to a doctrine of renunciation:

She took up the little, old, clumsy book with some curiosity; it had the corners turned down in many places, and some hand, now forever quiet, had made at certain passages strong pen-and-ink marks, long since browned by time. Maggie turned from leaf to leaf, and read where the quiet hand pointed: "Know that the love of thyself doth hurt thee more than anything in the world.... If thou seekest this or that, and wouldst be here or there to enjoy thy own will and pleasure, thou shalt never be quiet nor free from care; for in everything somewhat will be wanting, and in every place there will be some that will cross thee." (253)

There exist only fragmentary comments suggesting any such conversion Mary Ann Evans may have undergone while reading *The Essence of Christianity*. However, her letters indicate that she agreed “everywhere” with Feuerbach’s influential ideas (*GEL*, II, 153; VI, 98).

It seems inescapable that for Evans, as for so many others at the time, Feuerbach’s ideas certified, confirmed, and further clarified her inner feelings, only nascent at one time but substantively extant. Like Maggie, Evans immerses herself in a hugely influential book at a critical time in her life. About marriage, she reads from *The Essence of Christianity*:

Marriage—we mean, of course, marriage as the free bond of love—is sacred in itself, by the very nature of the union which is therein effected. That alone is a religious marriage, which is a true marriage, which corresponds to the essence of marriage—love ... Yes, only as the free bond of love; for a marriage the bond of which is merely an external restriction, not the voluntary, contented self-restriction of love, in short, a marriage which is not spontaneously concluded, spontaneously willed, self-suffering, is not a true marriage, and therefore not a truly moral marriage. (*TEOC* 271)

Here, perhaps for the first time, Evans comes to understand the meaning of Feuerbach’s “I” and “Thou”:

The other is my *thou*—the relation being reciprocal, my *alter ego*, man objective to me, the revelation of my own nature, the eye seeing itself. In another I first have the consciousness of humanity; through him I first learn, I first feel, that I am a man; in my love for him it is first clear to me that he belongs to me and I to him, that we two cannot be

without each other, that only community constitutes humanity. (TEOC 158)

And with startling force:

The *ego* . . . attains to consciousness of the world through consciousness of the *thou*. Thus man is the God of man (*Homo homini Deus*). That he is, he has to thank Nature; that he is man, he has to thank man ... Only where man suns and warms himself in the proximity of man arise feeling and imagination. Love, which requires mutuality, is the spring of poetry; and only where man communicates with man, only in speech, a social act, awakes reason. (TEOC 83)

And finally,

The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective—*i.e.*, contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature ... What man withdraws from himself, what he renounces in himself, he only enjoys in an incomparably higher and fuller measure in God ... To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing ... He who makes God act humanly, declares human activity to be divine; he says, A god who is not active, and not morally or humanly active, is no god; and thus he makes the idea of the Godhead dependent on the idea of activity, that is, of human activity, for a higher he knows not. (TEOC 14, 26, 29)

The words of Feuerbach, “God is Man’s relinquished self,” would command an exigent place in Eliot’s life and work. After Eliot reads Feuerbach, God exists for her only as the reification of the best in man. Religion becomes anthropology. Man realizes himself only in the species.

Spinoza held sway over Eliot's social vision through his *Ethics*. Spinoza advocated the idea that individuals possess inherent God-like traits and that each person holds a moral duty to foster and promote those traits. Because people exist interdependently, they must always be aware that their acts impinge upon others. As a result, Spinoza emphasized forbearance and inclusion. Spinoza also advocated freedom, especially from constraints, including liberation from purposefulness and other limiting goals. Freedom brings knowledge, Spinoza held; increased freedom results in a more felicitous life.

The *Ethics* can be considered a decisive text for Eliot. Instead of merely supplementing her knowledge of the classical idea of sympathy, it gives Eliot a fresh outlook on her own writing. Understanding Spinoza helps Eliot in her effort to thematize her novels; however, his influence on her operates not only at the level of theme but also as a structural and organizational guide for her novels. In the nine years from 1847 to 1856, when she completed her translation, Spinoza preoccupied Eliot's thoughts. In the twenty-odd months it took Eliot to finish her translation, she found herself immersed in Spinoza's ideas.

Isobel Armstrong's essay, "George Eliot, Spinoza, and the Emotions," makes an argument for the formative stimulus of Spinoza's *Ethics* on Eliot's conception of the urges and subtleties of social feelings.

Armstrong shows that studying Spinoza's stressing of the powerful societal interactions of love and hate, empathy and jealousy, need and pain, enables a comprehension of Eliot's work and helps to displace the customary mode of essentially rational sympathy usually deployed when analyzing her art.

Spinoza's elaboration of the divided character of human desires, the intersections of constructive and destructive influences, and the ideological dynamics of love and hate (especially with regard to race and class) lead to important observations about the more demanding and disconcerting elements of Eliot's novels. Instances of these elements can be found in Dorothea's witnessing in *Middlemarch* of Will's interplay with Rosamond and specific parallels in the dual narratives of *Daniel Deronda*, both of which display aspects of jealousy, angst, and projection. Eliot's optimistic social vision cannot be separated from her insight into the inexorable nature of controlling passions.

Spinoza's formative influence can be sensed in Eliot's fiction all the way through *Daniel Deronda*, in fact, especially in that novel. Eliot linked Spinoza and Jewishness, not simply because he was Jewish (although he had been excommunicated), but because during the time she translated the *Ethics* Jewishness dominated her German life. Eliot's companion George Henry Lewes performed the role of Shylock in company with

their friend Ludwig Dessoir, German actor and son of a Jewish tradesman. In her journal, Eliot describes the tenor of the performance:

I was amused to see that the young women's feeling towards the Jews was not much above that of Gratiano and co. Frau Gruppe when running through the wonderful speech "Hath not a Jew eyes" etc turned round to us and said "They don't feel – they don't care how they are used."  
(GEJ 39)

"The mind does not err from the fact that it imagines." Eliot's longhand translation of Spinoza's *Ethics* highlights this sentence. Mistakes occur when failing to comprehend the boundaries of the various epistemological types: when treating, for example, the output of the imagination as identical to that of reason. Embracing features of Feuerbach's and Spinoza's thought, Eliot approaches the imagination as a wellspring of wisdom. The imagination for Eliot serves as an essential source for gaining wisdom because it emotionally and intellectually links human beings to other individuals and to the whole of society.

Eliot understood that the empathetic imagination permits human beings to place themselves in the position of others and therefore attain an awareness of and empathy for their situations. Such a capacity becomes particularly important, given that from Eliot's perspective, there exists no spiritual being, no God, to instantiate truth or goodness. Even science, with its hypothesis of a common evolution, cannot establish such

a ground for morality. Consensus on moral issues being elusive, Eliot argues that “we turn to the truth of feeling as the only universal bond of union” (*GEL*, I 162). In Eliot’s assessment, this “truth of feeling” becomes available only by properly using the imagination and its capacity to link human beings through sympathy.

Notwithstanding the span of time that divides them, Spinoza and Feuerbach fundamentally agree on the subject of religion. Feuerbach’s *History of Modern Philosophy* ratified Spinoza’s segregation of theological and philosophical matters and provided a restatement of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*: “The value and function [of religion] is a practical one, uniquely; it is to lead those who are not determined by reason to dutifulness, virtue and happiness.” Feuerbach’s essential analysis of religion contains nothing distinctively innovative, except for its one reversal. Man creates God in his own image: “By his God thou knowest the man, and by the man his God.” Religious devotion becomes necessarily human-centric, and Feuerbach’s inversion of the maxim from *Genesis*, “God made man in his own image,” replays Spinoza’s wisecrack that “if a triangle could speak, it would say . . . that God is eminently triangular, while a circle would say that the divine nature is eminently circular.”



Feuerbach plays the part of observant auditor and allows religion to issue its pronouncements. He presents an anthropological analysis of the Bible, characterizing it as “man’s earliest and also [most] indirect form of self-knowledge” (TEOC 13). Religion revolves around the introspective qualities of human beings but only in a covert or suppressed and imaginative fashion (33). In Feuerbach’s formulation, religion hinges on illusion, but it offers not simply illusion but exigent revelations about human thought and essence. Eliot would come to enthusiastically embrace this particular point.

Every location in *The Essence of Christianity* that echoes Spinoza’s dictum, “man is God to man” (83, 159, 271) displays Feuerbach asserting the innate importance of human existence. Moral relations do not depend upon a spiritual godhead. Morality develops from natural associations, and Feuerbach regards these moral associations as innately inviolable (TEOC 273). Human thankfulness, feeling, and esteem should be guided not toward abstract religious concepts—the Virgin Mary, God the father, the crucified Jesus—but in the direction of deserving, living recipients: the parents who nurture us, the incarnate partner who counterbalances and absolves our shortcomings, and our fellow human beings whose abilities and efforts reinforce each individual human life. Such tangible, embodied relations, Feuerbach maintains, intrinsically and automatically

breed concern and empathy for other human beings and ethical responsibility toward them.

Asserting the duality of I and Thou, Feuerbach pushes aside the autonomous single individual of Western thought and, most crucially, uncovers Christianity's ego-centrism. A person survives "only by virtue of the conditions which constitute him a member of the whole, or a relative whole" (171). Only collectively do man and woman make a complete person. Only collectively do human beings attain their potential for wisdom, ethics, and integrity.

To the degree that he proposes the I-Thou dyad as a prerequisite to individualism and regards the existence of other human beings as the precursor of philosophic thought, Feuerbach presents a key relational example that would profoundly influence George Eliot's thought and work. Abstract dichotomies—mind and body, reason and emotion—become displaced by an incarnate dualism that tolerates and accepts changeable relations: this dualism would emerge throughout Eliot's fiction in the myriad associations between friends, marital partners, and communities.

The third major influence on Eliot's social vision, Auguste Comte, founded Positivism, a philosophical system that recognized as valid only that which can be scientifically proven. Comte initially transcribed the

epistemological character of Positivism in *Cours de philosophie positive* (*The Course in Positive Philosophy*), a group of books published between 1830 and 1842.

This series of works preceded the 1844 book, *A General View of Positivism* (published in French 1848, English in 1865). The first triad of the *Cours* books treats primarily the extant physical sciences (astronomy, biology, chemistry, mathematics, physics), whereas the fourth and fifth emphasize the inexorable arrival of the social sciences. Comte can be considered, in the recent definition of the term, the original philosopher of science. According to Comte, the physical sciences had to come first, before society could adequately direct its attention toward the most demanding and intricate “Queen science”: the study of human civilization. Therefore, Comte’s *View of Positivism* sought to establish the objectives of the sociological process. The main vehicle for the articulation of the method was the *Systeme de politique positive* (1851-54), the four volumes of which explored the political, social, and religious nature of the society Comte envisaged.

Comte became a major force in nineteenth-century philosophy, informing the thought of intellectuals such as Mill and Marx as well as Eliot. Positivism maintained that all knowledge allows verification. Positivists held that the scientific method—the reciprocal relationship of

observation and theory—would eventually displace metaphysics in the history of ideas. Comte denied the presence of a Divine but believed that one has a duty to be philanthropic. Essentially, for Comte, people should be what others need them to be.

Eliot examined Comte's writings, audited speeches on his method, mingled with his British followers, and contributed funds to advance his public standing. Even so, she refused to join the Comtean faction, as is made clear in her personal relations with close acquaintances like Frederic Harrison and Richard Congreve, both fully convinced Positivists. The more these friends sought to include her in the group, the more she moved away.

Eliot's longstanding acquaintance with Positivist thought derived from various sources. By 1851 she had already absorbed the central thesis of Comte's *Cours*; she referred to it in an essay for the *Westminster Review*, alluding sympathetically to those who hold "with Auguste Comte, that theological and metaphysical speculation have reached their limit, and that the only hope of extending man's sources of knowledge and happiness is to be found in positive science." Five years later, in "The Natural History of German Life," she paraphrased Comte's argument concerning the evolution of positive science:

To Chemistry, the laws of quantity of quality; comprised to these in again Mathematics are added, and in Physics

Biology, are laws superadded, of life; and in lastly, the conditions of life in general, branch out into its special conditions, or Natural History, on the one hand, and into its abnormal conditions, or Pathology, on the other. (*Essays* 290)

Eliot's commentary suggests not only familiarity with Comte's views in the *Cours* but acknowledgment of their general correctness. The mastery of this second point gives Eliot practical control of the two leading ideas of Comte: the concept of historical stages, whereby a theological worldview and then a metaphysical one were replaced in turn by a positive, scientific outlook; and the gradual emergence of new positive sciences out of earlier ones, whereby it became possible by the beginning of the nineteenth century to study man and human society with scientific certitude.

During the early 1850s, Eliot's interest in Comte increased by virtue of her growing intimacy with Lewes, then considered one of Comte's leading spokesmen in England. She worked closely with Lewes in preparing for publication Comte's *Philosophy of the Sciences*, a faithful synthesis and condensation of the *Cours*.

Having become a neighbor of the Congreves in 1859, she read quite eagerly Comte's *Catechisme positiviste*, which Richard Congreve had translated the previous year. Throughout the next decade, Comte remained much on Eliot's mind. In 1865 she visited his home in Paris and,

upon returning, immediately wrote to Mrs Congreve that “the most interesting sight we saw was Comte’s dwelling. Such places, that knew the great dead, always move me deeply” (GEL, IV, 176). Although she agreed with Sara Hennell “in regarding Positivism as one-sided,” she insisted in the same letter (13 July 1861) that “Comte was a great thinker, nevertheless, and ought to be treated with reverence by all smaller fry” (GEL, III, 439). She accepted and read the volume of Comte’s *Système de politique positive* that Richard Congreve gave her in 1866, subsequently writing in her letter to Mrs Congreve, “Will you give my thanks to Mr Congreve for the ‘Synthèse,’ which I have brought with me and I am reading? I expect to understand the three chapters well enough to get some edification” (GEL, IV, 227).

George Eliot’s association with Positivism cannot be separated from her relationship with George Lewes, “the chief representative to most reading English-men of the Positive Philosophy.” The influence traveled both ways. When she reviewed an article on Comte for the *Leader* in May 1854, she apologized deferentially for the absence of “the writer to whom the exposition of Comte in the *Leader* peculiarly belongs.” But when he described himself as a “reverent heretic” with regard to the Religion of Humanity in the *Fortnightly Review* twelve years later, he attributed his increased respect for the later Comte to her. The Congreves

certainly regarded her as the sounder disciple, blaming him for “keeping Marian back from better things.” Lewes took up Comte after reading Mill’s *Logic* in 1842 and was soon trumpeting his merits. His *Biographical History of Philosophy of 1845-46* portrays Positivism as the culmination of western thought. In 1846 began also a friendly but unphilosophical correspondence between Lewes and Comte which lasted on and off until 1853. Lewes used the *Leader* as a vehicle for the propagation of Positivism from 1850 to 1854. A series of articles from that paper formed the first half of his exposition of Comte’s *Philosophy of the Sciences in 1853*, a copy of which he presented to George Eliot (*GEL*, I 126). In the “Biographical Introduction,” he makes no secret of his allegiance to Positivism, which had given him “the sustaining Faith which previous speculation had shattered.” But this did not prevent Lewes from dissenting from some of Comte’s views. His main purpose was exposition rather than comment, although he expressed occasional reservations, for instance over Comte’s religion and cerebral theory. “Abstinence from criticism,” he explained, should not be interpreted as assent. Nevertheless, his enthusiasm for Positivism remained unmistakable.

George Eliot read *Comte on the Middle Ages* in July 1861 in preparation for *Romola*, praising his treatment in a letter to Sara Hennell. Further evidence that Comte was very much in her mind while she was

writing *Romola* occurs in her “Italian Notes, 1862.” After a number of historical details, she suddenly added two entirely different entries: “Influence of egoism in determining formulae. Necessity of strong theistic feeling as a preparation for the Religion of Humanity.” A few pages later she copied Comte’s disparaging remarks about half-hearted disciples: “Quelques esprits excentriques comprennent le droit d’examiner comme imposant le devoir de ne se decider jamais” (“Some eccentric minds include the right to examine imposing the duty of never deciding”). Eliot wrote to Mrs Congreve in November 1863 that she “was swimming in Comte” at the time she wrote *Romola* (GEL, IV, 116). This reference would seem to lend credence to a reading of the novel as a Positivist allegory, wherein Eliot’s female character traverses Comte’s three phases, mapping through her own life the journey of humanity.

In 1866, Eliot copied into her notebook for *Felix Holt* an interesting discussion by Comte of the extent to which theological faith encourages egoism under different conditions. The day before she began the novel, she started again on “Comte’s Social Science in Miss Martineau’s edition.”<sup>5</sup> Once again, this proves nothing about the novel itself, but it

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<sup>5</sup> Harriet Martineau translated and condensed Comte’s work. Published in two volumes by John Chapman in 1855 as *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte: Freely Translated and Condensed by Harriet Martineau*, the work remains in print and can be accessed also in digital form as published by Cornell University Library.



provides support for the attribution to Comte of some influence on Felix Holt's political and philosophical creed.

Feuerbach, Spinoza, and Comte sketched out the core ideas that informed George Eliot's social vision, such as concepts of the dimension of moral accountability, a universe causally determined, and the significance of human community. All three thinkers held a deterministic perspective of the universe, gained principally through deduction, though the Positivism of Feuerbach and Comte emphasized history's evolutionary quality while Spinoza held that societies advance as an increasing number of individuals within a society develop "adequate ideas." Through these ideas, individuals comprehend their relation to true substance and take particular moral choices as a result. The laws of causation embraced by Comte and Feuerbach explained the interrelatedness of phenomena. These laws held true for Spinoza as well, but he also concerned himself with the significance of individual action upon and within societies. Due to the universe's remaining fundamentally static, human acts founded on incomplete wisdom and extreme emotion caused error, "evil," misery, and "bondage," while acts founded on instinct and rationality led to happiness and liberty. Developments in science that Feuerbach and Comte would consider as

advancements in humanity's knowledge, Spinoza would regard as the ongoing routine of substituting acceptable ideas for inferior ones.

Several of Eliot's books treat the interactional strain between individuals and society. Eliot makes clear that man needs society, a concept that repeats Spinoza's and Feuerbach's maxim of "man's love for man." The threat of estrangement from society often serves as the severest penalty Eliot administers to the figures in her novels, such as to Arthur and Hetty in *Adam Bede* and Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*. Society's deterministic character, however, informs the relationship between each individual and society; Eliot's novels present the edicts of causation as they govern human lives. She forces numerous characters to internalize difficult lessons by witnessing the outcomes of human acts. Once more, Eliot injects into human activity Comte's positivist ideas rooted in science. However, Spinoza's recommended approach to acquire "adequate ideas" by way of "observed facts and deduction based on cause and effect relationships" seems equally conveyed. Eliot embeds these concepts within her plots. Adam's arduous ethical instruction in *Adam Bede*, the suffering endured by Mrs Transome as a result of her previous behavior in *Felix Holt*, and Romola's finding in *Romola* that ethical instruction from the outside can also be imperfect all demonstrate

both Comte's principles of cause and effect and Spinoza's insistence on the value of experiential knowledge.

Works produced by these three theorists—Feuerbach, Spinoza, and Comte—provided the original impetus for Eliot's social ideas, ideas she would subsequently and vividly convey in her fiction. In a reciprocal and mildly ironic way, Eliot acted in turn as a carrier of Feuerbach's and Spinoza's ideas, ideas that loomed large within the German higher criticism movement, synthesizing and passing them along to her British readers. The influence of the German movement on nineteenth-century British thought therefore owes much to George Eliot.

Eliot became one of the earliest figures in England to suggest the novel's moral promise and to consider it a suitable conveyance for advanced philosophic ideas. Indeed, Eliot's enunciation of her social vision hinges upon this ethical potential. Eliot's novels should be understood as attempts to convey her ideas about society in a nonconformist fashion. Her choice to compose fiction instead of standard philosophical works suggests a wish to incentivize the creative and emotional, along with the intellectual, capacities of her audience. In Eliot's opinion, imaginative activity generates one's inclination to feel sympathy for fellow human beings. She seeks to depict in her novels this inclination and its potential for refinement as moral knowledge.

The extent of Eliot's influence evinces both the potency of fiction as a form of social commentary and its popularity in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. With the spread of literacy and the increasing availability of inexpensive books and newspapers, reading had become democratized as never before. The repeated attempts in nineteenth-century critiques of literature to link public ethics with the novel, the joining of fiction and fact in the industrial novels of the mid-century, and the reliance on didactic fiction even in Evangelical pamphlets, all attest to the profound relevance of fiction to public life and to its capacity not merely to reflect but to amplify and deepen public debate. Seen within this context, Dinah Mulock's description of the novel, published in an 1861 issue of *Macmillan's Magazine*, seems apt:

[The novel is] one of the most important moral agents of the community. The essayist may write for his hundreds, the preacher preach for his thousands; but the novelist counts his audience by millions. His power is three-fold—over heart, reason, and fancy. (442)

Feuerbach and Spinoza each explored the functions of emotion, imagination, and reason in the acquisition of moral wisdom. Both described the relationships informing these attributes and insisted upon their reformation. Eliot attempts in her novels precisely this reformatory task. Spinoza's holistic thought surfaces throughout Eliot's fiction. She remains deeply suspicious of binary thought that treats imagination and

reason as separate and divided. Eliot understands, as do Feuerbach and Spinoza, that these divisions emanate largely from religion, particularly Christianity.

