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## *Style and Ethics in George Eliot*

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Style and Ethics in George Eliot

The great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty is clear to no man who is capable of apprehending it: the question, whether the moment has come in which a man has fallen below the possibility of a renunciation that will carry any efficacy, and must accept the sway of a passion against which he had struggled as a trespass, is one for which we have no master key that will fit all cases. The casuists have become a by-word of reproach; but their perverted spirit of discrimination was the shadow of a truth to which eyes and hearts are too often fatally sealed: the truth, that moral judgments must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot.

All people of broad, strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the men of maxims; because such people early discern that the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims, and that to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy. And the man of maxims is the popular representative of the minds that are guided in 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, without any care to assure themselves whether they have the insight that comes

from a hardly-earned estimate of temptation, or from a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human.

While it is no doubt true of all novels that the act of reading them differs markedly from the way they stick in the mind when the book has been shut (or the e-reader switched off), this difference seems especially profound in the case of George Eliot. Retrospective summaries can feel terribly thin when compared to the richness and density of the reading experience. So tightly interwoven can her novels feel – sentence by sentence, clause by clause – that it can be difficult even to extract a quotation without a feeling of creating distortion. Detail and plan, particularity and totality can seem almost perfectly harmonized. “I believe there is scarcely a phrase, an incident, an allusion, that did not gather its value to me from its supposed subservience to my main artistic objects” – so wrote Eliot of her historical novel *Romola* (1863), set in Renaissance Florence, but the remark applies, at least as an aspiration, to all her novels.

The two substantial paragraphs quoted above, from *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Eliot’s third major work of fiction, address issues that will soon become familiar to anyone reading her way through Eliot’s oeuvre. The conflict between “passion and duty,” the vital importance of renunciation of desire in honor of some higher principle, the even more vital importance of sympathy as the very basis of human interaction – these animate every work of fiction Eliot ever wrote. To a degree unusual in Victorian novels, Eliot’s work was deliberately designed to illustrate problems of ethics in human behavior and judgment; the characters and situations she created were clearly meant to appear as *cases* of more general conditions; indeed, the paragraphs above give us the generalizations to be derived from the particular dilemma into which Maggie Tulliver, the protagonist of *The Mill on the Floss*, has got herself some six hundred pages into

the novel. It is *her* recurrent conflicts of passion and duty that we have been following from the beginning. The quoted passage contrasts two approaches to ethical judgment, urging a generous-hearted sympathy toward errant humankind, “a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human,” an almost casuistical sensitivity to the highly particularized circumstances in which the ethical life must needs be lived, against the “men of maxims” who believe that we can reduce ethical judgment to a list of do’s and don’ts suitable for all occasions. The passage follows upon the latest and largest of Maggie’s many divergences from behavior deemed proper by her narrow-minded neighbors: she has placed herself in a situation in which nearly everyone around her will infer that she has had sexual relations with a man, Stephen, to whom she is not married, a man who was in fact informally engaged to marry Maggie’s cousin, Lucy, while Maggie herself is sworn to another, Philip. The inference is false, though Maggie is not without responsibility. She has blundered through life because she is driven by a passion “vivid and intense” and, like other heroines in Eliot’s writings, she lacks an outlet or an object appropriate to the scope of that passion. She is hemmed in by a set of seemingly immutable traditional mores that prescribe only the most straitened of life possibilities for women. Like Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, she may seem to approach a tragic grandeur, to the extent we can sympathize with the passion that sought outlet or object adequate to it, rather than focusing on her manifest errors or on the particular outlets or objects that happened to come within her grasp. Her largeness of soul and imagination distinguishes her from most of those around her, but her desire for some unprovided, unimaginable *more* and *other* makes her life far more difficult than it is for tamer spirits. “She thought it was part of the hardship of her life that there was laid upon her the burthen of larger wants than others seemed to feel, that she had to endure this wide hopeless yearning for that something, whatever it was, that was greatest and best on this earth.” To her censorious,

adamantine brother she declares, “sometimes when I have done wrong, it has been because I have feelings that you would be the better for if you had them.”