With her novels, Eliot sets into motion a new form of philosophical writing. However, her novels should not be characterized as providing literary cover for philosophical thought. Eliot rejects in no uncertain terms this portrayal as hostile to the basic principles of her authorial routine. When an acquaintance, Frederic Harrison, suggests to Eliot that she devise a novel conveying the thought of Auguste Comte as a way of promoting Positivism, Eliot resolutely declines, explaining that such a project would contradict her obligation to compose straightforward and representative work that “deals with life in its highest complexity.” Notwithstanding Eliot’s deployment of the novel as a serious medium for conveying her ideas about society, commentators seldom approach her novels and her social vision as an authentically cohesive entity. Many cogent critiques of her intellectual milieu exist, but, surprisingly, much remains to be said about Eliot’s literary inscription of her social vision and its lasting influence.

Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte offered a diagnosis of the state of humanity; Eliot pursues a prognosis. Investigating what assets society holds for creating a utilitarian morality that would insist humans assume

accountability for human life, Eliot determines those assets to be imagination and sympathy regulated by intellect. The influence appears in Eliot's ideas about the functions that intellect, feeling, and imagination ought to perform in living. For Eliot, the exercise of these parts working harmoniously together precedes the attainment of moral wisdom. Instead of writing a philosophical discourse promoting this concept as a mere hypothesis, and thereby try to generate intellectual accord with her audience, Eliot's fiction attempts to embody this call to moral wisdom. Her novels attempt to involve and motivate the sum total of her audience's intellectual, affective, and imaginative powers.

Having seen the crucial influence exerted upon Eliot by Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte, it becomes important to identify specific social tenets derived from them that infuse her novels. First, the notion that "man is god to man" stipulates that the ambitions and accomplishments of humanity reside only in communal, natural human life. Second, in order to permit ethical associations, each human being must first conquer an innate egocentrism. Such egocentrism blocks the path to self-knowledge achieved by interacting with others. Third, if moral life is to be delivered from traditional religion and a decaying aristocracy, then human beings must take accountability for the force of their emotions

and study how to redeem themselves through reflection, sympathy, and imagination.

Finally, and most importantly for the focus of this project, humankind's manner of existence consists in relationships: people come to terms with who and what they are, or might become, by engaging with others within a human community. This sympathetic concept emanates directly from the thinking of Feuerbach, especially his I-Thou formulation, with the interaction between the sexes forming an important aspect.

All of these processes can be best understood in evolutionary terms. Indeed, Eliot came to picture society itself as an ongoing invention—a collective, imaginative act proposed and tested piecemeal, defeated or established much as scientific hypotheses are, maintained and revised continually by the common force of individual acts of choice and judgment. Eliot's novels refuse to propose a moral hypothesis but instead offer a fictional, evolving world, as multifaceted as the medium can tolerate, through which she conveys a vision of society—a vision both of how society is and how she wants it to be.

## II

“Between the I and the Thou”:

George Eliot’s Diction of Hierarchy and Deliverance

The distinction between the I and the Thou, between the individual and the species, is the distinction between the essential and the superficial, between what is closer and what is more distant, between the higher and the lower.

—Ludwig Feuerbach

Born near Nuneaton, Warwickshire in 1819, Mary Ann Evans grew up on a landed estate in the Midlands. Her father, Robert Evans, managed the Arbury Hall Estate, and her childhood spent on its South Farm allowed Mary Ann to calculate the vast difference between the affluence in which the resident property owner lived and the condition of the indigent persons living nearby. Disparate lives lived in parallel would often reemerge in her fiction.

Like many other English people in the mid-nineteenth century, George Eliot would leave behind the countryside and live the remainder of her life in or around cities and large towns: in the suburbs of Coventry



and later London.<sup>6</sup> Yet, with the single exception of *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot sets all her English novels in a locale dominated either by a great park and manor house—the Donnithorne estate in *Adam Bede*, Transome Court in *Felix Holt*, Tipton and Freshitt in *Middlemarch*, Diplo and Monk's Topping in *Daniel Deronda*—or, in *Silas Marner*, by a large farm which stands in for the manor house and sits atop the social hierarchy of the local community.

Even when Eliot's *dramatis personae* do not belong to the privileged landed classes, they mix to a greater or lesser degree in those circles: Adam Bede, a lowly carpenter, knows his place, but his boyhood friend Arthur happens to be the young squire. This blending of privileged and non-privileged characters effectively blurs the dividing lines of social ranking in Eliot's fiction; simultaneously, it highlights her technique of inscribing the communitarian imperative she inherited from Feuerbach—the need to privilege “the higher” over “the lower,” that is, the welfare of

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<sup>6</sup> In *Migration, Mobility and Modernization* (2000) David Siddle points out that British migration from rural to urban areas that occurred around the time that Eliot published her first fiction had a circular character. In the harvest season, people worked in the countryside and the remainder of the time in the cities. As time went on, more and more people could not fall back on the countryside, and circle migration became chain migration. Cities with textile or heavy-industry attracted laborers as did commercial and administrative centers. People from all over Europe (after 1861 also from Eastern Europe) and even from other continents moved toward the new industry centers in England, as they did also in France and Germany. The Industrial Revolution introduced new means of transportation that made it easier to move over longer distances.

the general community over the concerns of the single individual. The narrator of *Adam Bede* provides an apt example of Eliot's blending technique:

Hetty was quite certain her uncle wanted her to encourage Adam, and would be pleased for her to marry him. For those were times when there was no rigid demarcation of rank between the farmer and the respectable artisan, and on the home hearth, as well as in the public house, they might be seen taking their jug of ale together; the farmer having a latent sense of capital, and of weight in parish affairs, which sustained him under his conspicuous inferiority in conversation. (*AB*, ch 9)

The farmer's "latent sense of capital" and the moments of "no rigid demarcation of rank between the farmer and the respectable artisan" bring to mind the binding interdependence of Feuerbach's I-Thou dyad, the chain of connection linking the higher and lower ranks, that keeps social life orderly and under control in Eliot's novels. Even linen-weaver Silas Marner, whose "protuberant eyes" and "pale face" cast him as a misproportioned, unfortunate figure, defies strict hierarchical boundaries as he comes into close contact with the wealthy small gentry. It is tempting to think that Eliot replays in these backdrops the historical shift from a hierarchical social order dominated by a closed system of power vested in the land and wealth of the aristocracy and gentry, a system described in the diction of rank, to a social order defined by economic relations between capital and labor and described in the diction of class.

At the same time, however, Eliot deeply attaches to the old traditions and institutions. Her intellectual commitment to the notion of a human community—a constitutively relational society based on Feuerbach's ideas of mutual dependency and duty—links simultaneously to anachronistic social forms based on privilege and maintained by rites of deference and obligation. Eliot's ethical concerns, in other words, link to what might be termed her social conservatism and not simply to her more obvious evangelistic motivation. Indeed, "That recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self" ("Janet's Repentance," ch 10) involves also a recognition of and resignation to social inequality.

George Eliot published her first fictional work, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, a collection of three short stories, in *Blackwood's Magazine* during the year 1857. The three stories—"The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton," "Mr Gilfil's Love Story," and "Janet's Repentance"—take place in and around the fictional town of Milby in the English Midlands. When in her first story Eliot stakes out the social terrain of her fiction as "the debatable ground between aristocracy and commonalty" (*SCL*, ch 4), her adopting the diction of hierarchy to describe social relations in Milby in the 1820s seems unsurprising. In her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, things no

longer seem quite so simple. Eliot's narrator sketches her heroine's family home as

just large enough to be called a mansion, and ... moderately rented, having no manor attached to it, and being rather difficult to let with its sombre furniture and faded upholstery.

The narration then evolves, invoking the "border-territory of rank," thereby suggesting a more complicated milieu:

But inside and outside it was what no beholder could suppose to be inhabited by retired trades-people: a certainty which was worth many conveniences to tenants who not only had the taste that shrinks from new finery, but also were in that border-territory of rank where annexation is a burning topic: and to take up her abode in a house which had once sufficed for dowager countesses gave a perceptible tinge to Mrs. Davilow's satisfaction in having an establishment of her own. (*DD*, ch 3)

Indeed, the Davilows move, as do Jane Austen's genteel families, in gentry circles. But *Daniel Deronda*, written in the mid-1870s and set in the mid-1860s, explores not the gentry but bizarre social hierarchies. It begins with countesses and tradesmen together at the gaming tables, in "a striking admission of human equality" (*DD*, ch 1), and follows the restless lives of those newly formed, still-to-be-defined social groupings—a shifting structure with a marked gradation of landowners, tenant farmers, countesses, dealers, craftsman, and laborers. As Raymond Williams has noticed, this fluid concoction emanated not from an outside

pressure affecting a previously stable rural milieu but from social and economic conflicts already endemic in the nineteenth-century environment.<sup>7</sup>

Eliot's setting seems to imply quite a different "border-territory," one which suggests that her usage of the word "rank" in a novel with such a consciously contemporary sensibility must be considered deliberate. Eliot seems wary of "class" as a hierarchical descriptor: wary that the struggles of competing economic groups should underpin all social description and wary of the diction of social description itself, which might be characterized as a calculated intervention in society. Once social experience becomes "wrought back to the directness of sense like the solidity of objects" (*MM*, ch 21), in the everyday face-to-face dealings of one person with another, class stands revealed as synthetic—as constructed. Thus, Eliot chooses provincial social life as paradigmatic of "our old society" (*Essays* 421), the society which has "grown up historically" and predates by centuries a class-based society.

Provincial settings offer Eliot a local particularity which resists sociological generalization: she wants most of all to convey the truth about these characters, about the society they inhabit. In so tightly

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*, one foundational text of British cultural materialism, addresses in its conclusion the idea of community and a "common culture." See especially 328-338.

focusing her scenes—Loamshire cannot be confused with Stonyshire, even if it exists next door; Treby Magna is not Middlemarch—she also contests the assumption, in place by 1860, that these societies were, a generation earlier, already part of that larger overarching structure, class-based society. So when Eliot writes about the “subtle movement” of social groups in “old provincial society,” she unreservedly deploys a diction of hierarchy to describe various fluctuations and slippages in social ranking:

Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement: had not only its striking downfalls, its brilliant young professional dandies who ended by living up an entry with a drab and six children for their establishment, but also those less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence. Some slipped a little downward, some got higher footing: people denied aspirates, gained wealth, and fastidious gentlemen stood for boroughs; some were caught in political currents, some in ecclesiastical, and perhaps found themselves surprisingly grouped in consequence; while a few personages or families that stood with rocky firmness amid all this fluctuation, were slowly presenting new aspects in spite of solidity, and altering with the double change of self and beholder. (*MM*, ch 11)

Setting her fiction in small rural communities offers Eliot a model of social relations as thoroughly modern in economic terms, but it also complicates her narrative structuring of social hierarchies. Eliot describes the Vincy family as “old manufacturers [who] had kept a good house for

three generations, in which there had naturally been much intermarrying with neighbors more or less decidedly genteel." However, while Mr Vincy's sister "made a wealthy match in accepting Mr. Bulstrode," Bulstrode does not enjoy the special status of having been born in the town; owing to his "dimly known origin," the townspeople regard Bulstrode as fortunate—having "done well in uniting himself with a real Middlemarch family" (*MM*, ch 11).

Mayor Vincy's fluctuating wealth and status—the novel's diction casts his social ranking as "descended a little, having taken an innkeeper's daughter"—derive from his ownership of a ribbon factory, a factory that hires local wage labor. He registers less as a Middlemarcher and more as a capitalist who might have invested his capital anywhere. Provincial life being insular, however, and tools of communication and conveyance being much less advanced during the 1820s, small-town social interactions functioned in practice very much as local interactions. As Lydgate finds, it seems virtually impossible to evade the "particular web" of interdependence in a small town, or the "hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity" (*MM*, ch 18). This "interdependence" also leads to a certain fluidity, that which Eliot characterizes as the "subtle movement" of social hierarchies.

County society and town society constitute the two intersecting axes of provincial life in Eliot's English fiction. County society mixes variously ranked occupations: landowners and tenant farmers (who may be well-heeled, as the Poysers on the Donnithorne estate in *Adam Bede*, or not-so-well-heeled, as the Dagleys on Brooke's estate in *Middlemarch*), rural artisans (skilled workmen such as Adam Bede or Caleb Garth), and agricultural laborers. Eliot takes quite seriously the accurate depiction of these different ranks and occupations. She explicitly warns in "The Natural History of German Life" that "our social novels profess to represent the people as they are, and the unreality of their representations is a grave evil." Extending this admonition against straying from reality in fictional representation, Eliot cites Scott, Wordsworth, Kingsley, Alton Locke, and Hornung as affirmative models of rendering character, of "linking the higher classes with the lower" and "obliterating the vulgarity of exclusiveness":

When Scott takes us into Luckie Mucklebackit's cottage, or tells the story of "The Two Drover,"—when Wordsworth sings to us the reverie of "Poor Susan,"—when Kingsley shows us Alton Locke gazing yearningly over the gate which leads from the highway into the first wood he ever saw,—when Hornung paints a group of chimney-sweepers,—more is done towards linking the higher classes with the lower, towards obliterating the vulgarity of exclusiveness, than by hundreds of sermons and philosophical dissertations. (*Essays* 270)



Eliot's negative invocation of "hundreds of sermons" and "philosophical dissertations" brings to mind that, for all the philosophical interests she held when she began writing fiction, Eliot's early reading of David Strauss alerted her to the ways in which narrative, as opposed to moral preachments or philosophical tracts, binds people together into communities. Eliot would aim her rhetorical strategies accordingly. Strauss's controversial study enabled Eliot to see supposedly miraculous events, particularly those in the New Testament, as potent narrative dramatizations of mythical happenings. This elucidation of narrative power helped to cement in Eliot a dedication to the fictional expression of her own philosophical concepts. As we shall see, Eliot seeks to implant in her audience a deep sympathy for her characters and the dramatic situations within which they live and struggle. Influenced by Strauss (and Scott, Wordsworth, and Kingsley), Eliot realizes that linking readers to realistic characters and events serves her strategic ends more effectively than attempting to connect them to the bloodless abstractions of "philosophical dissertations." Eliot subscribes to the principle that narrative persuasion provides her with the best of both worlds, conveying—by "showing" rather than "telling"—the full force and depth of her philosophical interests while sidestepping what she sees as the

more distanced, unsympathetic effects that attach to purely philosophical writing.

Town society, represented in most detail in *Middlemarch*, corresponds to the commercial culture of rural England in the early industrial period. Eliot classes her townspeople such as Vincy as manufacturers, but she constructs her towns as centers of agricultural commerce. St Ogg's in *The Mill on the Floss* seems exemplary in this regard. What makes St Ogg's modern is not the existence of local capitalists but the existence of urban capital flowing (to adopt the novel's operative metaphor) in to producers and out again as local goods and prices headed, via transport and communication routes, for other towns and ports across the country. Therefore, a clash between two rival producers of similar rank in a modernizing agricultural industry—not a local power struggle with Mr Pivart upstream—victimizes Tulliver. Eliot's novel portrays hierarchies of town professionals and businessmen, including lawyer Wakem—lawyers, most notably, but also bankers, such as Bulstrode in *Middlemarch*, as well as auctioneers and land agents—who function as the point of articulation between local interests and the interests of capital.

No better example exists of these intersections of agricultural and commercial production than the extended families of the Tullivers in *The*

*Mill on the Floss*. While Eliot defines these characters by their occupations, she characteristically ranks these occupations and the characters engaged in them as equal in a hierarchical sense. Eliot casts Tulliver as a mortgaged small businessman: a mill owner, whose flour-making business turns local agricultural produce (grown by poor tenant farmers like his brother-in-law, Moss) into goods headed, via transport on the river and canal systems, to national food markets. The character Bob Jakin, who prospers as a small trader, emphasizes the dominance of the local import-export markets. The husbands of the Dodson sisters also reflect this intimate relationship between agriculture and commerce: Mr Deane works in a local firm (which employs Tom); Mr Glegg, now retired, worked as a wool stapler and Mr Pullet as a gentleman farmer.

From her discussion of the peasantry in “The Natural History of German Life,” it might be anticipated that Eliot would explore the lives of agricultural laborers in her histories of “unfashionable families” (*MF*, IV, ch 3). There do exist certain moments when the lowest of the lower orders occupies her mind. In *The Mill on the Floss*, for instance, the narrator pauses to defend the novel’s “tone of emphasis,” by which Eliot means the vulgar stridency of its social critique. This “wide national life,” the narrator argues passionately, bases itself entirely on “the emphasis of want.” The narrator explains that

good society, floated on gossamer wings of light irony, is of very expensive production; requiring nothing less than a wide and arduous national life condensed in unfragrant deafening factories, cramping itself in mines, sweating at furnaces, grinding, hammering, weaving under more or less oppression of carbonic acid—or else, spread over sheepwalks, and scattered in lonely houses and huts on the clayey or chalky cornlands, where the rainy days look dreary. (*MF*, IV, ch 3)

Eliot highlights here, of course, the emphasis of Maggie's wants—Maggie the daughter of a petty bourgeois mill owner. Interestingly, no factory workers populate Eliot's fiction, and the vast coterie of agricultural laborers remains virtually invisible. The unworthy poor do not constitute, Eliot implies, the stuff of fiction. They "are not easily roused," as the Reverend Irwine informs Dinah in *Adam Bede* (ch 8) and "take life almost as slowly as the sheep and cows." He redirects Dinah's attention to the "intelligent workmen" about the district as he states, "I daresay you know the Bedes."

Within Eliot's distinctive diction of hierarchy, then, her representative "peasant" becomes the skilled artisan, the high-status craftsman laborer whose skills, passed down from master to apprentice, link him back to medieval times (hence the significance of the originary naming of *Adam Bede*). Independence, his control over his own work, characterizes the skilled artisan. As described by E. P. Thompson's landmark *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), by the end of the

eighteenth century, as a vast new class of unskilled factory laborers emerged, a crucial identification of the rising proletariat with the proud tradition of independent artisans forged class-consciousness.

Eliot, however, skeptically regards this characterization of traditional social rank and class identity. As a result, she ignores the real poor, effectively sanitizing the people of working class in order to deal with them. For her, the artisan embodies the ideal of a responsible, progressive worker. His independence safeguards him from the corruptions of class, that corporate form of self-interest that blinds its members to their responsibilities and capacities to pursue social relations independently and clear-sightedly; these corruptions encourage moral laziness and the tendency to “convenience, that admirable branch system from the main line of self-interest” (*SCL*, ch 10), in which individuals lived “from hand to mouth . . . with a small family of immediate desires” (*MF*, bk 1, ch 3).

No group of people in Eliot’s fiction more enthusiastically embraces this convenience—doing harm to no one, just doing the best for themselves—than her egoistic landowners (Arthur Donnithorne, Harold Transome, Mr Brooke). That observation helps to explain why, in a number of novels, Eliot explores versions of a partnership or association between local landed interests and socially mobile artisans for the

ultimate betterment of society; Eliot thereby instantiates, albeit obliquely, an unlikely version of Feuerbach's communitarianism. Thus, Adam Bede benefits Arthur Donnithorne; and Caleb Garth benefits Sir James Chettam and, especially, Mr Brooke. More broadly, Eliot writes into her social plots certain relationships between the ranks of leisured and productive "classes" (in the generic sense of that word): Godfrey Cass and Silas Marner; the Transomes and Felix Holt; and later, more boldly still, Deronda and the Mallinger-Grandcourts.

In these plots, Eliot pushes individuals from different social hierarchies into contact with each other or, more commonly, to the peripheries of each other's lives, in what she characterizes in *Middlemarch* as

the stealthy convergence of human lots . . . 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 neighbor. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our dramatis personae folded in her hand. (*MM*, ch 11)

Eliot tends to write as latent the social relationships of these characters. She often represents the unseen interdependence of individuals and the social ranks they inhabit in ways that suggest that the localized settings of her fiction also characterize wider social realities. Her "Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt" frames this effect in terms of

social responsibility, interdependence, and hierarchies: when all the “various parts” of the human body depend on one another, they are “likely all to feel the effect if any of them goes wrong” (*Essays* 420).<sup>8</sup>

This effect obtains equally within her local communities, where Eliot shows obscure actions as having unseen, far-reaching consequences—consequences, she suggests, of national significance. This effect constitutes the meaning of the web in *Middlemarch*, the most explicit of the aesthetic organizing structures Eliot superimposes on social actuality in order to make sense of it. *Middlemarch* society should not be viewed as English society, but it does stand in for English society. It constitutes only one small part of it—resembling the larger stratified entity closely in many ways (it includes, for instance, “representatives” of the various ranks and occupations of English society, and of the English “character”). But it is itself: it has its own particularities, which restrain

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<sup>8</sup> In a 2013 analysis of “Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt,” Robert Dingley argues that Eliot holds quite well-defined social interests. However, Dingley maintains that what some critics have regarded as Eliot’s “radical conservatism” should be viewed as not particularly radical but as closely allied to Tory politics. In support of this view, Dingley points out that Eliot’s writing betrays certain conflicts and ambiguities in what other critics have termed her avowed liberal creed. Although Dingley’s argument with respect to Eliot’s putative conservatism seems only marginally persuasive, he nevertheless makes cogent and useful observations regarding Eliot’s 1868 essay and its registering the pressure of external events—election agents planning campaigns, disgruntled workers rioting, and political principles being debated in pubs. In the end, however, Dingley presents a politically bifurcated Eliot who is neither wholly reactionary nor progressive but irretrievably divided against herself.

the empiricist narrator of *Middlemarch* from becoming involved in a misleading social allegory:

I have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe. (*MM*, ch 15)

Any discussion of Eliot's usage of hierarchical language and social ranking leads inevitably to an acknowledgement that British society during Eliot's lifetime was class-based, and that the age of reform was the age of the middle classes. But who exactly comprised these middle classes, and how were they arranged hierarchically and set apart from those above and below them?

Answering these questions requires a brief digression into the origins of class-based society in Britain. As a way of describing societal hierarchies, the term "class" dates only from the late eighteenth century. Therefore, in 1819, when Mary Ann Evans came into the world, it was a relatively new way of thinking about the differentiation of social groupings (the term "working class" dates only from 1813, when Robert Owen first used it). Rich and poor had existed side by side, of course, since the very beginning of human society, and social inequality was especially pronounced in pre-industrial Britain. In the countryside the most distinctive pre-industrial formation was the landed estate, with its



farms, villages, parish church, and common lands, which grew out of the integration of Norman and Saxon feudalism in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It continued to exist in more complex forms after Britain had become industrialized and to interconnect in complex ways with the newer social formations growing out of industrial capitalism. Put simply, the earlier formation of landowners and dependent yeomen, artisans, and laborers constituted a grouping based not on class but on rank—social station.

The relationship between Arthur Donnithorne and Adam Bede, in a novel set at the end of the eighteenth century, clearly exemplifies how Eliot regards rank as different from class. Arthur, the young squire-in-waiting, embodies self-satisfied ease and moral indolence and entertains paternalistic fantasies about his future as a benevolent and beloved landlord. At the same time, Adam seems endlessly deferential to those of higher social rank such as Arthur, as this extended passage from chapter 16 makes clear:

Adam, I confess, was very susceptible to the influence of rank, and quite ready to give an extra amount of respect to every one who had more advantages than himself, not being a philosopher or a proletaire with democratic ideas, but simply a stout-limbed clever carpenter with a large fund of reverence in his nature, which inclined him to admit all established claims unless he saw very clear grounds for questioning them. He had no theories about setting the world to rights, but he saw there was a great deal of

damage done by building with ill-seasoned timber—by ignorant men in fine clothes making plans for outhouses and workshops and the like without knowing the bearings of things—by slovenly joiners’ work, and by hasty contracts that could never be fulfilled without ruining somebody; and he resolved, for his part, to set his face against such doings. On these points he would have maintained his opinion against the largest landed proprietor in Loamshire or Stonyshire either; but he felt that beyond these it would be better for him to defer to people who were more knowing than himself. He saw as plainly as possible how ill the woods on the estate were managed, and the shameful state of the farm-buildings; and if old Squire Donnithorne had asked him the effect of this mismanagement, he would have spoken his opinion without flinching, but the impulse to a respectful demeanour towards a “gentleman” would have been strong within him all the while. The word “gentleman” had a spell for Adam, and, as he often said, he “couldn’t abide a fellow who thought he made himself fine by being coxy to’s betters.” I must remind you again that Adam had the blood of the peasant in his veins, and that since he was in his prime half a century ago, you must expect some of his characteristics to be obsolete. (AB, ch 16)

Here, in *Adam Bede*, Eliot’s plot movements seem to propose an egalitarian ideal. Even though Adam remains “very susceptible to the influence of rank,” he declares himself Arthur’s equal at the moment of discovering his patron’s irresponsible behavior toward Hetty (ch 16, p 139; ch 28, p 260). Similarly, though Adam would never put “worldly interest” before his sense of what is “honourable,” he begins as a foreman but ends up owning a flourishing building business (ch 43, p 394). In *Silas Marner*, too, a sense of natural equality vies with prescriptive

respectability and wins, so that Godfrey Cass, the most substantially landed parishioner, must give up his claims to the daughter who has been adopted by Silas, a working man. Eliot generally shows in her fiction the curtailment of upper-class dominance to be far more a gain than a loss.

However, ambiguities do arise. While the word “gentleman” holds Adam, “with the blood of the peasant in his veins,” in its thrall, Arthur harbors fantasies about the continuance of rank and its unearned privileges. He believes that, with “a prosperous, contented tenantry,” he will become

the model of an English gentleman—mansion in first-rate order, all elegance and high taste—jolly housekeeping—finest stud in Loamshire—purse open to all public objects—in short, everything as different as possible from what was now associated with the name of Donnithorne. (*AB*, ch 12)

Arthur is in for a rude shock, but not in the form of an uprising of his tenants. The Donnithorne estate, mismanaged by the family, preserves the idea of a harmonious system of social differences based on birth and property and held together by the magnanimity of the powerful and the acquiescence of the powerless: “a grateful and honest confiding dependence,” as Southey characterized it in 1829. Thus, Arthur and Adam, although they come to blows over Hetty, hold a mutual respect for one other. Adam respects Arthur’s station, worthy of admiration no

matter who occupies it, and in exchange Arthur respects Adam's character, which functions as an ideal reflection of the integrity of the entire system.

Neither Adam nor Arthur, nor anyone else in Eliot's Midlands fictional world for that matter, thinks of himself as belonging to a class to which he also owes his identity and devotion. Instead, these characters identify themselves only by their positions on a vertical hierarchy (along which they have a limited degree of mobility, as Adam does, rising up the social scale through his efforts)—or, more commonly, a pyramidal hierarchy, with the great mass of so-called “common people” occupying the base. Perhaps Arthur thinks of his tenants as an undifferentiated mob, but he never thinks of them as a class.

By the time Eliot wrote *Adam Bede*, however, the class system was long entrenched. Indeed, Adam's social mobility displays all the characteristics of middle-class social ideology. Because the new economic divisions of land, capital, and labor—as opposed to hereditary entitlements and duties and title to landed property—determine class, class differs in fundamental ways from rank. Within the class system, one's position within a particular class—and not within a fixed hierarchy of caste—fixes an individual's identity. This structure therefore

introduces a notion of class interest and of a society based not on a preordained order but on inequality.

Class-based hierarchy functions in Eliot's fiction in a complicated fashion: interest groups, occupational groups, and sectional religious groups may overlap. Unlike rank, it takes for granted the existence of conflict and tension among classes, and it stratifies and sectionalizes society along lines openly recognized as unequal: working and housing conditions, food and leisure pursuits, types of illnesses and lengths of lifespans. Arthur, who "doesn't mean badly by his tenants or any one else," does not question the loyalty of his tenants, but his "way of paring and clipping at expenses" would certainly affect their livelihoods in a destructive way. Even so, it would not occur to Arthur that the tenants might organize themselves sufficiently to question their living conditions or make demands of their landlord. In a modest local community where the sustenance of all depends on the big house, where few can read or write, and where communication with other districts remains limited, such action would seem inconceivable.

In other words, Eliot's farm laborers remain, on the whole, unconscious of themselves as a class. However, as Raymond Williams observes, working-class consciousness began to form in Britain at about the time *Adam Bede* takes place. Factory workers or clerks or

professionals, on the other hand—members of a social class—tended to live together in cities and interact among themselves, read the same newspapers, and frequent the same pubs. The relationship they experienced with other classes constituted not a personal relationship but a relationship based on economic transactions. Thomas Carlyle in 1829 had already understood that the “sole nexus” between men in industrial societies was the “cash payment” nexus. Without sufficient economic or cultural capital, industrial operatives found themselves unable to improve their conditions or make demands of their social superiors, but their identities no longer hinged on their preordained place in the social order.

Eliot’s fiction concerns itself with these thorny issues of hierarchy—class and rank—in unlikely and often unnoticed ways. For example, the world of fashion tropes the power of status, class, social rank, and wealth. Fashion intrudes into religious practices, displacing spirituality and Christian brotherhood. Already in “Janet’s Repentance,” Eliot shows the customs of churchgoing, of dressing well for church, and of mocking the unfashionably dressed as one and the same. “Few places could present a more brilliant show of out door toilettes than might be seen issuing from Milby church,” Eliot writes, but “the respect for the Sabbath, manifested in this attention to costume, was unhappily

counterbalanced by considerable levity of behavior during the prayers and sermon,” especially toward “persons inferior in dress and demeanour” (*SCL*, 2, 254-255).

The vocabulary of the Confirmation scene in “Janet’s Repentance” conveys well this ranking function of costuming and coiffure:

The church-bells were ringing, and many families were conscious of Sunday sensations, chiefly referable to the fact that the daughters had come down to breakfast in their best frocks, and with their hair particularly well dressed. (*SCL*, ch 5)

The scene reveals “Sunday sensations” to be so “chiefly referable” to wearing one’s “best frocks” and having “hair particularly well dressed” that even the Bishop becomes measured by the costume he wears. “Sensations” of this sort Eliot uncovers to be entirely hierarchical, not only for the values they privilege but also for their total neglect of the “working-day look” of those who labor in the fields and at the handlooms (5, 286).

Noting that “it was not Sunday, but Wednesday,” Eliot expands her narrative to embrace the intra-familial costuming of “young ladies,” costuming that reflects only the “notion of its being Sunday”:

The notion of its being Sunday was the strongest in young ladies like Miss Phipps, who was going to accompany her younger sister to the confirmation, and to wear a ‘sweetly pretty’ transparent bonnet with marabout feathers on the interesting occasion, thus throwing into relief the suitable

simplicity of her sister's attire, who was, of course, to appear in a new white frock. (SCL, ch 5)

This description of the sisters' dress choice being mandated by a "notion" highlights Eliot's particular view of society—the concentrated center of life and self-definition—as an arbitrary construct in thrall to the requirements of the moment. In this Confirmation scene, Eliot writes a setting where clothing, goods, and reputation state one's identity, where the power of fashion converts Wednesday to Sunday, or, to put it a different way, where the notions of appearance shunt aside the organizing structure of the Gregorian calendar.<sup>9</sup>

Devoting an entire chapter to "Charity in Full-Dress," George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* again turns a church activity into that blatant presentation of rank, a fashion show, and exposes how far removed from true charity it is. That fashion functions in a far more powerful way than charity becomes later punctuated by Eliot's use of the metaphor that describes the stern-but-charitable Dr Kenn's failed efforts to elicit from his parishioners kindness toward Maggie. "He suddenly found himself as

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<sup>9</sup> Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British thinkers and writers held a view of costume and fashion markedly different from that insinuated here by Eliot. John Ruskin, for example, in *The True and the Beautiful in Art, Morals, and Religion* (1858), observes that "True nobleness in dress is to be an important means of education. No good historical painting ever yet existed or ever can exist, where the dress of the people of the time are not beautiful." Scottish philosopher and essayist Thomas Carlyle holds that "If the cut of the costume indicates intellect and talent, then the color indicates temper and heart." Finally, novelist and dramatist Henry Fielding maintains that "Fashion is the science of appearance, and it inspires one with the desire to seem rather than to be."



powerless," Eliot writes, "as he was aware he would have been if he had attempted to influence the shape of bonnets" (57, 441).

Eliot deploys costume as an hierarchical indicator in order to reveal, within the purely secular sphere of kinship, the perversion of custom. In *The Mill on the Floss*, for instance, rituals of dress reveal both the paganism that unifies the Dodson kin and the economic rivalry that inspires their reverence for "whatever was customary and respectable" (30, 239).

The novel introduces and differentiates each of the Dodson sisters by her way of dressing; and rivalries reflected in modes of dress mark each of the ceremonial family gatherings. Sister Pullet, who "had married a gentleman farmer, and had leisure and money to carry her crying and everything else to the highest pitch of respectability," appears at the first gathering wearing a costume matched in extravagance only by her tears (7, 53). Mocking both, the narrator links them to the gross debasement of custom and displacement of emotion in a putatively civilized society:

It is a pathetic sight and a striking example of the complexity introduced into the emotions by a high state of civilization—the sight of a fashionably dressed female in grief. From the sorrow of a Hottentot to that of a woman in large buckram sleeves, with several bracelets on each arm, an architectural bonnet, and delicate ribbon strings—what a long series of gradations! In the enlightened child of civilization the abandonment characteristic of grief is checked and varied in the subtlest manner. (7, 51)

Weeping for the death of an acquaintance, Mrs Pullet wears her grief as she wears her bonnet—for adornment—and as the passage evolves she begins to prepare her ornaments for a return to “a calm and healthy state.” In contrast, the genuine emotions that emerge during this family gathering seem quarrelsome from beginning to end, whether the subject be Tom’s education, Maggie’s hair, funerals, millinery, or money. The overriding importance of the last, moreover, turns the feast into a disastrous feud.

Even when the metamorphosis of custom into costume seems relatively innocent, an inversion of value marks it as suspicious. In another chapter of *The Mill on the Floss*, for instance, a “procession” leads merely to a shrouded “best room” where an expensive new bonnet that is the pride of one sister and the envy of the other becomes unveiled with “funereal solemnity” (ch 9, 80-81). At the opposite extreme sits the shabby “costume” (“selected with the high moral purpose of instilling perfect humility into Bessy and her children”) Sister Glegg puts on for the family council (ch 23, 183). At this meeting, the refusal of aid to the bankrupt Tullivers becomes so absolute as to suggest to Maggie “a world where people behaved the best to those they did not pretend to love, and that did not belong to them” (ch 25, 208). The novel reveals, furthermore, how even Maggie thinks elegant and expensive dress essential to producing

“any effect with her person.” “Girls are so accustomed,” the narrator explains, “to think of dress as the main ground of vanity” (ch 33, 263). At the same time, the narrative strategy of moving from Maggie to “girls” renders costume, however clannish or idiosyncratic in its particulars, emblematic of a great divide between custom as a great social force and custom as a force of social goodness.

In terms of hierarchy, a great deal more than costume defines the good society, of course. The definition has to do with manners as well, but as George Eliot regularly dramatizes, fashion dictates manners, because the “good society” shows them off in order to indicate its refinement. Maggie’s manners and dress, for instance, not only mirror her “tender and affectionate” nature but also serve as foil to the “artificial airs,” “pretentious etiquette,” and “petty contrivances other women have”—especially women wanting to assert their positions in “good society.”

This ranking of manners and fashion—nowhere more apparent than in the demarcation of “good society” and “fashionable society”—continues in George Eliot’s late novels to uncover social and moral

corruption and to sanction unconventional behavior.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes the identity functions metaphorically, as in the rejection of fashion that accompanies Felix's avowal of loyalty to the working class, or in the allusions to "costume and horsemanship" and "high door-step and a brass knocker" that convey Felix's contempt for "clerkly gentility" (*FH*, ch 5, 144-145; ch 11, 219).

In addition, here and elsewhere, whether through scene or image, all the accouterments of "good society" testify in George Eliot's fiction to fashion's invasive power and to a corresponding conventionalization of custom. "Marriage," in *Middlemarch*, "according to custom," depends most of all on "good looks, vanity, and merely canine affection"; and "genteel visiting" on "suitable furniture and complete dinner-service," not "esteem" (*MM*, ch 1, 6-7; ch 23, 170). The novel's opening pages quickly transition from the external dress to the internal reasons for choosing the costume, from the clothing to the motives controlling and coloring it. It was "only to close observers that Celia's dress differed from her sister's," and had "a shade of coquetry in its arrangements."

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<sup>10</sup> In her essay, "George Eliot and Politics" in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (2006), Nancy Henry asserts that Eliot in effect concocted a deliberate strategic plan with respect to the sequence of her novel writing. Unlike other critics, Henry traces in a convincing way what she sees as Eliot's purposeful development toward a predetermined goal, a movement from the earlier novels—largely grounded in a realist aesthetic that was underpinned by Eliot's studies of provincial life—to an established position from which Eliot would embark on the work, Henry argues, Eliot long sought to write: the complex later works that expressed her political views and dealt with larger societal problems.

Dorothea's "plain dressing was due to mixed conditions, in most of which her sister shared." They both fall under a certain influence, "the pride of being ladies," of belonging to a rank not exactly aristocratic, but unquestionably "good." The quotation marks placed around the word "good" become suggestive and meaningful.

Eliot goes to great lengths to clarify issues of familial ranking. There exist "no parcel-tying forefathers" in the Brooke pedigree. Mixing issues of inherited rank and fashion, Eliot describes a Puritan forefather, "who served under Cromwell, but afterward conformed and managed to come out of all . . . political troubles as the proprietor of a respectable family estate," had a hand in Dorothea's "plain" wardrobe. "She could not reconcile the anxieties of a spiritual life involving eternal consequences with a keen interest in gimp and artificial protrusions of drapery," but Celia "had that common-sense which is able to accept momentous doctrines without any eccentric agitation." Both function as examples of "reversion." Then, as an instance of heredity working itself out in character, "in Mr. Brooke, the hereditary strain of Puritan energy was clearly in abeyance, but in his niece Dorothea it glowed alike through faults and virtues."

Within Eliot's work, fashion equates to hierarchy but also to distinguishable moments, to phases, and to the dissolution of custom.

George Eliot dramatizes a good many of these phases, ranging from the relatively innocent to the sophisticatedly corrupt and renders them symptomatic of the dissolution of custom. In the first and most transitional of her novels, she rails against “all the artificial vesture of our life” (*MF*, ch 58, 453). In the last and most contemporary of her novels, she makes the world of “highest fashion,” complete with “bedizened child” (*DD*, ch 1, 35-36), entirely one with the gambler’s world depicted throughout *Daniel Deronda*.

In that novel, the spirited Gwendolen attempts from the start to invert the prevailing hierarchical arrangement by marrying a man she believes she can command. Grandcourt performs so cunningly as the master that he courts her by encouraging the deception. Whether Gwendolen relishes her power of using him as she likes, or whether he in fact uses her as he likes, the delineation of the “depraving agency” seems sharp and clear, evident even in their proposal scene:

At that moment his strongest wish was to be completely master of this creature—this piquant combination of maidenliness and mischief: that she knew things which had made her start away from him, spurred him to triumph over that repugnance; and he was believing that he should triumph. And she—ah, piteous equality in the need to dominate!—she was overcome . . . by the suffused sense that here in this man’s homage to her lay the rescue from helpless subjection to an oppressive lot. (*DD*, III, 27, 346)

Instead of rescue, instead of embodying Feuerbach's I-Thou ideal, the marriage brings an oppression so severe as to make Grandcourt's daily pleasure Gwendolen's torture. In this depraved structure, Grandcourt holds sway over Gwendolen while bestowing on her a rank she can attain only by aligning herself with one who dominates her. The rector, invoking the vocabulary of "power . . . rank and wealth," carefully outlines to Gwendolen what he considers to be the practical benefits of the marriage:

Marriage is the only true and satisfactory sphere of a woman, and if your marriage with Mr. Grandcourt should be happily decided upon, you will have, probably, an increasing power, both of rank and wealth, which may be used for the benefit of others. (*DD*, ch 13)

The form of Grandcourt's power casts this husband as the worst kind of potentate. Just as Mill's *The Subjection of Women* compares the lot of a wife to that of a "Sultan's favourite slave," so George Eliot alludes sardonically to a "Moslem paradise" when she writes of Gwendolen's imprisonment on her husband's yacht.

Both participants acknowledge the contractual nature of their marriage. "She had no right to complain of her contract, or to with draw from it," Gwendolen feels, "by saying that there had been a tacit part of the contract on her side—namely, that she meant to rule and have her own way." Grandcourt thinks similarly, and he fulfills his contractual

obligation by conveying to Gwendolen what Eliot describes as certain “rank and luxuries.” The narrator carefully explains:

Grandcourt might have pleaded that he was perfectly justified in taking care that his wife should fulfill the obligations she had accepted. Her marriage was a contract where all the ostensible advantages were on her side, and it was only of those advantages that her husband should use his power to hinder her from any injurious self committal or unsuitable behavior. He knew quite well that she had not married him—had not overcome her repugnance to certain facts—out of love to him personally; he had won her by the rank and luxuries he had to give her, and these she had got: he had fulfilled his side of the contract. (*DD*, ch 54)

Grandcourt now threatens to deprive her of these “rank and luxuries” by changing the terms of his will, naming as his heir the boy he had by Mrs Glasher should Gwendolen not bear him a son. His threat to withhold those privileges of hierarchy owed to Gwendolen by marriage suddenly becomes acutely clear to her: “This question of property and inheritance was meant as a finish to her humiliations and her thralldom.”

George Eliot makes Grandcourt’s moral obtuseness—his inability to understand that Gwendolen’s repugnance consists partly of spiritual dread—the cause of his own defeat by showing how his calculations about the will have “an effect the very opposite of what he intended” (VI, 48, 664). While Grandcourt would employ the will to maintain his dominance, to keep his “yoke tightly riveted” on Gwendolen’s neck, George Eliot makes the yoke an instrument of her moral regeneration.