Yet if Eliot’s imaginary characters and situations were created in order to illustrate general problems, that is, to give rise to such passages of generalization as the ones at the head of this essay, the triumph of Eliot’s realism consists of the balance it achieves between the generalizing teachable moments and the exquisitely fine-grained depiction of characters and situations in all their distinctiveness. For all that they may be taken as cases, the happenings and people, even the minor people, never devolve into stick figures or contrived episodes delivering portable lessons with crude efficiency. Eliot’s fiction could not differ more profoundly from the pedantic tales of Hannah More or the fictional *Illustrations of Political Economy* by Harriet Martineau. Part of the difference resides in the fact that Eliot nearly always enjoins mercy and compassion, showing fallible characters committing errors but reminding us that our own fallibility makes it incumbent on us to sympathize, not condemn. Part of the difference resides simply in the depth of Eliot’s investment in her characters and situations, the great lengths she goes to in delineating and particularizing them. Part resides in the sinuous complexity of her prose style, which exhibits both the willingness and the capacity to make fine distinctions and to weigh the components of each statement with scrupulous care, in frequently elaborate complex sentence structures. Only such a style seems capable of grasping “the mysterious complexity of our life” and of fostering those “divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy.” It is not too much to say that, in Eliot, style *is* ethics.

But that is not all I mean to derive from the two paragraphs from *The Mill on the Floss* with which we started. We need to take stock of the fact that, excerpted, they contain nothing that would tell us that they take place in a work of fiction. Maggie’s name and circumstances are

not mentioned. The paragraphs might have been lifted from one of the many essays and reviews George Eliot wrote before she *became* George Eliot, before Mary Ann (or Marian) Evans took a masculine pseudonym when, at her partner George Henry Lewes's suggestion, she took to the writing of fiction in 1856, at the age of 37. For several years before that, she had effectively run *The Westminster Review* from behind the scenes, and she had contributed numerous nonfiction pieces to that periodical and to another, *The Leader*, with which Lewes was associated. What we find in the two paragraphs that lead off this essay – the generalization, the fine discrimination and apprehension of nuance (“shadow of a truth,” e.g.), the vocabulary and style of a great learning worn lightly, the ethical zeal and great-heartedness, the sharpness with dullards – all these characterize Eliot's wrote trenchant nonfiction and, along with a delicate and forgiving humor, they are to be found throughout her novels and stories. When she began to focus on the writing of fiction, she brought her perfected essayistic uses of prose into contact with narrative ones, establishing a highly distinctive alternation and interplay of tale and commentary, story and discourse, a rhythmic ebb and flow that is the very substance of what it feels like to read her. As in the casuistry-versus-maxims passage above, what looks like a discrete and easily extractable quotation – a bit of “wisdom” such as disciples of Eliot's were to anthologize in such works as Alexander Main's *Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings of George Eliot* (1872) – can, on reconsideration in its narrative context, actually be seen, not simply as tied in to the specific situation obtaining in the narrative by drawing a generalization from it, but as emanating from it in a manner almost uncanny. The excursus on ethical judgment follows directly upon, and almost seems to consist of, the musings of one particular character, Dr. Kenn, the clergyman who listens to Maggie's tale and sympathizes with the woman whom, though not “fallen,” everyone takes to be so. Putting quotation marks around our two opening paragraphs would more or less

turn them into Dr. Kenn's thoughts, effacing the narrator. It turns out that extracting those two generalizing paragraphs does indeed create distortion: the depiction of specific characters and situations that from one angle alternates with the discourse on human judgment and compassion appears, from another, to fuse with it. Immediately preceding "The great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty ..." comes a paragraph beginning, "When Maggie had left him, Dr. Kenn stood ruminating with his hands behind him, and his eyes fixed on the carpet, under a painful sense of doubt and difficulty." The remainder of the paragraph runs as follows.