Grandcourt attempts to increase Gwendolen's thralldom by revising his will; Gwendolen sees in the new arrangement a way of righting the wrong done to Mrs Glasher. Earlier she asked Deronda how she might make amends. Grandcourt unwittingly provides her with a way of acting on the advice Deronda gives her:

That is the bitterest of all—to wear the yoke of our own wrong doing. But if you submitted to that, as men submit to maiming or a lifelong incurable disease?—and made the unalterable wrong a reason for more effort towards a good that may do something to counterbalance the evil? (*DD*, V, 36, 506)

The advice raises questions even as it answers them, as does the later movement of the novel. The closing affirms Gwendolen's "good," but only tentatively, by projecting a future announced but unseen.

Although *Daniel Deronda* contains energetic criticism of social ranking and institutions, persistent atrophy and dissolution mark the English segments. Gwendolen enters the novel with a "dynamic glance"; she leaves with a "withered look of grief." The word "dynamic," George Eliot would have been acutely aware, means "force producing motion." Within the actual social world of this novel that force alters hierarchical arrangements in either a destructive or inert way, as in Gwendolen's seeking to "conquer" or her suffering "arrest." An opening image—so emblematic as not even to refer to specific characters—marks the tone of

*Daniel Deronda*. Invoking “human equality” while commenting on the “varieties of European type” gathered at the gambling hall, “Livonian and Spanish, Graeco-Italian and miscellaneous German, English aristocratic and English plebeian,” George Eliot writes:

Here certainly was a striking admission of human equality. The white bejewelled fingers of an English countess were very near touching a bony, yellow, crab-like hand stretching a bared wrist to clutch a heap of coin—a hand easy to sort with the square, gaunt face, deepset eyes, grizzled eyebrows, and ill-combed scanty hair which seemed a slight metamorphosis of the vulture. (*DD*, I, 1, 36)

In her essay, “The Natural History of German Life” (1856), Eliot writes explicitly that she embraces a different means of analyzing the hierarchical rankings of “the people,” “the masses,” “the proletariat,” and “the peasantry.” Rejecting both economic generalizations and romantic idealization, she calls for a “natural history” of the working classes, revealing their “real characteristics” to those outside their social ranks (*Essays* 268). In George Eliot’s critical work and the fiction that followed it, collective abstractions such as class and rank seem complicated, even deceptive and limiting. Her narrative interest in the mode of natural history, as opposed to abstract generalizations, leads to representations of the interplay between character, heredity, and environment. She replaces diagrammatic classifications by rank with pictures of individual particularities. In “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton”

(1857), George Eliot's earliest study of this sort, she depicts Barton as a lower-middle-class man displaced from his proper hierarchical station. "Nature" has given him a strong opinion of himself as a preacher, but he would have been better to remain at the hereditary rank of his father, as an "excellent cabinetmaker and deacon of an Independent church," where faulty English and constant sniffing would not have prevented him being "a shining light in the Dissenting circle of Bridgeport" (*SCL*, ch 2). In what seems at first a clear statement of social conservatism, against the upward mobility of the lower orders, Eliot depicts Barton as a misfit, a country clergyman, a "tallow dip ... plebeian, dim, and ineffectual" taken from the kitchen where it belongs and stuck in a silver candlestick in the drawing room. The pathos and comedy of Barton's narrative emanates in great part from the fact that he does not apprehend this social displacement: he seems entirely unconscious of the way in which his rank registers transparently to his peers and the parishioners of rural Shepperton.

Yet to label George Eliot as a social conservative opposed to social mobility would be to miss the emphasis on exceptionalism evident in her early fiction; the way in which "Nature" distributes gifts unevenly, endowing some with talents that make them stand out from the social ranking into which they are born, determining, over time, shifts in

standing. The sad fortunes of Amos Barton emanate from the fact that Nature has not bestowed upon him quite enough of a gift to rise free from his hereditary rank, unlike, for example, Adam Bede:

He was not an average man. Yet such men as he are reared here and there in every generation of our peasant artisans—with an inheritance of affections nurtured by a simple family life of common need and common industry, and an inheritance of faculties trained in skillful courageous labour: they make their way upward, rarely as geniuses, most commonly as painstaking honest men. (*AB*, ch 19)

A careful scrutiny of the natural history of any rural neighborhood, the narrator implies, will throw up such exceptions, growing out of the peasant environment to rise beyond it and enrich a whole community; these individuals cannot be held over time to a fixed rank.

Society, in George Eliot's fiction and social analysis, never remains static but exists in a constant process of change, in which some slip "a little downward, some [get] higher footing" (*MM*, ch 11). Staying loyal to Feuerbach's I-Thou formulation, Eliot depicts such change as an organic process in which different social groups function interdependently, not in conflict and opposition, despite the hitches and tension as misfitting individuals struggle to find their places. Adam Bede, for instance, makes his employers richer, but the novel represents him as a free agent and proud owner of his skilled labor, not as an exploited proletarian. When

the old squire tries to pay Adam only a guinea for a commission Adam priced at one pound thirteen shillings, Adam refuses the exchange and gives the screen in question as a gift to the squire's daughter rather than take less than his "regular price" (*AB*, ch 21). It might seem only a minor incident in the novel, but it speaks volumes about Eliot's representations of social and economic ranking in the nineteenth century.

Eliot contended with a solemn distinction made by many Victorians between poetry and fiction. The everyday prosaic worlds depicted in novels—so held some Victorians, Matthew Arnold among them—preclude that lofty ennobling of emotion characteristic of poetry and essential to art that seeks to affirm the social enterprise as a spiritual whole.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, and crucially for Eliot, Feuerbach argues that

the profoundest secrets lie in common everyday things. . . .  
It needs only that the ordinary course of things be interrupted in order to vindicate to common things an uncommon significance, to life, as such, a religious import.  
(276-278)

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<sup>11</sup> In his article, "Matthew Arnold and the Novel," published in *Salmagundi* (Fall 2001), Christopher Ricks examines more completely the denigration of the novel by Arnold and others. Ricks observes that "the novel did not command the high ground of criticism. The novel was patronized, condescended to, feared, misrepresented, and identified with its trashiest instances. . . . The novelist, from Jane Austen to Henry James, found herself or himself the beneficiary of such high-minded hauteur only when this phenomenon could itself be turned to artistic advantage in rueful comedy. It is within the world of D.H. Lawrence, not that of Arnold, that the novel is the bright book of life, and even in Lawrence's day the announcement or pronouncement was called for. Arnold's injustice to the novel is an instance of his concurring with, not resisting, the critical propensity of his age."

George Eliot committed to both: to being truthful to the experience of the working-day world and to revealing the poetry in the commonplace. Thus, for her, the sought-after “community of feeling” was to be created not only through the ennobling of experience, implicit in the argument Wordsworth makes in the *Preface* to the *Lyrical Ballads*, but also through the accurate portrayal of prosaic ordinariness. Together, Eliot believed, these elements would act together, enlarging the reader’s capacity to enter sympathetically into the human emotions, needs, experiences, and aspirations all people share.

In chapter 54 of *Middlemarch*, the narrator remarks that “life would be no better than candlelight tinsel and daylight rubbish if our spirits were not touched by what has been, to issues of longing and constancy” (*MM*, 54, 393). Expressing a dissatisfaction with what “is,” figures such as these appear with great frequency in George Eliot’s fiction. Linking the deceptively attractive and the seemingly worthless, they reveal the poetic “candlelight tinsel” to be no less tied to daily reality than is the entirely prosaic “daylight rubbish.” Although Eliot in *Romola* makes an accommodation of sorts as the “the glow of a common life with the lost multitude . . . beholds the history of the world as the history of a great redemption” and touches the “common deeds of a dusty life,” that glow ultimately fails to remain constant (*R*, 61, 487; 40, 352).

Trying to steady it so as to offset the feelings of despair or resignation she herself harbors toward both the speciously poetic and the utterly prosaic, George Eliot often enlists the diction of deliverance, for she finds herself preoccupied both by the elaborate set of associations she brings to “this working-day world” and by a pronounced desire to escape.

Eliot derives this diction of deliverance from Feuerbach’s idea as expressed in *The Essence of Christianity* that human beings must learn, by escaping their egos, by recognizing a world outside of themselves, to seek and find their own deliverances:

That which comes from God to man, comes to man only from *man in God*, that is, only from the ideal nature of man to the phenomenal man, from the species to the individual.... The contents of the divine revelation are of human origin, for they have proceeded not from God as God, but from God as determined by human reason, human wants, that is, directly from human reason and human wants. And so in revelation man goes out of himself, in order, by a circuitous path, to return to himself! (TEOC, 207)

Eliot wholeheartedly embraces Feuerbach’s admonition that humans take responsibility for the power of their emotions, to “return to [themselves]” and, by understanding that “man is God to man,” deliver themselves in a moral sense. At the same time, however, Eliot associates strongly with a second particular impulse that Feuerbach describes as

the feeling of a want; therefore conscious, or an unconscious need, that is God. Thus the disconsolate feeling of a void, of loneliness, needed a God in whom there is society, a union of beings fervently loving each other. (73)

These feelings of despair or resignation parallel feelings Eliot herself harbors toward both the poetic and the prosaic. Indeed, the elaborate diction of deliverance that Eliot brings to the “working-day world” betrays a desire to escape “the feeling of a want” that haunted Eliot’s imagination.

Eliot’s letters clearly reveal her shrinking “from decided ‘deliverances’ on momentous subjects from the dread of coming to swear by my own ‘deliverances,’ and sinking into an insistent echo of myself”; yet, writing to an admirer, she references “the intense comfort I have found in the response which your mind has given to every ‘deliverance’ of mine” (*GEL*, 5: 76, 325). But Eliot seems completely comfortable with neither. Eliot’s unease emerges in the inflated language she brings to the instantaneous and consequently unconvincing recognitions of union in her fiction—as between Maggie and Dr Kenn, Romola and Savonarola, Lydgate and Dorothea, Daniel and Mirah, Daniel and Mordecai. Occasionally, Eliot’s overall dramatic action renders such unions ironic, disclosing them to be calculated inversions of the Feuerbach I-Thou formulation and therefore powerless to affect everyday reality, as in Dorothea’s momentary rescues of Lydgate and later Rosamond. At other



times, the events confirm and highlight a deliverance by countering the negations that would otherwise play themselves out. As a straightforward example, Deronda delivers Mirah from death, and she then becomes so emblematic of the community of humankind that “a painter,” Eliot informs the reader, “need have changed nothing” had he wanted to put her face “in front of the host singing ‘peace on earth and goodwill to men’” (*DD* 32, 418).

In *Felix Holt, the Radical*, although Esther’s love for Felix delivers her, Eliot casts Esther a deliverer as well: Esther affects her audience during her testimony at Felix’s trial much as George Eliot seeks to affect her reader. Eliot’s turning away from the pending rescue of a character, as in the final scenes involving Deronda and Gwendolen, highlight the complexities of her technique.

Eliot writes deliverances large and small, her diction often bestowing psychological heft to otherwise insignificant actions, as in this passage from *Felix Holt*:

Esther noticed a strange fitfulness in her movements. Sometimes the stitches of her embroidery went on with silent unbroken swiftness for a quarter of an hour, as if she had to work out her deliverance from bondage by finishing a scroll-patterned border. (*FH*, ch 45)

Chapter 24 contains another instance of Eliot’s making a putatively passing moment seem substantive. She writes that “Reverend Theodore’s

agitation had increased so much during his walk, that the passing coach had been a means of deliverance not to be resisted; and, literally at the eleventh hour, he had hailed and mounted the cheerful Tally-ho! and carried away his portion of the debate in his pocket" (*FH*, ch 24). An additional example appears in chapter 42 of *Romola*, where Eliot writes that for

a century and a half there were records how the Florentines, suffering from drought, or flood, or famine, or pestilence, or the threat of wars, had fetched the potent image within their walls, and had found deliverance.

And *Romola's* chapter 48 provides a moment when Eliot wields the diction of deliverance to have one character issue a warning to another. Tito, "in a cool liquid tone" that betrays a "husband's determination to mastery," defies Feuerbach's I-Thou equilibrium as he instructs Romola that "it is time we understand each other." By "understand," Tito means of course that Romola must bow to his desire to steer clear of his practical doings. Romola counters: "You shut me out from your mind. You affect to think of me as a being too unreasonable to share in the knowledge of your affairs. You will be open with me about nothing." Thereupon, Tito, invoking "deliverance," upbraids Romola:

"You would perhaps flatter yourself," [Tito] went on, "that you were performing a heroic deed of deliverance; you might as well try to turn locks with fine words as apply such notions to the politics of Florence. The question now is,

not whether you can have any belief in me, but whether, now you have been warned, you will dare to rush, like a blind man with a torch in his hand, amongst intricate affairs of which you know nothing."

Occasionally, Eliot has a narrator employ the language of deliverance while openly espousing Feuerbach's ideas, as in this description of Daniel Deronda's empathetic abilities in the appropriately titled chapter 16, "Revelations":

Our consciences are not all of the same pattern, an inner deliverance of fixed laws they are the voice of sensibilities as various as our memories (which also have their kinship and likeness). And Deronda's conscience included sensibilities beyond the common, enlarged by his early habit of thinking himself imaginatively into the experience of others. (*DD*, bk 6, ch 16).

The deliverances of Esther and Gwendolen, on the other hand, constitute part of a long and intricate process, beginning with their entrancement within a specious candlelight world, continuing throughout the daylight disenchantments they later experience, and culminating finally in perhaps questionable reconciliations. Each step in this process of entrancement, disenchantment, and deliverance involves in some way Eliot's inscription of Feuerbach's communitarian ideas.

The entrancement with being a "lady" that holds Esther and Gwendolen tightly under its spell serves to measure the absence of value in a self-indulgent, upper-class social world that Eliot reveals to be no less

“middling” than the ordinary world but a good deal more hypocritical; its “niceties” simply mask the vulgarities they pretend to eliminate. Lyon’s cluttered study, the Holborn book shop, and the small house at Chelsea where the poor but cultured Meyricks live become the loci of intellectual engagement, while the drawing room and country estate, along with all the other scenery associated with “genteel romance,” the novel shows to be imprisoning, holding one “captive by the ordinary wirework of social forms” (*DD* 6, 83). That Esther fails to perceive for so long just how ordinary they are reveals only her relatively innocent retreat from reality.

Gwendolen’s attitudes seem more complicated, since she regularly mocks conventional social forms and yet cannot muster an awareness sufficient to deliver herself from them. Eliot’s language demands deliverance from illusion even as it unequivocally constrains: Esther’s “imaginary mansion” collapses, and Gwendolen’s conservatory life becomes a “penitentiary,” her large drawing room no better than a “painted gilded prison.”

The disenchantment of Esther exists in an essentially vicarious way, experienced through Mrs Transome, whose “life had been like a spoiled shabby pleasure-day, in which the music and the processions are all missed”; but its very vicariousness provides a paradigm for the reader,

who may also, like Esther, be delivered out of a spoiled shabbiness “to lead a life of ‘vision and of choice.’” Gwendolen’s own reflection in the mirror, which reminds her of “the packed-up shows of a departing fair” (*DD* 23, 306) triggers her disenchantment. Fitfully longing for “deliverance from the dull insignificance of her girlhood” and the potential of her forthcoming marriage to Grandcourt to provide it, Gwendolen seems painfully skeptical about the hoped-for “freedom” and her “irrevocable decision”:

The brilliant position she had longed for, the imagined freedom she would create for herself in marriage, the deliverance from the dull insignificance of her girlhood—all immediately before her; and yet they had come to her hunger like food with the taint of sacrilege upon it, which she must snatch with terror. In the darkness and loneliness of her little bed, her more resistant self could not act against the first onslaught of dread after her irrevocable decision. (*DD*, bk 4, ch 28)

Through the language of disillusionment, George Eliot, in a fashion Feuerbach would approve, uncovers a consuming selfishness in the false values of a make-believe world that desecrates the everyday one while pretending to ignore or look down on it. In addition, as Barbara Hardy points out, while the scenes of disenchantment suggest a “prosaic present stretching into an unchanging prosaic future . . . each conversion of poetry into prose depends on the dispelling of a dream. . . . It is a test and a prelude to change.”

When a form of deliverance replaces the dream that has been dispelled, however, the prose again becomes poetry. Eliot designs the final conversion to function as a healing force, but unresolved tensions continue to surface. The poetry Esther had thought to find in Harold Transome turns unambiguously into prose; but the poetry she discovers in Felix, though it allegedly returns her to “that rougher, commoner world where her home had been,” merely substitutes one romantic notion for another (*FH* 43, 526). Felix “is my champagne,” Esther declares, as Eliot’s language of deliverance pushes her “towards the life where the draughts of joy sprang from the unchanging fountains of reverence and devout love” (*FH* 43, 539; 50, 597). All signs of her former “sauciness” disappear; “devotion,” “perfect love,” “inspiration,” “consecration,” and “ecstasy” take their place (ch 43, 547-551).

The settings of the love scenes as well contribute to the deliverance from the everyday, since most of them occur in a Sunday, countryside world. In these ways and others, Esther becomes the “ballad heroine” we are supposed to believe she refuses to be. Still, she exists as a ballad heroine with a difference—delivered not into but from riches to marry the man she loves. Furthermore, at the trial held after the Election Day riots, her testimony sets Felix free by transforming the disagreement and hostility in the courtroom into cooperation and sympathy.

In several ways, this act constitutes something of a model for the kind of deliverance George Eliot hopes to provide for her readers. Esther's testimony emanates from the "inward revolution" she has experienced (49, 591). Her effect on her listeners depends on the same kind of "ardour which has flashed out and illuminated all poetry and history" (46, 571). Creating in others a corresponding "state of sympathetic ardour," the impression she makes on their feeling dispels what had been "unmitigated daylight."

But while Esther affects the jury as George Eliot wishes to affect her audience, the overturning of the verdict nonetheless circumvents the task commonly ascribed to witness and realistic novelist alike. For Esther's power, derived from her "inspired ignorance" and "incongruously simple" testimony, speaks only in the most minimal way to the daylight realities presented throughout the novel (46, 571).

As though further acknowledging the incongruities in *Felix Holt*, George Eliot seems in *Middlemarch* to mock the earlier book, when she writes of Lydgate that

he was beginning now to imagine how two creatures who loved each other, and had a stock of thoughts in common, might laugh over their shabby furniture, and their calculations how far they could afford butter and eggs. But the glimpse of that poetry seemed as far off from him as the carelessness of the golden age. (MM 69, 514)

Eliot denies to Lydgate the reconciliations allowed to Romola and Esther. Returning in *Gwendolen* to a character similar to Esther, but far more complicated, George Eliot both offers and denies her deliverance. *Gwendolen's* urgent need for deliverance from Grandcourt becomes so pronounced that the word appears again and again, three times in one particular sentence alone:

The thought that his death was the only possible deliverance for her was one with the thought that deliverance would never come—the double deliverance from the injury with which other beings might reproach her and from the yoke she had brought on her own neck. (R 48, 669)

But while *Gwendolen* continues to wear that yoke after Grandcourt's death and must learn to find her own deliverance by recognizing a world outside of herself, still George Eliot attempts once again to affirm Feuerbach's idea of the "way our brother may be in the stead of God to us" (64, 833).

The stressfulness of Eliot's task makes itself felt in the jagged and unevenly controlled rhythms of the scenes between *Deronda* and *Gwendolen* as the novel approaches its close. Repeatedly withdrawing from the deliverance he offers to *Gwendolen* in the two chapters immediately after Grandcourt's death and *Deronda's* discovery of his



own Jewish lineage, Deronda finds himself caught between all-absorbing sympathy for Gwendolen and rapt attention to his new life's task.

In the rallying call that brings *The Essence of Christianity* to a close, Feuerbach urges the reader to understand that "the profoundest secrets lie in common everyday things" (276-278) and issues the declaration that "only community constitutes humanity." Eliot answers Feuerbach's call by attempting in her fiction to fuse profundity and "everyday things." Eliot makes this attempt in one conspicuous instance by referencing Dante—who, importantly for Eliot, wrote the *Divine Comedy* not in "high" Latin but in an "everyday" Tuscan dialect—and his fictive treatment of deliverance.

Eliot's notebooks, letters, and essays for the *Westminster Review* indicate great knowledge of a remarkable number of European authors, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Dante, Auguste Comte, George Sand, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, and Heinrich Heine. For Eliot, Dante becomes the one writer who most nearly realizes Feuerbach's fusion. In *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Eliot advises the reader to "witness Dante, who is at once the most precise and homely in his reproduction of actual objects, and the most soaringly at large in his imaginative combinations." Furthermore, Eliot invokes, in chapter 13 of

*Theophrastus Such*, canto 15 of the *Divine Comedy* in order to assert in a corrective, Feuerbachian fashion that

powerful imagination is not false outward vision, but intense inward representation, and a creative energy constantly fed by susceptibility to the veriest minutiae of experience, which it reproduces and constructs in fresh and fresh wholes; not the habitual confusion of provable fact with the fictions of fancy and transient inclination, but a breadth of ideal association.

Eliot considers Dante

the strongest seer who can support the stress of creative energy and yet keep that sanity of expectation which consists in distinguishing . . . between the *cose che son vere* outside the individual mind, and the *non falsi errori* which are the revelations of true imaginative power.

Interestingly, at the point in *Daniel Deronda* where Gwendolen appears to be in her lowest spirits, Eliot draws an explicit comparison between Gwendolen's pending deliverance and that of Dante's La Pia, who appears very briefly in the *Comedy*. A convincing case can be made that Eliot designs chapter 54 of *Daniel Deronda*—with its deliberate linking of Gwendolen with “the poor Tuscan lady who had her deliverance long ago”—as an imaginative expansion on the scanty details in Dante's original. Eliot writes that

Madoima Pia, whose husband, feeling himself injured by her, took her to his castle amid the swampy flats of the Maremma and got rid of her there, makes a pathetic figure in Dante's Purgatory, among the sinners who repented at

the last and desire to be remembered compassionately by their fellow-countrymen. We know little about the grounds of mutual discontent between the Siennese couple, but we may infer with some confidence that the husband had never been a very delightful companion, and that on the flats of the Maremma his disagreeable manners had a background which threw them out remarkably; whence in his desire to punish his wife to the uttermost, the nature of things was so far against him that in relieving himself of her he could not avoid making the relief mutual. And thus, without any hardness to the poor Tuscan lady who had her deliverance long ago, one may feel warranted in thinking of her with a less sympathetic interest than of the better known Gwendolen who . . . is at the very height of her entanglement in those fated meshes which are woven within more closely than without. . . . (731-732)

Clearly, Eliot offers Dante's "poor Tuscan lady" as the more obscure bearer of the suffering that Gwendolen herself ungoes.

Until Eliot reveals the form of Gwendolen's "deliverance"—the husband dies instead of the wife—the audience waits in suspense to discover the importance of the Madonna Pia section, given Gwendolen's murderous desires regarding Grandcourt. However, the reference accurately predicts the onset of Gwendolen's purgatorial existence. Eliot, recalling Feuerbach's instruction "to vindicate to common things an uncommon significance," expresses both the scale and the costs of Gwendolen's actions with a lucidity that echoes Gwendolen's state of mind at the epiphanic moment: "She had a root of conscience in her, and the process of purgatory had begun for her on the green earth: she knew

that she had been wrong" (733). Gwendolen repents at last and thereupon achieves "her deliverance."

### III

“All this was told at once”:

#### Reader Engagement and Eliot’s Sympathetic Vision

After all, one may hear the most private affairs of other people, but only in a spirit of respect for the struggling, battered thing which any human soul is, and in a spirit of fine, discriminative sympathy. For even satire is a form of sympathy. It is the way our sympathy flows and recoils that really determines our lives. And here lies the vast importance of the novel, properly handled. It can inform and lead into new places the flow of our sympathetic consciousness, and it can lead our sympathy away in recoil from things gone dead. Therefore, the novel, properly handled, can reveal the most secret places of life: for it is in the passional secret places of life, above all, that the tide of sensitive awareness needs to ebb and flow, cleansing and freshening.

– D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*

Lawrence’s twentieth-century meditation on sympathy restates George Eliot’s guiding principle of novel writing and testifies to the durability of certain eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideas, ideas that Eliot internalizes and reconfigures into fictional structures. By undertaking an analysis of Eliot’s techniques of direct and indirect

address—specifically the ways in which those techniques inscribe her sympathetic vision—this chapter explores both Eliot’s recasting of Feuerbach’s humanitarian concepts into formal strategies and her deployment of the Victorian aesthetic of sympathy, in which she not only engages but also helps to invent.<sup>12</sup>

Eliot’s direct appeals to the reader, particularly their ubiquity, tone, and intricacy, evidence her objective to nurture a deeply humane alliance between writer and audience. Through this artistic collaboration, Eliot seeks to generate a more empathetic and understanding readership motivated to change society. However, she expects something other than locked uniformity. As a way of strengthening and complicating this alliance, Eliot advocates not simple agreement but a serious and thorough interaction between her writing and her audience. Eliot writes to Charles Bray in July 1859, defining what constitutes for her the linkage between art’s utility as an agent of change and its moral force: “If Art does not enlarge men’s sympathies, it does nothing morally.” Eliot then elaborates,

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<sup>12</sup> In *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* (2000), Audrey Jaffe argues that in constructing unabashedly sympathetic scenes in various Victorian fictional texts, nineteenth-century authors reconstitute individual identity as social identity. When subjects confront each other across a social divide, Jaffe maintains, “the elements that define this boundary constitute—at least for the moment—their subjectivity” (158). Jaffe proposes as a primary embodiment of the Victorian aesthetic of sympathy Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*: a conversion text that depicts scenes of joy and of sorrow among various social groups, especially the impoverished and hardworking Cratchit family, thereby causing a sympathetic response, a change of heart, both in the character within the story and in the reader of the narrative.

identifying “the only effect” that she “ardently long[s] to produce” through her writing:

I have had heart-cutting experience that opinions are a poor cement between human souls; and the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures. (*GEL*, 3: 111)

In a subsequent August 1868 letter to physician and inventor Clifford Allbutt, Eliot provides confirmation that she “deliberately [and] carefully constructed” her novels in order to communicate the essential “goodness and nobleness” of human impulses:

My books are . . . deliberately, carefully constructed on a basis which even in my doubting mind is never shaken by a doubt, and they are not determined, as conversation inevitably is, by considerations of momentary expediency. The basis I mean is my conviction as to the reality goodness and nobleness of human dispositions and motives.

Eliot then expands upon this idea by specifying the single “inspiring principle” that motivates and emboldens her writing:

And the inspiring principle which alone gives me courage to write is, that of so presenting our human life as to help my readers in getting a clearer conception and a more active admiration of those vital elements which bind men together and give a higher worthiness to their existence; and also to help them in gradually dissociating these elements from the more transient forms on which an outworn teaching tends to make them dependent. (*GEL*, 4: 472)

Correspondence that Eliot receives from her audience, taken together with commentary of her time, suggest that Eliot elicits the particular type of “binding together” response she seeks.

Eliot’s construction of such a community of readers depends upon three characteristics: a literary work that facilitates the writer/reader alliance; an author intent on assembling “those vital elements which bind men together and give a higher worthiness to their existence”; and an audience willing and able to exert upon the quotidian world the impositions placed upon it by a literary one. These qualities, especially the third, unambiguously connect to the Victorian aesthetic of sympathy. Contingent on an abiding confidence in the power of art to expand the reader’s capability for sympathetic response, this aesthetic of sympathy seeks to generate a change in the sensibilities of its audience so complete that the audience subsequently generates a change in the social enterprise.

George Eliot’s direct and indirect addresses perform a crucial function in fashioning this alliance with her audience. While widely varying in substance and tone, these addresses slot into particular configurations. Eliot wields heavily the direct address in *Adam Bede*; she deploys the direct address once again in *The Mill on the Floss* but with a tonal character now drastically changed. In contrast, in Eliot’s middle



novels, *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, and *Felix Holt, the Radical*, the indirect address dominates. In *Middlemarch*, where the direct address seems ubiquitous, Eliot merges and enlarges the configurations typical of the first two novels. With *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot initiates both increased invention and additional withdrawal.

Evincing Eliot's caution that the subject matter of her novels holds the potential to alienate her readers, the narrators of these novels have a propensity to resist the direct address when the narrative drifts from known to foreign territory such as "a long, lonely journey, with sadness in the heart; away from the familiar to the strange"—the characterization Eliot's narrator uses in *Adam Bede* to announce Hetty's extended travel.<sup>13</sup> The narrator recounts Hetty's search for her lover, during which Hetty delivers her baby in another town and then abandons it to die. In such passages, Eliot drastically reduces the number of direct appeals to the audience. Instead, she turns almost entirely to dramatic staging, as she

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<sup>13</sup> For an idiosyncratic analysis of the narrator's function in *Adam Bede*, see Harold Bloom's introductory essay to *Silas Marner* (2002). Bloom argues that "The boundary between the novel's fictional world and the real world of the reader grows appreciably fainter. Implicitly the reader is being asked to receive the opinions of the narrator in the same way that she has taken in Adam's observations about one of the clerical successors of Mr. Irwine. So, too, when the narrator directly addresses the reader, not with a reminder, in the manner of Thackeray or Trollope, that the characters are subject to authorial whim, but to persuade him/her 'to be in perfect charity' towards Mr. Irwine, 'far as he may be from satisfying your demands on the clerical character.' And elsewhere in the chapter, the reader is invited, so to speak, to cross the boundary between the two worlds and join forces with the narrator in the necessary human enterprise of tolerating, pitying, and loving one's fellow man" (89).

does in Book 6 of *The Mill on the Floss*, when Stephen Guest makes off with Maggie, and again in *Middlemarch* when Bulstrode and Raffles implicate themselves in illicit activity.

Certain correlated arrangements emerge in these novels. For example, the direct appeal occurs often in *Silas Marner* only when Eliot seeks to highlight a sympathetic narrative thread by accentuating not Silas's disinheritance but his assimilation into society. In the cases of *Felix Holt, the Radical*; *Daniel Deronda*; and *Romola*, Eliot employs indirect generalized statements, convincing because they appear to be eminently sensible, more often than she utilizes direct appeals.

The later novels take on potentially risky characteristics and topics. For example, Eliot sets the social novel *Felix Holt, the Radical* at the time of the First Reform Act of 1832;<sup>14</sup> the novel concerns political disputes in a

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<sup>14</sup> For an exhaustive account of the First Reform Act of 1832, resulting events in the two decades subsequent, and the opening up of parliamentary proceedings to public scrutiny, see Kathryn Rix's article, "'Whatever Passed in Parliament Ought to be Communicated to the Public': Reporting the Proceedings of the Reformed Commons, 1833-50," in *Parliamentary History* 33 (2014), pp. 453-474. Rix examines developments in the publication of parliamentary debates, considering why proposals for an official parliamentary record were rejected in the 1830s. The article also discusses two less well-studied but equally vital means of publicizing parliamentary activity: the publication of official division lists and the sale to the public of parliamentary papers. Rix argues that the 1830s was a critical decade of change, influenced by shifting perceptions of the relationship between the reformed House of Commons and those it sought to represent. This was driven, in particular, by liberal notions of the importance of parliamentary accountability to public opinion: Members of Parliament were increasingly aware of the need to keep constituents informed of their parliamentary activities, whether in the chamber, committee room, or division lobby. The article covers a period crucially formative in the development of Eliot's ideas regarding British society and politics.

small English town and openly embraces subject matter many of Eliot's readers would consider questionable. *Romola* assumes the proportions of sweeping historical fiction set in Papist times, with Savonarola, the charismatic Dominican preacher, embodying dual attributes—enthusiast and Catholic—that many Victorians would regard with suspicion. *Daniel Deronda*, her final novel, presents to its audience a cultural milieu distant and unfamiliar. George Eliot employs the direct address more often when her thematic concerns register as safely customary or unadventurous than she does when writing her more daring novels that embrace potentially problematic or controversial themes.

Eliot's turning away from the direct address suggests her being conscious of the requirement for tactically persuasive rhetoric. The turning away occurs first in the books immediately subsequent to *The Mill on the Floss*, and then again after *Middlemarch*—or following these two novels that gave contemporary critics and readers reason to distrust her irony, doubt her sympathy, and shy away from her sarcasm. Consider, for example, an anonymous critic's dissatisfaction with Eliot's "mannered sarcasms" and the "biting power of [her] acid criticism," as conveyed concisely in this December 1871 *Spectator* review of *Middlemarch*:

To us one of George Eliot's great charms consists in her large friendly way of letting the light fall on human

weakness; and these mannered sarcasms—which have always haunted her books—seem altogether out of keeping with that way, seem like broken lancet-points in a living body. Something of the cruelty of vivisection is natural in Thackeray's style, and very unnatural in George Eliot's. She gains her ascendancy over the imagination without inflicting these little superfluous wounds, and they only diminish it. It is the one and almost the only respect in which we prefer her poetry to her prose.—That in her poetry she does not put forth, at least in her own person, the biting power of this acid criticism. (*Spectator* XLIV, 16 Dec 1871, pp. 1528-1529)

Such criticism, while acknowledging Eliot's "charm" and her "way of letting the light fall on human weakness," unwittingly violates an expectation Eliot holds, an expectation of reciprocity wherein sympathy travels in two directions. As Eliot makes clear in "The Natural History of German Life," she fully anticipates engendering sympathy within her audience, but she also anticipates that her audience will sympathize with the artist and her work:

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. (*Essays* 270)

It seems evident that Eliot's rhetorical strategies perform a tricky and difficult balancing maneuver: persuading her readers while

challenging them, provoking their intense sympathy toward the building of an alliance with the author while allowing for dissent, all the while avoiding the looming specter of their disaffection.<sup>15</sup>

Eliot's pattern of reader address seems complicated even at its most simple. In *Adam Bede*, for example, a three-part arrangement holds sway, involving first a Feuerbachian I-Thou plea to "our" shared human journey, the appeal for a compassionate acknowledgment of an imaginary character, and a ratification of the authenticity of what "we" witness. This triad does not, of course, exist in each of Eliot's direct addresses to the reader; one will at times occur alone, and on other occasions Eliot conflates two of the three.

In the optimum case, Eliot's direct addresses to the reader flow directly out of the narrative circumstances, which in turn buttress the addresses. Witness the following appeal from chapter 5 of *Adam Bede*, wherein the narrator accompanies the reader into the "dining-room" and lays out the precise details of how the reader and the narrator will stand and conduct themselves in the presence of the Vicar of Hayslope. Eliot's

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<sup>15</sup> In *The Sympathetic Response: George Eliot's Fictional Rhetoric* (1981), Mary Ellen Doyle explicates more generally the issue of Eliot's sympathetic rhetorical strategies. Doyle writes that "George Eliot clearly announces that her central aim as a writer is rhetorical. She wishes to influence the intellectual and emotional attitudes of real readers toward other people in the real world outside her books she proposes to do this by rousing those readers' imaginative sympathy for fictional people inside her books. Thus her method also is rhetorical; her fictional materials must be managed so as to produce the desired effects of understanding and sympathy. Her novels therefore invite rhetorical analysis as an effective way to grasp her art" (1).

narrator begins the appeal, the first phrase of which references both “me” and “you,” by extending the offer to “Let me take you into that dining-room”

and show you the Rev Adolphus Irwine, Rector of Broxton, Vicar of Hayslope, and Vicar of Blythe, a pluralist at whom the severest Church-reformer would have found it difficult to look sour. We will enter very softly and stand still in the open doorway. (47)

Continuing to guide us after “we enter very softly,” the narrator proceeds to explain to the reader what “you see” and at what “we can look.” This explanation contributes two qualities: authoritative weight by referencing “our” presence and historical authenticity by alluding to the “pluralist” and the “Church-reformer.”<sup>16</sup>

Eliot simultaneously promotes the reader’s sympathy for Irwine, because the audience must think itself more magnanimous than the “severest Church-reformer.” Then portraying the aging and patrician Mrs Irwine, Eliot conveys by way of a conversation between mother and son that, because the rector holds sympathy for others, he merits reciprocal

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<sup>16</sup> The tangled associations linking writer, narrator, and narrative seem more pronounced in Eliot’s works than in those of other Victorian novelists. Eliot’s method tends to draw the reader’s attention toward the writer, toward the mechanics of the author’s fabrication, and so toward the writer’s own feeling. At the same time, her narrator’s voice speaking as “I” or “we” dominates the narrative, nearly erasing the border separating author from narrator. Furthermore, while the term “narrator” suggests a character within the province of the narrative, in fact the narrator stands closer to the province of the author but remains distinct from her. This complicated dynamic constantly impinges on the experience of reading Eliot and demands from her audience sophisticated, calibrated judgments.

sympathy from the reader. As Irwine prepares to visit his infirm sister, even though his mother declares, “‘It’s of no use, child; she can’t speak to you . . . she has one of her worst headaches this morning,’” the narrator once more focuses his attention on “you,” the reader, allowing that “If you know how much of human speech is mere purposeless impulse or habit,”

you will not wonder when I tell you that this identical objection had been made, and had received the same kind of answer, many hundred times in the course of the fifteen years that Mr. Irwine’s sister Anne had been an invalid. Splendid old ladies, who take a long time to dress in the morning, have often slight sympathy with sickly daughters.  
(49)

Beginning the passage with a contingent “if” that offers “you” a way out, Eliot judiciously tempers this appeal to the audience, one designed most of all to invoke shared experience. Eliot has the narrator authenticate the appeal by invoking a prior fifteen-year period during which the same back-and-forth had occurred “many hundred times.” Finally, the narrator’s observation concerning “splendid old ladies” reinforces the reader’s affinity for Irwine and produces a sense of empathy for the infirm. For the reader, the narrator’s judgment either intensifies or ameliorates the criticism of this particular “splendid” old lady, depending entirely on the degree of the reader’s sensitivity to the passage’s irony.

Eliot carefully positions this exchange near the first part of chapter 5. At the chapter's conclusion the narrator, wielding extended passages, unabashedly exhorts the audience and argues on behalf of Irwine, despite Irwine's careless religious stances. Eliot's narrator makes an effort to charitably characterize Irwine, describing him as

one of those large-hearted, sweet-blooded natures that never know a narrow or a grudging thought; Epicurean, if you will, with no enthusiasm, no self-scourging sense of duty; but yet, as you have seen, of a sufficiently subtle moral fibre to have an unwearying tenderness for obscure and monotonous suffering. It was his large-hearted indulgence that made him ignore his mother's hardness towards her daughters. (59)

Nevertheless, since Eliot has just now introduced the audience to Mr Irwine, her appeal to the reader ("as you have seen") seems to land with a weight greater than the passage can fully support. The hyperbole reveals two pertinent authorial issues: first, Eliot's great investment in the narrative point she wishes to make and, second, her acute awareness that her nineteenth-century audience would possess maximum interest in Irwine's religious affiliation.

Again in the subsequent section, the three features of the pattern appear, lending expressiveness and depth to the passage but also further betraying Eliot's inclination to confirm through her writer's voice certainties not entirely substantiated within her narrative. Set a year and a



half subsequent to Hetty's conviction of murder and positioned in the decisive chapter 50, the section begins,

For Adam, though you see him quite master of himself, working hard and delighting in his work after his inborn inalienable nature, had not outlived his sorrow—had not felt it slip from him as a temporary burthen, and leave him the same man again.

This extended appeal to the reader begins by addressing the singular "you" ("you see him") and concludes by expanding outward to include the communal "us," "we," and "our," when Eliot's narrator asks:

Do any of us? God forbid. It would be a poor result of all our anguish and our wrestling, if we won nothing but our old selves at the end of it—if we could return to the same blind loves, the same self-confident blame, the same light thoughts of human suffering, the same frivolous gossip over blighted human lives, the same feeble sense of that Unknown towards which we have sent forth irrepressible cries in our loneliness. Let us rather be thankful that our sorrow lives in us as an indestructible force, only changing its form, as forces do, and passing from pain into sympathy—the one poor word which includes all our best insight and our best love. . . . Desire is chastened into submission, and we are contented with our day when we have been able to bear our grief in silence and act as if we were not suffering. For it is at such periods that the sense of our lives having visible and invisible relations, beyond any of which either our present or prospective self is the centre, grows like a muscle that we are obliged to lean on and exert. (407)

Therefore the conversion of "pain" passing into "sympathy" undergone by one character in relation to another translates as a metaphor for the

processes of society. However, Eliot maps this arrangement perhaps too neatly. She conveys to the audience that “Tender and deep as his love for Hetty had been—so deep that the roots of it would never be torn away” (54, 442), when, in fact, the history of Adam’s and Hetty’s relationship suggests that Adam’s “love” could more aptly be characterized as blind and superficial rather than “tender and deep.” Consequently, Eliot’s aesthetic of sympathy and the ideology of social harmony, rather than essential narrative imperatives, appear to govern and shape the structure of the passage.

Particularly because Eliot’s narrator transforms a sorrowful occurrence into a positive assertion, this disposition must have appeared adequate for Eliot’s nineteenth-century audience. The narrator of *Adam Bede* regularly casts a beneficent clarification on the shared understanding on which the audience appeal hinges. Eliot stipulates in this, her first novel, that the “judicious historian abstains from narrating precisely what ensued,” and then emphasizes to the audience, “You understand” (12, 109). “We” the readers do understand that in this formulation Eliot proposes herself as the “judicious historian.” However, when subsequently conveying the extent of Arthur’s predicament, the narrator sets the “truthful” against the “judicious,” denigrating the “judicious” as constituting only “a question of tactics” (28, 258-59).

George Eliot harbors discomfort and uncertainty toward the use of these “tactics,” and her ambivalence surfaces in her drawing of characters in novels beyond *Adam Bede*. Eliot characterizes as obligatory and even commendable Philip Wakem’s maneuvers to win his father’s acceptance. She depicts, first as worthy then as deceitful, Savonarola’s calculations in his dealings with church and state. Eliot casts Tito, the definitive plotter, as utterly appalling. Brooke, who schemes incompetently, Eliot portrays as foolish.

The issue of tactics proves problematic and fundamental for George Eliot, because it seems to call into question the genuineness demanded by the foundational aesthetic of sympathy. Traces of this predicament emerge even in *Adam Bede*, the novel that persuades her nineteenth-century audience of Eliot’s sincerity. The words, “Awake, my soul,” inaugurate the song that opens the first chapter of *Adam Bede* and ushers the audience into Adam’s workshop; the workshop’s “concert of the tools and Adam’s voice,” concludes with an appeal to “be sincere”:

Let all thy converse be sincere.

Thy conscience as the noonday clear. (1, 5-6)

Subsequently in Book 2, “In Which the Story Pauses a Little,” in order to rouse the audience, Eliot’s narrator admits that

I am afraid I have often smiled with hypocritical assent. . . .  
Human converse . . . is not rigidly sincere. But I herewith

discharge my conscience, and declare . . . that human nature is lovable — the way I have learnt something of its deep pathos, its sublime mysteries. (157)

The narrator in this passage makes observations at once doubting and confirmatory, reserved and candid, even while he urgently “discharge[s] [his] conscience.”

As if to deliberately call attention to this thorny issue of tactics, Eliot abruptly and startlingly inserts a reference to “one of my readers” into the opening lines of *Adam Bede*, chapter 17:

“THIS Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!” I hear one of my readers exclaim. “How much more edifying it would have been if you had made him give Arthur some truly spiritual advice! You might have put into his mouth the most beautiful things — quite as good as reading a sermon.”

Eliot then writes the pronoun “I”; in so doing she interjects the presence of the novelist herself:

Certainly I could, if I held it the highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be. Then, of course, I might refashion life and character entirely after my own liking.

These passages illustrate the technique (or tactic) Eliot uses to deftly construct a novel in which the reader constantly feels the novelist’s presence and where the novelist in turn feels no obligation to vanish into the fiction in the way Flaubert or James would. Eliot’s technique demonstrates how to write a fictional work that seems almost impossibly

inclusive, a work that unites characters, audience, and author together in a secular, unbordered fictional world.

Eliot takes more risks with sincere “human converse” when writing *The Mill on the Floss*. The success of *Adam Bede* perhaps emboldens her to test the limits she had previously set. Nevertheless, Eliot can no longer remain obscured behind her mask. 1859 brings the release of *Adam Bede*, and once Queen Victoria reads the novel and praises it, sales of the book soar. Yet there remains a mystery as to George Eliot’s true identity. John Chapman had already revealed to certain members of the London literary community the name hiding behind the pseudonym. Months of gossip that Eliot attempts to challenge in order to suppress the secret forces her to unmask the identity even as she works on the first book of *The Mill on the Floss*. This gossip may very well have triggered Eliot’s hostility toward the public, hostility that infuses several of her narrative addresses.

George Eliot endeavors in *The Mill on the Floss* to expose a certain shallow sophistication affected by some women—including some of her female readers—by unveiling the crudity and inflexibility this “sophistication” disguises.<sup>17</sup> At the point in *The Mill on the Floss* where St

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<sup>17</sup> This theme of shallowness and women recalls “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” an essay by George Eliot published anonymously in the *Westminster Review* in 1856. The essay criticizes many novels written by and for women, objecting to their “silliness” and willful disregard for reality. While Eliot acknowledges that “Fiction is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men” (324), she nevertheless

Ogg's harshly appraises Maggie, "we" merges with the "public opinion, [which] in these cases, is always of the feminine gender" (55, 428).<sup>18</sup> Eliot directs other critiques toward men. For example, she upbraids the often inflexible, kneejerk, morally careless actions taken by merchants or civil employees. On more than one occasion Eliot highlights "a touch of human experience which I flatter myself will come home to the bosoms of not a few substantial or distinguished men" (48, 345). Eliot's comments directed exclusively at males register in no individual case as caustic as her remarks on the "world's wife." However, because such comments occur infrequently in Victorian fiction, their aggregate seizes the attention of the reader.

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asserts that "silly novels" undercut the cause of women's education. Eliot notices that the heroines in these novels enjoy a high level of education, but this education often renders them self-satisfied and tiresome. Furthermore, the writers of these novels have evidently read a great deal, but their reading, Eliot argues, has not prepared them to write well. Eliot maintains that their own writings mistake "vagueness for depth, bombast for eloquence, and affectation for originality" (316). Eliot fears that readers of such silly novels will come to the conclusion that women do not benefit from education—even though, as she takes care to remind her readers, there do exist truly great female writers. Eliot counts Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Brontë among them.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Ermarth's article, "Maggie Tulliver's Long Suicide" (2014), examines Maggie Tulliver's problematic cultural status as ambitious female and how that position mandates her eventual demise. The presence of the word "suicide" in Ermarth's title can be regarded as ironic, because there exists scant evidence within Eliot's novel that Maggie takes her own life. Maggie is, of course, the victim of a series of narrative events that culminate in a flood that destroys her home and much of her village. However, Ermarth asserts that Maggie's death assumes a wider meaning when considered within the context of nineteenth-century history and particularly with respect to female intellectuals and writers. Ermarth's argument parallels the observations of other critics who find a correspondence between the circumstances of George Eliot the author and the narrative world she builds for Maggie Tulliver.

In *The Mill on the Floss* the direct appeal performs the same function as in *Adam Bede*: it encourages the audience's sympathetic reaction by making a plea to shared experience. However, its overall pitch modulates to a conspicuously different register. The direct addresses in *The Mill on the Floss*, when most persuasive, present an appeal to the frailties all humans possess; the least convincing of these addresses seem patronizing, hectoring, or harshly accusatory. Eliot's characteristic appeal to common experience exhibits irony, false attribution, or questionable statements: "Poor relations are undeniably irritating—their existence is so entirely uncalled for on our part, and they are almost always very faulty people" (8, 74).

While *Adam Bede* tends to uplift, frequently referencing for example the audience's "best self," *The Mill on the Floss* persistently demands the reader face a self that seems disturbingly craven, insecure, and needlessly destructive. "It is easy enough to spoil the lives of our neighbours," the narrator blithely begins the following passage, "without taking so much trouble":

It is easy enough to spoil the lives of our neighbors without taking so much trouble; we can do it by lazy acquiescence and lazy omission, by trivial falsities for which we hardly know a reason, by small frauds neutralized by small extravagancies, by maladroit flatteries, and clumsily improvised insinuations. We live from hand to mouth, most of us, with a small family of immediate desires—we do little

else than snatch a morsel to satisfy the hungry brood, rarely thinking of seed-corn or the next year's crop. (3, 23)

George Eliot endeavors time and again in *The Mill on the Floss* to leverage the audience's agreement by drawing explicit linkages, comparisons designed to force "distinguished men" and "refined" women to identify in themselves the small-mindedness that marks the citizenry of St Ogg's. Eliot's usage of this mode of striking, intimidating address occurs first in an unvarnished rebuke from "Janet's Repentance," wherein Eliot writes that

it is easy to understand that our discernment of men's motives must depend on the completeness of the elements we can bring from our own susceptibility and our own experience. See to it, friend, before you pronounce a too hasty judgement, that your own moral sensibilities are not of a hoofed or clawed character." (SCL, 2, 324).

In *The Mill on the Floss*, however, Eliot deploys this manner of solicitation in a more complex and highly evolved fashion. *Adam Bede* shows Eliot eschewing harsh commentary, perhaps because its tone had inflamed Blackwood's anxiety about her cynicism. The reoccurrence of Eliot's disapproving manner implies a degree of self-awareness in her adjustment of tone and a deliberate abrasiveness in the irony directed at the audience.

*The Mill on the Floss* contains intimidating appeals that often seem too strident to be tactical. However, even the narrator's assaults on the



“light and graceful irony” of “good society” indicate Eliot’s attempt to exert a measure of moderation. For example, the “emphasis of want” lines contain an apology, an appeal to authenticity, and a subtle questioning of certain “eligible” subjects. “In writing the history of unfashionable families,” Eliot observes that

one is apt to fall into a tone of emphasis which is very far from being the tone of good society, where principles and beliefs are not only of an extremely moderate kind, but are always presupposed, no subjects being eligible but such as can be touched with a light irony. (32, 255)

This passage and subsequent ones evince Eliot’s efforts to adjust tone. The narrator uses generic adjective and noun pairings (“national life,” “good society”) and indefinite pronouns (“it,” “one,” “some”) to replace the more emphatic accusatory personal pronouns at times when the criticism turns intensely strident. Eliot saves the “you” for such inconsequential acts as exploring “the stuffing of your couch” and reserves “ourselves” and “us” for occasions when she wants to invoke “active love for what is not of ourselves” or for calling upon the sympathy required when “human looks are hard upon us” (255-256).

In any case, the fervent social commentary of *The Mill on the Floss*—impugning those who form “their moral judgment solely by general rules, thinking that these will lead them to justice by a ready-made patent method, without the trouble of exerting patience,

discrimination, impartiality”—and the novel’s encouragement of “wide fellow-feeling with all that is human” seem perilously juxtaposed. Eliot injects positive attributes into her audience appeals mainly by invoking nostalgic veneration of the past and by vivid expressions of fellowship. The novel’s persistent yoking of past and present pushes onto the audience illusory notions of unity and permanence. At the same time, *The Mill on the Floss* also stipulates that such qualities do not characterize either St Ogg’s or the world of Eliot’s Victorian readers.

This yearning for unity and the acknowledgement of its absence make confusing those ironic appeals that compare past and present. Eliot’s robust assertions of fellowship, which seem to emerge when the narrative action implies disunity and difference, seem likewise perilously juxtaposed. One such passage describes an encounter between Maggie and Dr Kenn wherein Kenn encourages an equivocating Maggie to become a “permanent parishioner” while he simultaneously points out to her that she stubbornly maintains her distance. As an uncomfortable Maggie attempts to escape the situation, she says, ““Oh, I *must* go,”” while wearing an expression that betrays her feeling that “she had told him her history in those three words.” The narrator then describes the encounter as

one of those moments of implicit revelation which will sometimes happen even between people who meet quite

transiently, — on a mile's journey, perhaps, or when resting by the wayside. There is always this possibility of a word or look from a stranger to keep alive the sense of human brotherhood.

Here, Eliot clearly depends on Dr Kenn “to keep alive the sense of human brotherhood” in both Maggie and the audience. However, the novel implies that Kenn shares his parishioners' deficiency of genuine kindness and tolerance. Therefore, Eliot's writing that “most of us . . . would have welcomed a priest of that natural order” suggests Eliot's imaginative wish for Dr Kenn more than the social realities that generate the irony permeating Book 6.

Arbitrating most reliably between writer and audience, then, are those appeals that draw distinctions between individual human beings and invite general inquiries about order as opposed to those that propose all-inclusive fellowship or a charitable natural order. Eliot writes that

for dear Tom, who always had that pleasant smile when he looked at cousin Lucy, to turn completely round, say the opposite of what he had always said before, and declare that he, for his part, was delighted that all the old grievances should be healed, and that Maggie should have Philip with all suitable despatch; in cousin Lucy's opinion nothing could be easier.

But to minds strongly marked by the positive and negative qualities that create severity—strength of will, conscious rectitude of purpose, narrowness of imagination and intellect, great power of self-control, and a disposition to exert control over others—prejudices come as the natural food of tendencies which can get no sustenance out of that complex, fragmentary, doubt-provoking knowledge which

we call truth. Let a prejudice be bequeathed, carried in the air, adopted by hearsay, caught in through the eye,—however it may come, these minds will give it a habitation; it is something to assert strongly and bravely, something to fill up the void of spontaneous ideas. . . . Our good upright Tom Tulliver’s mind was of this class. (51, 400)

Eliot’s narrator in this section deftly disconnects the audience from Tom by specifying that “All people of broad, strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the men of maxims” and furthermore that “the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims” or “formulas” (55, 435). Eliot stages the idea that they “repress” our “growing insight and sympathy” by foregrounding both Tom’s response to Maggie and Maggie’s “deep rooted” childhood fear of Tom:

Her brother was the human being of whom she had been most afraid from her childhood upward; afraid with that fear which springs in us when we love one who is inexorable, unbending, unmodifiable—with a mind that we can never mould ourselves upon, and yet that we cannot endure to alienate from us. (54, 422)

Eliot subtly primes the reader to empathize with Maggie’s dread of Tom by aligning Tom with particular adjectival qualities of the laws of nature—“inexorable, unbending, unmodifiable”—that leave no room for accommodation or sympathy.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Paul A. Makurath treats the issue of nature’s laws in “The Symbolism of the Flood in Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*,” in *Studies in the Novel* 7 (1975), pp. 298-300. Makurath begins by pointing out that the culminating flood serves as a “quite obvious” symbol of wild, destructive nature and its function as a determinate of human destiny. Makurath goes on to suggest that the flood also tropes nature as a final arbiter of the struggle among

Writing in an intermittently scolding and depressing tone, George Eliot disaffects a sizeable portion of her audience with *The Mill on the Floss*, but with *Silas Marner* she returns to their good graces. Eliot accomplishes this rehabilitation in two ways: by deemphasizing the “emphasis of want” (which drearily accentuates humans living “in a chill, uncarpeted fashion, amidst family discord unsoftened by long corridors”) and by more conscientiously maintaining the space that separates writer from audience. Eliot’s appeals to the reader again promote those ideals she stages in *Silas Marner*, the modest principles of domesticity and friendliness. Even when the narrator overtly switches on the criticism, the implied links between the reader’s experiences and events in the novel resonate in only unthreatening and inoffensive ways. Eliot’s narrator first raises the question of “why we are seldom able to comfort our neighbours with our words” and then speculates in an understanding tone that

our goodwill gets adulterated, in spite of ourselves, before it can pass our lips. We can send black puddings and pettitoes without giving them a flavour of our own egoism; but language is a stream that is almost sure to smack of a mingled soil. (10, 130-131)

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individuals for social superiority. As evidence for this claim, he points out that Maggie’s brother, Tom, finds himself on the precipice of a new and improved social ascendancy at the very moment the flood washes away everything that Tom, Maggie, and all the novel’s characters hold dear. However, Makurath’s article posits three other meanings for the flood: as an agent of death, as a factor in the fate of economic enterprises, and as an avenue of escape from inhibitions.

By casting Silas as a pariah who bestows “a blessing on himself by acting like a father to a lone motherless child” and who carries the baggage of a “strange history,” Eliot adroitly appeals to the reader’s sympathies. At the same time, she prevents the appeal from turning uncomfortably intrusive by enforcing a subtle detachment between audience and writer. Refusing to risk offending her audience with intensely personal allusions to “you,” “we,” and “our,” Eliot instead makes only vague insinuations by safely citing “all men,” “everyone,” “people,” “a man,” “a woman,” and “anyone.” Tellingly, such allusions occur at junctures where the narrative distances Godfrey from himself or where it detaches Silas from the people of Raveloe.

Urging the audience to empathize with Godfrey’s uniquely human dependence on luck and coincidence, Eliot deploys the direct address to build this identification, but the deployment remains circumspect and innocuous. For example, Eliot encourages the reader to identify with Godfrey, and he ultimately makes himself an acceptable figure. Eliot also casts the reader as at least morally equal to the characters of *Silas Marner* and superior with respect to general “culture.” The contrast to *The Mill on the Floss*, wherein Eliot distances the audience from the comfortably known, makes a distinct impression; in *Silas Marner* what at first registers as foreign Eliot makes familiar. Thus the detachment that Eliot initially

constructs ultimately strengthens the writer and audience rapport. The novel's widespread solicitations to shared experience avoid provoking antipathy while expanding in a nonthreatening way the audience's understanding.

With *Romola*, Eliot again places the audience at a remove; however, she alters the tenor of the novel and makes narrative and historical similitude a pronounced feature of the novel. By showing belligerent and damaging aggression as a shared characteristic of the commercial societies of nineteenth-century England and fifteenth-century Florence, *Romola's* direct appeals seem designed to eliminate the divide between them.<sup>20</sup> The parallels between past and present, Eliot writes, can be "explained by our seeing" the Florentine Bardi family

as standing in the very front of European commerce—the Christian Rothschilds of that time—undertaking to furnish specie for the wars of our Edward the Third, and having revenues "in kind" made over to them; especially in wool, most precious of freights for Florentine galleys. (5, 43)

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<sup>20</sup> For an examination of the often-paradoxical characteristics of Victorian society documented by Eliot in *Romola* and her other novels, see *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (2001) by Kathryn Hughes. Hughes treats the conflicted circumstances of Eliot's life and acknowledges that Eliot wrote her works after years of living unconventionally, including a scandalous voyage to Europe with the married writer and editor George Henry Lewes. The scandal intensified when she moved in with Lewes after he separated from his wife. Hughes also explores the ways in which Eliot re-entered London's social life years later, when her literary success made it impossible for respectable society to dismiss her (even Queen Victoria enjoyed her books). Hughes notes that Eliot counted among her friends and supporters Dickens, Trollope, and various other Victorian literati.

However, unfortunate circumstances befall the family Bardi. As the narrator explains,

Their august debtor left them with an august deficit, and alarmed Sicilian creditors made a too sudden demand for the payment of deposits, causing a ruinous shock to the credit of the Bardi and of associated houses.

Eliot in *Romola* makes her analogies subtly, so subtly that when Victorian critics complained, they did so because they ignored or overlooked the narrative correspondence drawn by Eliot between Renaissance Florence and nineteenth-century England. Finding the correlation between the two societies cleverly marked, British intellectuals understood *Romola*, but many of Eliot's readers found the novel unusually erudite but stilted and unmoving. Critic R.H. Hutton voiced the ambivalence of many when he wrote in an 1863 review that "of *Romola* it is less easy to say whether one is absolutely satisfied or not."

In terms of form, the dynamic existing in *Romola* between the indirect and direct address suggests a slow evolution toward the balanced intricacy that distinguishes Eliot's later novels. In *Romola*, this middle novel, the indirect address generally governs the narrative. For the first time, Eliot routinely makes prophetic utterances about "a mixed condition of things," one such utterance invoking a "sign" that indicates the state of a fraught social enterprise:



The same society has had a gibbet for the murderer and a gibbet for the martyr, an execrating hiss for a dastardly act, and as loud a hiss for many a word of generous truthfulness or just insight: a mixed condition of things which is the sign, not of hopeless confusion, but of struggling order. (57, 462)

Here, the voice of the oracle speaks convincingly of “struggling order,” thereby displacing the individual with the societal while attempting to neutralize any sense of life as hopelessly confused or exhaustively difficult.

On the other hand, the direct solicitations of *Romola* routinely pull the audience away from the societal into the “hopeless confusion” and uncertainty endured by individual characters. As an example, when Romola nervously contemplates “violently rending her life in two” as a consequence of leaving Tito, Eliot directly addresses “us” and explains that Romola’s pending action

had a power unexplained to herself, of shaking Romola. It is the way with half the truth amidst which we live, that it only haunts us and makes dull pulsations that are never born into sound. (36, 313)

In a comparable way, when circumstances dictate that Savonarola suffer persecution by fire, thereby challenging the Dominican’s faith, the narrator probingly wonders

Were not Fra Domenico and Fra Mariano, and scores of Piagnoni besides, ready to enter the fire? What was the cause of their superior courage, if it was not their superior faith? Savonarola could not have explained his conduct

satisfactorily to his friends, even if he had been able to explain it thoroughly to himself. And he was not. Our naked feelings make haste to clothe themselves in propositions which lie at hand among our store of opinions, and to give a true account of what passes within us something else is necessary besides sincerity, even when sincerity is unmixed. (64, 511)

At this moment in the novel, Eliot's binary addresses, the disturbing indirect and the comforting direct, remain stubbornly unreconciled. The inability to effect any significant amalgamation of the two modes, combined with the supremacy of the indirect address, make inevitable the novel's stultifying quality. Presumably in order to calm the reader's unease, *Romola* provides simple pronouncements and pays a price for doing so. In the final analysis, Eliot approaches but finally neglects to exploit the multiple-address complications that would have animated her work.

In *Felix Holt, the Radical*, Eliot returns to provincial familiarity, introducing her audience to the fictitious community of Treby in the English Midlands in 1832, the time of the First Reform Act. Displaying what reassured readers would regard as a renewed and refreshing equanimity and calmness of tone, Eliot in *Felix Holt* takes to heart lessons learned from the muted-to-negative responses to *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*. This time Eliot corrects course and again deploys with

effectiveness the techniques of dissociation she refined in *Silas Marner* and *Romola*.

Ironically, however, the openness, tranquility, and evenhandedness critics perceive in the author of *Felix Holt* starkly oppose the uncertainty, diminished confidence, and dejection Eliot regularly suffers, along with questionable health, while writing the novel. Her publisher, John Blackwood, inspired by the prospect of a George Eliot novel relevant to current affairs, writes her an encouraging letter about the work; he receives a response in which Eliot reveals having been chronically plagued by depression:

How very good it was of you to write me a letter which is a guarantee to me of the pleasantest kind that I have made myself understood. The tone of the prevalent literature just now is not encouraging to a writer who at least wishes to be serious and sincere, and, owing to my want of health, a great deal of this book has been written under so much depression as to its practical effectiveness, that I have sometimes been ready to give it up. (GEL, 4, 247-248)

Three excerpts from Eliot's writing indicate the cautionary and measured judgment she musters while writing *Felix Holt*. Her letter to Blackwood provides the first:

Your letter has made me feel, more strongly than any other testimony, that it would have been a pity if I had listened to the tempter Despondency.—I took a great deal of pains to get a true idea of the period. My own recollections of it are childish, and of course disjointed, but they help to

illuminate my reading. I went through the Times of 1832-33 at the British Museum, to be sure of as many details as I could. It is amazing what strong language was used in those days, especially about the Church. The Times is full of turgid denunciation; "bloated pluralists," "stall-fed dignitaries" etc. are the sort of phrases conspicuous in the leaders. There is one passage of prophecy which I longed to quote, but I thought it wiser to abstain. "Now the beauty of the Reform Bill is, that under its mature operation the people must and will become free agents"—a prophecy which I hope is true, only the maturity of the operation has not arrived yet.

Excerpt two indicates the outcome of Eliot's decision that ultimately "it is wiser to abstain." In the Epilogue to *Felix Holt*, she writes:

As to all that wide parish of Treby Magna, it has since prospered as the rest of England has prospered. Doubtless there is more enlightenment now. Whether the farmers are all public-spirited, the shopkeepers nobly independent, the Sproxtton men entirely sober and judicious, the Dissenters quite without narrowness or asperity in religion and politics, and the publicans all fit, like Gaius, to be the friends of an apostle—these things I have not heard, not having correspondence in those parts.

Chapter 16 of *Felix Holt* provides a third passage that indicates the ways in which Eliot, paying close attention to detail, cultivates the results of her aforementioned *Times* research at the British Museum:

Crying abuses—"bloated paupers," "bloated pluralists," and other corruptions hindering men from being wise and happy—had to be fought against and slain. Such a time is a time of hope. Afterwards, when the corpses of those monsters have been held up to the public wonder and abhorrence, and yet wisdom and happiness do not follow,

but rather a more abundant breeding of the foolish and unhappy, comes a time of doubt and despondency. But in the great Reform year Hope was mighty: the prospect of Reform had even served the voters instead of drink; and in one place, at least, there had been “a dry election.” (271)

Notably, Eliot releases the narrator from accountability for these portrayals (from being “held up to the [reader’s] wonder and abhorrence”) by making “bloated paupers” and “bloated pluralists” cited phrases; the conscientious researcher merely quotes his source. However, Eliot also indiscernibly rewrites the *Times*. Where the denunciation in the *Times* treats only the gentry, Eliot’s litany of wrongs specifies the wealthy and the indigent, the notorious and the reputable. Eliot also employs this sleight-of-hand of spotlighting everyone and no one in the Epilogue, where the tone softens to conciliatory: “throughout that neighborhood [Transome Court] there was silence about the past.” In chapter 16, which calls for a more weighty approach, the authorial attitude shifts to contemplative rather than forceful.

Eliot’s complicated devices in *Felix Holt, the Radical*—most often techniques for avoiding culpability: submission to imposing precedent (Sophocles, Lucretius, Dante, the *Bible*, Euripides), personification, wide generalizations—cushion the harshness of the social reproach. Reflecting her book’s tendency to admonish only obliquely, Eliot postulates that “Men do not become penitent . . . by having their backs cut open with the

lash." Approaching the end of chapter 42, she embarks upon an extended musing caused by the accusatory but earnest words of Mrs Transome in her argumentative "interview" with Jermyn. The narrator, as the passage concludes, maintains that

Human beings in moments of passionate reproach and denunciation, especially when their anger is on their own account, are never so wholly in the right that the person who has to wince cannot possibly protest against some unreasonableness or unfairness in their outburst. . . . Men do not become penitent and learn to abhor themselves by having their backs cut open with the lash; rather, they learn to abhor the lash. (520)

Here the narrator invokes first "human beings" and proximately afterward "men," deftly sidestepping the direct appeal. The exception occurs when alluding in the subsequent paragraph to "a touch of something that makes us all akin" as Jermyn contemplates the "clearest and most unpleasant result of the interview" (519-521).

Chapter 16's previously quoted section concerning the "great Reform year" features unflinching characterizations made by Eliot's narrator. However, these characterizations occur only in the passage that invokes "corpses" and "abundant breeding," words themselves related to the novel's organic philosophy. Organic principles inform numerous direct audience appeals throughout *Felix Holt*. Eliot positions her initial

lengthy direct solicitation within this now well-known paragraph found near the conclusion of chapter 3:

These social changes in Treby parish are comparatively public matters, and this history is chiefly concerned with the private lot of a few men and women; but there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life. . . . And the lives we are about to look back upon . . . are rooted in the common earth, having to endure all the ordinary chances of past and present weather.

Culminating in yet another organic reference to “the common earth,” this passage that began with the narrator’s indirect address soon evolves into the direct appeal found in “the lives we are about to look back upon.” The change encloses the audience within the “mutual influence of dissimilar destinies which we shall see gradually unfolding itself” (3, 129) and exemplifies the ways in which Eliot routinely subsumes in *Felix Holt* virtually all adverse aspects, at least those not either dissociated or softened, into the novel’s fundamentally affirmative organic philosophy.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In the 1868 essay, “Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt,” a kind of addendum to her novel *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), Eliot expresses a more negative although ultimately constructive view of the state of Victorian England. Under the name of her novel’s fictional character Felix Holt, Eliot composed the piece for *Blackwood’s Magazine* during the period leading up to the Reform Act of 1867. Eliot’s choice of pseudonym suggests that she finds such distancing a necessary technique for voicing her opinions outside the political mainstream. During a period when journalistic articles were not signed, the name “Felix Holt” was familiar to readers who had read Eliot’s 1866 novel. A few days after she began writing the essay, Blackwood urged her on: “You have the knowledge of what the working men ought to do and the real feeling towards them which will give a force to your words which no ordinary address could possibly possess.” An ordinary address presumably would be neither fictional nor written by a woman. Perhaps because he was dealing with a woman, whose authority to speak about

In *Middlemarch*, Eliot's direct solicitations to the reader extend the techniques of *The Mill on the Floss* as well as those used in other prior novels. This extension generates both surprisingly intricate tonal shifts and persistent engagement with the novelist. Eliot controls these ubiquitous addresses with such deftness that she creates different modes of exchange involving narrator and audience: the most audacious exchanges generate a break; the most understated leave the audience uncertain of having been implicated. For example, the following address concerning the "stealthy convergence of human lots" found in chapter 11 of *Middlemarch* brings the audience to a standstill. Eliot writes that

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 neighbor. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our *dramatis personae* folded in her hand.

The passage so struck reviewer A.V. Dicey that he felt compelled to turn Eliot's own words against her, castigating the *Middlemarch* author in his January 1873 *Nation* review for encouraging "the part of the 'destiny which stands by sarcastic.'"

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a political process from which she was excluded was highly dubious, Blackwood emphasized feeling as the force behind her knowledge. When the Felix Holt essay was completed, Blackwood approved, musing that "if the mass could appreciate rightly such words and feelings, what a grand nation we would become."



Eliot contours other *Middlemarch* sections by shifting among character, narrator, and reader. This technique activates a dynamic especially appropriate to a novel that insists its audience experience and understand from markedly dissimilar centers of consciousness, thereby causing the audience to imagine situations vastly different from those it has lived. These shifts reflect and intensify the various modifications applied to the characters of *Middlemarch* by the narrator.<sup>22</sup> For instance, the narrator first allows that the Reverend Mr Farebrother, unlike “the majority of us,” “could excuse others for thinking slightly of him, and could judge impartially of their conduct even when it told against him.” Immediately thereafter, however, the narrator veers off in a different direction, conceding that the Reverend’s “talk was not always inspiring,” for

he had escaped being a Pharisee, but he had not escaped that low estimate of possibilities which we rather hastily arrive at as an inference from our own failure. Lydgate thought that there was a pitiable infirmity of will in Mr. Farebrother. (18, 139)

In comparison to her handling of Farebrother, Eliot puts distance between her narrator and Dorothea, a character John Holloway aptly calls one

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<sup>22</sup> For an enlightening analysis that treats Eliot’s shifting techniques in *Middlemarch*, see Derek Oldfield’s “The Language of the Novel: The Character of Dorothea,” in *Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel* (1967), pp. 63-86. Oldfield points out that Eliot’s “judgments are constantly modified or restricted in some way, whether by such devices as the ‘impersonal’ narrator, the use of negatives and irony, or by a modifying context.”

“who for all her fineness labours under foolish and disastrous delusions” (131). Eliot describes a “blind” Dorothea, caught up in the disorienting first days of her marriage to Casaubon, whose “words were among the most cutting and irritating” to her husband:

She was as blind to his inward troubles as he to hers: she had not yet learned those hidden conflicts in her husband which claim our pity. She had not yet listened patiently to his heartbeats, but only felt that her own was beating violently. (20, 148)

Barbara Hardy and Derek Oldfield have observed that Eliot, by adjusting the tenor and stresses of a passage, often purposefully widens or narrows the gap separating the author from a given character. This widening or narrowing applies also to the distance between author and reader. The prevailing modes of direct solicitations in *Middlemarch*, especially considering their various groupings and incorporations into the previous novels, suggest most of all the care and deliberation with which Eliot assembles them.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, Eliot’s different novels display different characteristics. Whereas both *Middlemarch* and *Romola* generate significant uncertainty, only *Middlemarch* unflinchingly faces that uncertainty. Eliot suffuses the

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<sup>23</sup> Derek Oldfield notices in his contribution to *Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel* that Eliot develops “three different stylistic methods in her presentation of Dorothea. First, there it is her allegedly direct narrator’s voice; then there is the dramatization of Dorothy’s own speech; and finally there is George Eliot’s method of communicating Dorothea’s thoughts” (65).

dominant modes of direct address in *Middlemarch* with an encompassing sense of human struggle and intricacy; this quality has the effect of placing the audience in the midst of ongoing conflict in which the preponderance of the novel's dramatic action occurs. Preventing the direct addresses from seeming either simpleminded or predictable in their appeals for unity, *Middlemarch* occasionally undercuts, as shown in the Farebrother and Dorothea lines, the communal vision to which "we" all subscribe or concurrently asserts and interrogates organic linkage, as shown in the "watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots" phrase.

By way of her large-scale deployment of direct questions and myriad parentheses, two devices that deliver to *Middlemarch* unlikely comparisons and surprising linkages, Eliot leverages readers to immerse themselves in the novel's intricacies. As one conspicuous example of this technique, Eliot begins with direct queries both the Prelude ("Who that cares much to know the history of man?") and the Finale ("Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years?"). While in prior novels Eliot's narrators regularly deploy questions in an effort to transport the audience into the mind of a character, in *Middlemarch* direct queries perform additional functions. Eliot either poses a straightforward

question to the audience and then provides a disconcerting response or poses a disturbing question and confirms the disturbance in the answer: "Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world, and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self" (42, 307). In addition, Eliot often has her narrator declare a fact and then call into question its serviceability with a query: "[T]here had been a mixture of criticism and awe in the attitude of Celia's mind towards her elder sister. The younger had always worn a yoke; but is there any yoked creature without its private opinions?" (1, 11).

This manner of audience solicitation, which might be characterized as complex and interrogative, occurs with regularity alongside an additional type, one that fuses the authorial hectorings of *The Mill on the Floss* with the compassionate reassurances of *Silas Marner* and *Adam Bede*. This technique forecloses the audience from harboring any illusions of moral ascendancy over a fictional character. Consider, for example, this passage that launches a critique of Mr Bulstrode's "egoistic terrors": "[T]he life-long habit of Mr. Bulstrode's mind clad his most egoistic terrors in doctrinal reference to superhuman ends." Immediately after the narrative renders its strongly implied negative judgment, the subsequent phrase implicates "we":

But even while we are talking and meditating about the earth's orbit and the solar system, what we feel and adjust our movements to is the stable earth and the changing day. And now within all the automatic succession of theoretic phrases—distinct and inmost as the shiver and the ache of oncoming fever when we are discussing abstract pain, was the forecast of disgrace in the presence of his neighbours and of his own wife. For the pain, as well as the public estimate of disgrace, depends on the amount of previous profession. (53, 385-386)

Eliot deploys first-person pronouns less often in other books than in *Middlemarch*, where the usage has the effect of generating an audience appeal of a third type. By foregrounding a strong sense of the narrator's wants, troubles, confidences, and doubts, Eliot's use of the personal "I" evinces a struggle to narrow the gap separating novelist from audience and to sidestep the troubling and patronizing atmosphere that permeates *The Mill on the Floss*.

The employment of the narrator's "I" persona works slightly differently in different novels, but in *Middlemarch* its first-person authority has the effect of either certifying the manner in which people typically behave or exposing the weaknesses of single characters. At the same time, the narrator routinely adopts a tenor so carefully calibrated that it can seem wry or lighthearted. Questioning if Casaubon "was fairly represented in the minds of those less impassioned personages who have hitherto delivered their judgments concerning him," for example, the

narrator warns the reader against the “too hasty judgment . . . in relation to Mr. Casaubon” made by Mr Brooke, Celia, and Mrs Cadwallader:

I am not sure that the greatest man of his age, if ever that solitary superlative existed, could escape these unfavourable reflections of himself in various small mirrors; and even Milton, looking for his portrait in a spoon, must submit to have the facial angle of a bumpkin. Moreover, if Mr. Casaubon, speaking for himself, has rather a chilling rhetoric, it is not therefore certain that there is no good work or fine feeling in him. (10, 62)

At times populating the same scene, these three modes of audience solicitation can also meld with indirect appeals. First acknowledging Lydgate’s “mind . . . a little spotted with commonness,” the narrator then addresses “you” the audience, pleading that the character’s “faults will not, I hope, be a reason for the withdrawal of your interest in him”:

Among our valued friends is there not some one or other who is a little too self-confident and disdainful; whose distinguished mind is a little spotted with commonness; who is a little pinched here and protuberant there with native prejudices; or whose better energies are liable to lapse down the wrong channel under the influence of transient solicitations? All these things might be alleged against Lydgate, but then, they are the periphrases of a polite preacher, who talks of Adam, and would not like to mention anything painful to the pew-renters. (15, 111)

The narrator of *Middlemarch* clearly holds a perspective wider than that of the characters or the reader. Here, the “I,” who first urges sympathy for an imperfect Lydgate, relinquishes the narrative to the “our” of shared

human traits, deeply suspect but deserving of understanding. The succeeding question (“is there not some one or other who is a little too self-confident and disdainful. . . ?”) ratifies an uncomfortable certainty. Then, turning to the indirect address, the narrator warns against uttering “the periphrases of the polite preacher,” a timid figure who fears invoking “anything painful to the pew-renters.” Insinuating that it may be the audience that occupies the pew, the narrator characterizes “our vanities” as possessing small differences without major distinctions: “Our vanities differ as our noses do.” Discarding vanities in general in favor of vanities in particular, the narrator circles back to describe “Lydgate’s conceit” as complex and “of the arrogant sort, never simpering, never impertinent, but massive in its claims and benevolently contemptuous.”

Just when Eliot’s analysis turns tantalizingly intricate, she moderates the moment using three narrative turns: she brushes aside references to “our valued friends”; she moderates the condemnation of both audience and fictional character; and she ridicules the narrator’s wordy platitudes and “periphrases.” However, her ridicule fails to restrain the narrator from further engaging in overly long or indirect language. Consider, for example, the narrator’s announcement that “The particular faults from which these delicate generalities are distilled have distinguishable physiognomies, diction, accent, and grimaces; filling up

parts in very various dramas.” The narrator then draws an analogy between the aforementioned “noses” and “conceits”: “Our vanities differ as our noses do: all conceit is not the same conceit, but varies in correspondence with the minutiae of mental make in which one of us differs from another.” In these passages Eliot directs the irony onto the narrator by using specialized scientific language; simultaneously, she normalizes that scientific language by making “our noses” the measure of “our vanities.” This self-referential normalization suggests both authorial composure and a newfound stability in the writer-audience relationship, a stability that Eliot seeks and to a great extent achieves in the writing of *Middlemarch*.

The novel’s unlikely coalition—the ethos of sympathy existing alongside uncomfortable and vexing revelations—creates that stability. *Middlemarch* deftly fuses the nonthreatening appeals her audience embraced in *Adam Bede* with the scolding it rejected in *The Mill on the Floss*. Therein, Eliot displays her determination to mix the analytical and the remedial while avoiding the offensive. The direct address that concludes the Finale’s penultimate paragraph evidences this effort. Beginning with the admonition “For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it,” Eliot moves quickly to the point she wishes to make: “But we



insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know." This passage contains five sympathetic qualities that mark Eliot's direct addresses: the unifying "we" that invokes shared experience; a barbed reproach of the audience found within "our daily words and acts"; an expression of empathy for the "far sadder sacrifice"; a valuing of the life dramatized within; and an acknowledgment of the society that "lies outside" the character.

Interestingly, when Eliot's solicitations turn caustic in *Middlemarch*, the narrator's "I" often melds with the "we," as in the "you and me" of the novel's final sentence, a sentence that juxtaposes and thus affiliates Dorothea with those "who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs":

But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

By deploying and linking her compassionate and analytical voices, by striking a delicate balance between the imperatives of sympathy and of judicious inquiry, Eliot forms an effective engagement with her *Middlemarch* audience. This engagement, ubiquitous to the extent that it

becomes characteristic of the novel, forms a kind of alliance between author and reader.

Modifications in formal techniques mark many of George Eliot's novels. Eliot once again in *Daniel Deronda* alters these techniques, calling upon new strategies to enact the range of effects and states of mind she endeavors to produce. At those times when her thematic material consists of the unfamiliar rather than the conventional, Eliot turns less often to direct solicitation. However, when she needs it, she uses the direct solicitation in fresh ways, calling upon what by now can be seen as an array of techniques.

In *Middlemarch*, the issue of complex linkages constitutes a principal method of audience appeal. In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot's final novel, the issue takes on new urgency; here, Eliot accentuates both the difficulty of discerning these linkages and the necessity of doing so in spite of the difficulty. Eliot's audience addresses focus on juxtaposition, dissimilarity, and combination, both genuine and specious, and on the importance of distinguishing between the two. The linkages of which Eliot makes the reader aware include the nexus between general and specific, present and past, conduct and consequences ("some would never get their eyes opened if it were not for a violent shock from the consequences of their own actions"), action and belief, life and art, science

and poetry ("the sensibility of the artist seizes combinations which science explains and justifies"), everyday reality and the poetry of vision, sexual roles and morality. What was in *Middlemarch* an energetic criticism of single mindedness Eliot transforms in *Daniel Deronda* into an unalloyed appeal for discovering and enabling broader associations. Eliot's audience solicitations in *Middlemarch* both resolve and provoke narrative strain; this duality often results in tentative, uneasy solutions.

In *Daniel Deronda*, however, Eliot's focus on juxtaposition and contradiction generates difficult assertions. For example, in one moment Eliot writes ironically that "ignorance gives one a large range of probabilities" (13, 174) and mockingly that "the truth is something different from the habitual lazy combinations begotten by our wishes" (22, 280). At another time Eliot admonishes the audience to "beware of arriving at conclusions without comparison" (4, 71) and illustrates comparison's "corrective" capacity:

In his anxiety about Mirah's relatives, [Deronda] had lately been thinking of vulgar Jews with a sort of personal alarm. But a little comparison will often diminish our surprise and disgust at the aberrations of Jews and other dissidents whose lives do not offer a consistent or lovely pattern of their creed; and this evening Deronda, becoming more conscious that he was falling into unfairness and ridiculous exaggeration, began to use that corrective comparison: he paid his thaler too much, without prejudice to his interests in the Hebrew destiny, or his wish to find the Rabbinische

Schule, which he arrived at by sunset, and entered with a good congregation of men. (32, 415)

At the same time, Eliot's audience solicitations routinely highlight complexity and differentiation, how "lives are enlarged in different ways" and how "one man differs from another" (28, 370). Eliot observes that difference in addition possesses corrective power, illuminating things "which to you are imperceptible" (28, 370). The judicious and studied juxtaposition of different things, Eliot advises her audience, widens imaginative boundaries.

In *Daniel Deronda*, an unusual form of audience solicitation defined by a recurrent admonition to "imagine" widens these boundaries even further. Eliot exhorts the audience to "imagine" abundant details about a narrative parade of characters and objects. At the beginning of chapter 30, the narrator asks the reader to

Imagine a rambling, patchy house, the best part built of gray stone, and red-tiled, a round tower jutting at one of the corners, the mellow darkness of its conical roof surmounted by a weather-cock making an agreeable object either amidst the gleams and greenth of summer or the low-hanging clouds and snowy branches of winter.

Later in the chapter, after carefully positioning Mrs Glasher next to Grandcourt, Eliot exhorts the reader to

Imagine the difference in rate of emotion between this woman whom the years had worn to a more conscious dependence and sharper eagerness, and this man whom

they were dulling into a more and more neutral obstinacy.  
(30: 384, 391)

Eliot's narrator also advises the reader to "imagine" Gwendolen's state of mind after she finds herself "a queen dethroned" and to "imagine one who had been made to believe in his own divinity finding all homage withdrawn" (26, 334). Following Grandcourt's death, after Gwendolen admits to Deronda her secret thoughts of culpability, Eliot asks the audience to "imagine the conflict of feeling that kept him silent" (56, 754). The theme of what can be imagined rises to prominence also in the Princess' interview with Deronda, where Eliot pushes the narrative from compassion to accusation to intrigue as the emphasis travels from the Princess to Deronda to the audience.

Eliot constructs such appeals to the audience more as elaborations of familiar modes than as innovations. A real advance takes place when the demand to "imagine" merges with the imperative to differentiate. Eliot aims some of the solicitations in *The Mill on the Floss* at female audience members and others at males. However, the observations found in *Daniel Deronda* elicit comparisons between females and males but in a fashion that solicits the audience's condemnation of a standard applied unfairly. Eliot writes that

This was nearly poor Gwendolen's condition. What though such a reverse as hers had often happened to other girls? . . . To be a queen dethroned is not so hard as some other

down-stepping: imagine one who had been made to believe in his own divinity finding all homage withdrawn, and himself unable to perform a miracle that would recall the homage and restore his own confidence. Something akin to this illusion and this helplessness had befallen the poor spoiled child. (26, 334)

Eliot's puzzling usage of male pronouns in the phrases "his own divinity" and "himself unable to perform," instead of the female versions that would be anticipated to follow "queen," remains unexplained.<sup>24</sup> In other passages, Eliot treats the double standard explicitly; this excerpt from chapter 30 entreats the audience to imagine a calculating Grandcourt's attitude toward Mrs Glasher:

Grandcourt had of course got weary of her. He was much given to the pursuit of women: but a man in his position would by this time desire to make a suitable marriage with the fair young daughter of a noble house. No one talked of Mrs. Glasher now, any more than they talked of the victim in a trial for manslaughter ten years before: she was a lost vessel after whom nobody would send out an expedition of search; but Grandcourt was seen in harbour with his colours flying, registered as seaworthy as ever. (30, 386)

Careful to isolate her audience from potentially off-putting reproach, a circumspect Eliot here judiciously invokes "no one," "they," and "nobody" instead of "we." In a subsequent sentence, Eliot makes an

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<sup>24</sup> Perhaps Eliot simply makes a mistake and uses male pronouns in reference to "a queen," or perhaps she temporarily and uncharacteristically descends into the common practice of writing male pronouns to refer to all persons of any gender. In any case, it seems difficult to detect any considered strategic motivation behind Eliot's odd deployment of these male pronouns.

analogous tonal calibration effectuated through indirect address, a technique that contains a generic observation about human self-regard:

Luck had been against him lately; he expected it to turn . . . .  
Lapidoth counted on the fascination of his cleverness—an old habit of mind which early experience had sanctioned; and it is not only women who are unaware of their diminished charm, or imagine that they can feign not to be worn out. (66, 844)

Using that which might be imagined ironic to enumerate shortcomings common to both men and women, Eliot inserts a second section:

Gwendolen, indeed, with all that gnawing trouble in her consciousness, had hardly for a moment dropped the sense that it was her part to bear herself with dignity, and appear what is called happy. . . . She was not without enjoyment in this occasion of going to Brackenshaw Castle with her new dignities upon her, as men whose affairs are sadly involved will enjoy dining out among persons likely to be under a pleasant mistake about them. (35, 480)

Deronda's interaction with Mordecai provides the basis for Eliot's most sweeping and persistent exhortations to "imagine." Following the encounter on the bridge at the end of Book 5, the most conspicuous of these audience appeals occurs. Positioned at the opening of Book 6, the plea to "imagine" makes an arresting impression:

Imagine the conflict in a mind like Deronda's given not only to feel strongly but to question actively, on the evening after the interview with Mordecai. To a young man of much duller susceptibilities the adventure might have seemed enough out of the common way to divide his thoughts; but

it had stirred Deronda so deeply, that with the usual reaction of his intellect he began to examine the grounds of his emotion, and consider how far he must resist its guidance. The consciousness that he was half dominated by Mordecai's energetic certitude, and still more by his fervent trust, roused his alarm. (41, 567).

Deronda's reflection on this encounter, a musing triggered by Deronda's "alarm" at having been "stirred" "so deeply" by Mordecai, occupies the whole of chapter 16. Deronda proceeds to imagine the dark words that Sir Hugo Mallinger might use to describe Mordecai: "a consumptive Jew, possessed by a fanaticism which obstacles and hastening death intensified." Sir Hugo's definition betrays antipathies some of Eliot's audience might be inclined to embrace. This passage exemplifies the ways in which Eliot coerces her audience to experience the working of Deronda's mind.

Eliot structures the chapter to generate wide swings between two opposing poles: fanciful passion and knowing reaction. She places Mordecai, the "enthusiast" with "illusory notions," the contrapositive of the type of person typifying "a man of the world," at one pole. At the other, she sets Deronda, that "man of the world" who "knows what to think beforehand" and who thinks Mordecai a figure deserving of mockery. Eliot characterizes Deronda as a man "whose clothing and action" indicate seriousness of purpose, who "dressed for dinner" and "wore a white tie." As Eliot continues to build chapter 16, she upends the



mockery: the stigma of “vulgarity” attaches not to the “poor Jewish workman” but to the “man of the world.” Eliot utilizes this swapping tactic regularly in *Daniel Deronda*, initially to coddle and inflate predictable worldly prejudices and subsequently to invert the object of caricature or mockery.

Additional instances of oscillation between fanciful, ardent belief and knowing calculation occur in this chapter. Eliot’s solicitation to imagine Deronda’s nagging problem, the potential that “Mordecai’s ideas made a real conquest over Deronda’s conviction,” serves finally as a warning against “mere dullness of imagination”:

As that possibility presented itself in his meditations, he was aware that it would be called dreamy, and began to defend it. If the influence he imagined himself submitting to had been that of some honoured professor, some authority in a seat of learning, some philosopher who had been accepted as a voice of the age, would a thorough receptiveness towards direction have been ridiculed? . . . Poverty and poor clothes are no sign of inspiration, said Deronda to his inward objector, but they have gone with it in some remarkable cases. And to regard discipleship as out of the question because of them, would be mere dullness of imagination. (41, 571)

Insinuating sympathetic linkages and ratifying certain values that Eliot would have her audience pursue, this passage at the same time walls off Daniel from the novel’s audience. “Our consciences are not all of the same pattern, an inner deliverance of fixed laws,” Eliot writes,

they are the voice of sensibilities as various as our memories (which also have their kinship and likeness). And Deronda's conscience included sensibilities beyond the common, enlarged by his early habit of thinking himself imaginatively into the experience of others. (41, 570)

While presenting Deronda's self-examination to the reader, Eliot invokes "our human thinking" either in "sum total" or in "separate minds"; she then associates the authority and potency of imagination with "the passionate patience of genius" required to explore "the world":

We must be patient with the inevitable makeshift of our human thinking, whether in its sum total or in the separate minds that have made the sum. Columbus had some impressions about himself which we call superstitions, and used some arguments which we disapprove; but he had also some true physical conceptions, and he had the passionate patience of genius to make them tell on mankind. The world has made up its mind rather contemptuously about those who were deaf to Columbus. (41, 572-573)

As striking an impression as her rationalization for imagination, "the passionate patience of genius," makes, it functions as only one limited element of a wider assertion concerning the linkage between communal value and creative invention. Eliot depicts Daniel facing the awareness that bravery does not occur on a grand stage but within the wins and losses of quotidian existence. Regularly in *Daniel Deronda*, tiresome issues and unappealing exterior conditions accompany

descriptions of a valiant interior life. Concerning this unlikely juxtaposition, Eliot writes of

the irony of earthly mixtures, that the heroes have not always had carpets and tea-cups of their own; and, seen through the open window by the mackerel-vendor, may have been invited with some hopefulness to pay three hundred per cent in the form of fourpence. (43, 606)

Indeed, the irony mandates that even Daniel must endure being “visited with doubt whether” he puts “the lower effect for the higher.”

Owing to her own need to uplift, George Eliot often excludes in *Daniel Deronda* the “irony of earthly mixtures” from the exhortation to “imagine.” For example, Eliot asks the reader to “Imagine the difference in Deronda’s state of mind” before and after he learns the details of his lineage:

He had set out for Genoa in total uncertainty how far the actual bent of his wishes and affections would be encouraged—how far the claims revealed to him might draw him into new paths, far away from the tracks his thoughts had lately been pursuing with a consent of desire which uncertainty made dangerous. He came back with something like a discovered charter warranting the inherited right that his ambition had begun to yearn for. (63, 812-813)

Eliot undermines this passage’s seriousness by describing in broad, parodic language the

classical, romantic, world-historic position of his, bringing as it were from its hiding-place his hereditary armor he

wore—but so, one must suppose, did the most ancient heroes, whether Semitic or Japhetic—the summer costume of his contemporaries.

Despite her reference here and elsewhere to the “Semitic,” Eliot does not intend to write a Jewish novel; she clearly wants *Daniel Deronda* to reflect a period of time and its connection to the individual and to world history. The Jewish people and the “Jewish question” function only as vehicles for the conveyance of a central ideological theme.<sup>25</sup> The earliest of the solicitations to “imagine” invoking this Jewish issue provides an emphatic illustration of Eliot’s urge to exclude from *Daniel Deronda* components fundamental to her work. Unsurprisingly, Eliot

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<sup>25</sup> See Michael Ragussis, *Figures of Conversion: “The Jewish Question” and English National Identity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995) for a detailed study of the ways in which the so-called “Jewish question” provoked debate throughout the nineteenth century. Ragussis’s particular interest goes to those novelists—Eliot, Edgeworth, Scott, and Disraeli—who attempted to counteract and revise the culturally hegemonic plan of conversion. English national identity was a problem, rather than a given, for these novelists, and by disengaging the representation of Jewish religion, life, and culture from conversionist propaganda, they worked toward a more nuanced sense of both Jewishness and Englishness. *Daniel Deronda* falls clearly within the discursive parameters that Ragussis stakes out; however, his study does not offer a convincing answer to the question of why Eliot should have turned toward Judaism in her quest for a regenerated English future. Other recent studies address Judaism and nationalism in *Daniel Deronda*. Reina Lewis, for example, examines “the development of concepts (notably of Englishness, the familiar and the alien) that pre-empt and structure” the novel. Lewis pays special attention to the critical responses of Victorian Anglo-Jewish writers to Eliot’s work, “in order to focus . . . the interpenetrative discourses of Englishness and Jewishness that suffuse the novel and its reception” (*Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity, and Representation* [London: Routledge, 1996, p. 193]. By comparison, Susan Meyer considers how Eliot’s novel evinces “the suppression of feminist impulses” while displaying an “increase in imperialist sentiment and an endorsement, by way of proto-Zionism, of racial separatism” (*Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women’s Fiction* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996], p. 160).

solicits on behalf of Mirah, whom Eliot likens to “a child,” arguably the novel’s character most in need of support. Eliot’s “child” analogy displays Feuerbach’s humanitarianism stalled, with Mirah, in spite of her sympathetic appeal, estranged more than humanized. Moreover, the passage, in addition to twice invoking the reader to “imagine” on Mirah’s behalf, seems to compare that character to the “worn instrument” she plays:

She immediately rose and went to the piano — a somewhat worn instrument that seemed to get the better of its infirmities under the firm touch of her small fingers as she preluded. . . . Imagine her — it is always good to imagine a human creature in whom bodily loveliness seems as properly one with the entire being as the bodily loveliness of those wondrous transparent orbs of life that we find in the sea — imagine her with her dark hair brushed from her temples, but yet showing certain tiny rings there which had cunningly found their own way back, the mass of it hanging behind just to the nape of the little neck in curly fibres, such as renew themselves at their own will after being bathed into straightness like that of water-grasses. (32, 421-422)

Standing apart because of its vaguely whimsical quality, a different reader solicitation to “imagine” takes place as Hans Meyrick coyly dangles news from Italy before Mrs Meyrick and Mirah. As his mother eagerly inquires, “What on earth is the wonderful news?,” Hans responds playfully:

“Nothing about Italy, but something from Italy,” said Hans, with a peculiarity in his tone and manner which set his

mother interpreting. Imagine how some of us feel and behave when an event, not disagreeable, seems to be confirming and carrying out our private constructions. We say, "What do you think?" in a pregnant tone to some innocent person who has not embarked his wisdom in the same boat with ours, and finds our information flat. (61, 794)

Eliot subsequently relates to the reader that Hans, "whose talk naturally fluttered toward mischief," engages in a "form of experiment on live animals which consisted in irritating his friends playfully" (797). Here George Eliot engages "playfully" in a self-referential critique, knowing that some readers will find "irritating" the particular fictive experiment in which she participates and which she insists they endure.

The following solicitation more adequately epitomizes Eliot's pleas to "imagine"; redounding to Mordecai's benefit, this particular plea asks "all of us" to

Imagine—we all of us can—the pathetic stamp of consumption with its brilliancy of glance to which the sharply-defined structure of features, reminding one of a forsaken temple, give already a far-off look as of one getting unwillingly out of reach; and imagine it on a Jewish face naturally accentuated for the expression of an eager mind—the face of a man little above thirty, but with that age upon it which belongs to time lengthened by suffering. . . . (40, 552)

In a previous passage, Eliot characterizes Deronda and Mordecai as "two men, with as intense a consciousness as if they had been two undeclared lovers" who turn "face to face, each baring his head from an

instinctive feeling that they wished to see each other fully.” Contradicting this intimate description, *Deronda* earlier holds Mordecai at arm’s length. Eliot writes: “And yet it might be that he had neared and parted as one can imagine two ships doing, each freighted with an exile who would have recognised the other if the two could have looked out face to face” (40, 549). Eliot’s novel positions “face to face” characters who desire social union even as they suffer social exile. Ironically, in this, her only partially successful novelistic experiment, George Eliot confronts her own readers “face to face” by issuing to them authorial provocations to “imagine” new boundaries.

*Daniel Deronda* undeniably fails to live up to the expectations of a large segment of Eliot’s contemporary audience. Many find distasteful the novel’s highly unusual contemporary concern with the standing of Jews in British and European society. Unflatteringly comparing *Daniel Deronda* to Eliot’s previous novels, A.V. Dicey voices, in an 1876 *Nation* review, attitudes shared by many:

The sense of dissatisfaction with the result of *Daniel Deronda* has its source in something deeper than any of the peculiarities of the story. The reader feels that there is something disappointing in the development of George Eliot’s own genius. The power, the humor, the deep moral insight which were revealed to the public in *Adam Bede* and *Scenes of Clerical Life* are all to be found in *Deronda*. The genius is still there, but the proportions of the qualities that make up the genius have, it is felt, gradually changed.

Reflection prevails over description, and the moral purpose always discernible in George Eliot's works threatens to throw into the shade the author's creative power. (*Nation*, XXIII [1876]: 245–246)

However, if Eliot stumbles in her attempt to win her readers' unanimous approval, she resolutely continues to advance her sympathetic vision. R.E. Francillon's stirring invocation of the "courage" of Eliot's artistic vision provides a glimpse of the sympathetic aura one critic detects surrounding the novel, a work he regards as ultimately concerned with the "truer and deeper":

*Daniel Deronda* alone . . . is proof enough that its author has the courage to enter upon the surest road to the highest kind of popularity—that which apparently leads above it. There is not a sentence, scarcely a character, in *Daniel Deronda* that reads or looks as if she were thinking of her critics before her readers at large, or of her readers at large before the best she could give them. She has often marred a stronger and more telling effect for the sake of a truer and deeper—and this belongs to a kind of courage which most most artists will be inclined to envy her. (*Gentleman's Magazine* XVII [October 1876]: 411–427)

*Daniel Deronda*, writes Edward Dowden in 1877, delivers Eliot's sympathetic agenda most forcefully in the "meeting of the Jewish workman and Deronda in the splendor of sunset, and the gloom of the little second-hand bookshop, while the soul of one transfuses itself into the soul of the other." Another critic praises that Eliot "should have worked out these ideas with such minuteness, force, skill, and lucidity,



and should have brought them forward so prominently and lavished upon them the wealth of her genius." In an 1876 review, James Picciotto maintains that the thematic concerns of *Daniel Deronda* accomplish nothing less than a

vindication of a long maligned race against ignorant misrepresentation or wilful aspersion, the defence of Jews and Judaism against fanaticism and prejudice. George Eliot has laid open before a larger audience than had ever before been summoned for a similar purpose, the aims and scope and innermost thoughts of Judaism, and she has accomplished more for the cause of toleration and enlightenment than could have been achieved by any amount of legislation.

To have broached these questions before the popular mind is already to have obtained a great gain, and George Eliot has thus earned the gratitude, not only of her countrymen of the Jewish race, but of all thinkers and friends of progress. (*Gentleman's Magazine* XVII [November 1876]: 593-603)

As this chapter has shown, George Eliot's usage of reader address prepares the ground for implanting in the audience Eliot's charitable aesthetics, her commitment to social interdependence, and her desire to move "towards linking the higher classes with the lower, towards obliterating the vulgarity of exclusiveness." Traditionally thought to produce a breaking of aesthetic illusion, audience appeals in Eliot's novels in fact serve the opposite function: they deepen the reader's engagement with the fiction rather than disrupting immersion. Striving

constantly to increase the reader's empathy for her characters, to elucidate the complexity of all human relationships, Eliot's strategic techniques succeed in promoting the aesthetic of sympathy and in authenticating the reality of Eliot's fictional worlds.

## Afterword

In this world there are so many of these common, coarse people, who have no picturesque or sentimental wretchedness! And 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.

The narrator's admonition in *Adam Bede* calls attention to the particular quality Eliot holds as the highest purpose of art—the “extension of our sympathies.” For Eliot, novels or other works of art that misrepresent their subjects direct the audience's “fellow feeling” toward an unjust end. As she writes in “The Natural History of German Life,” “our social novels profess to represent the people as they are, and the unreality of their representations is a grave evil” (*Essays* 270). Eliot sees the idealized representation of the “common, coarse people” as particularly specious because it short circuits understanding and prevents true sympathy from reaching those “more heavily-laden fellow-men” who endure particularly hard lives. As if to further emphasize this point, Eliot warns in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* not to

impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house, those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world—those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs, and their clusters of onions.

Eliot's sympathetic social vision interlaces with her concern for community; this combination results from her belief that the individual should be bound to others. Her embracing of Feuerbach's I-Thou formulation, wherein man serves as God to man, casts a revealing light on Eliot's view of the relationship between the self and society. Her fiction presents characters engaged in a struggle to find the right social environment for self-fulfillment—the capacity to offer and accept sympathy and to treat others respectfully and sensitively—but she sees this struggle as closely tied to the kinds of communities in which these characters anchor themselves. Therefore, Eliot's concept of a person's relationship to a proximate community, as distinct from a total society or the larger human race, can be seen as her contribution to that wide river of thought of which Feuerbach's I-Thou configuration forms one tributary.

In writing her novels, George Eliot imports to the aesthetic of sympathy both the agreement essential to a community of feeling and the skepticism and productive discord equally vital to any transformational project. In her pursuit, George Eliot encounters the formidable problem of changing her audience but not estranging it. Her fiction's attempt to alter the reader's awareness often contains a condemnation of orthodox action and thought. This condemnation, of course, imperils the particular sensation of community the writer sets out to generate. At the same time, however, turning away from such condemnation holds the potential to sabotage Eliot's goal by leaving the audience passive and complacent instead of energized and motivated to take regenerative action.

George Eliot responds in the formal techniques of her work to rapid changes in Victorian society and to what she sees as erosions of coherent social faiths and orders. Exploring the past, she for the most part comprehends the relationship between communal and traditional values. However, Eliot inevitably cannot resist transplanting her own imperatives into her devotional notion of what an alliance of sympathetic human beings might accomplish. Feuerbach regards religion as the anthropomorphic expression of man's loftiest aims: "The yearning of man after something above himself is nothing else than the longing after the perfect type of his nature" (*TEOC* 281). In her attempt to replace religious

with social belief, Eliot clings to a carefully calibrated standard of this perfection, one that rejects Heaven but adopts a secularized standard of human community. A persuasive argument can be made that Eliot, replaying Feuerbach's concept of "man is God to man," often proposes solutions inadequate to the issues they seek to address, and that many of the remedies she seems to champion fail to make a dent in real-world Victorian problems. Nevertheless, multiple forms and devices of George Eliot's writing—modes of reader address, evolutions of character, arrays of images, structures of narrative—vividly and stubbornly reflect these complex issues.

As this dissertation has attempted to show, Eliot's literary techniques evince her unflagging optimism in the power of formal strategies and a Victorian aesthetic of sympathy to alter and enlarge the sensibilities of her readers and their capacities for sympathetic response. Through these readers, Eliot seeks to effect so comprehensive a transformation of sensibility that it will finally change society. Ultimately, on a different level, Eliot successfully explores the contradictory ground that separates social theory from the autonomous work of art, an exploration carried out through the transference of her sympathetic vision from the philosophical to the literary.

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