The tone of Stephen's letter, which he had read, and the actual relations of all the persons concerned, forced upon him powerfully the idea of an ultimate marriage between Stephen and Maggie as the least evil; and the impossibility of their proximity in St. Ogg's on any other supposition, until after years of separation, threw an insurmountable prospective difficulty over Maggie's stay here. On the other hand, he entered with all the comprehension of a man who had known spiritual conflict and lived through years of devoted service to his fellow-men, into that state of Maggie's heart and conscience which made this consent to the marriage a desecration to her: her consciousness must not be tampered with; the principle on which she had acted was a safer guide than any balancing of consequences. His experience told him that intervention was too dubious a responsibility to be lightly incurred: the possible issue either of an endeavour to restore the former relations with Lucy and Philip, or of counseling submission to this irruption of a new feeling was hidden in a darkness all the more impenetrable because each immediate step was clogged with evil.

Paragraph break; then “The great problem of the shifting relation of passion and duty . . . .” One is tempted to describe the transition that occurs when we move from the thoughts of Dr. Kenn to the thoughts of Eliot’s narrator in the language of magic or metamorphosis: it feels rather as if Dr. Kenn has breached that definitive boundary internal to all narrative, the boundary between story and discourse, between the zone where the characters operate and the zone of retrospection in which the narrator looks back on the action they move progressively and unforeseeingly through. It is as if Dr. Kenn has temporarily “become” the narrator, or vice versa, for Dr. Kenn is engaging in the kind of sympathetic consideration of others that our generalizing paragraphs recommend. Like a number of other characters throughout Eliot’s works who are shown in the act of judging, Dr. Kenn has come to function as a surrogate for the narrator, as the narrator incognito, moving about in the domain of the characters. And the boundary between story and discourse comes to feel as if it has been instituted in order to be crossed in just this way. This too is what reading George Eliot feels like. In the bizarre tale “The Lifted Veil,” Eliot *does* resort to supernatural means in endowing a fictional character, the protagonist Latimer, with a consciousness oppressively like that of a third-person narrator. He is in fact Eliot’s only instance of *first*-person narration (if one discounts the essayistic final work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* [1879]), yet not only can Latimer foresee what’s going to happen; he is privy to the thoughts of others as well.

The phenomenon of crossing that border between narrator and characters is more than just a frequent occurrence in a George Eliot novel; it is virtually a hallmark of her realism, and it occurs not just between one paragraph and another, but sentence-to-sentence, even within sentences. Take for example Eliot’s frequent and masterful use of the narrative technique known as free indirect style, wherein a third-person narrator tells us thoughts that are framed the way a



distinctive character, in a distinctive situation, would frame them. (The technique would appear to be the defining opposite of the generalizing, essayistic mode.) Witness Dorothea Brooke, the protagonist of Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872), as she ponders her future as the wife of the scholarly Mr. Casaubon:

Now she would be able to devote herself to large yet definite duties; now she would be allowed to live continually in the light of a mind that she could reverence. This hope was not unmixed with the glow of proud delight – the joyous maiden surprise that she was chosen by the man whom her admiration had chosen. All Dorothea's passion was transfused through a mind struggling towards an ideal life; the radiance of her transfigured girlhood fell on the first object that came within its level. The impetus with which inclination became resolution was heightened by those little events of the day which had roused her discontent with the actual conditions of her life.

This passage, taking place early in the novel and preceding the disaster that Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon turns out to be, makes evident how similar Dorothea, a member of the gentry, is to the mill-owner's daughter of *The Mill on the Floss*. Like Maggie, Dorothea longs to put her energies to work on some great project, to realize some grand ambition, yet is confined by her culture's expectations for women. She colossally blunders by latching onto "the first object" that comes before her appearing to offer a means of transcending that culture, and in the passage just quoted we see her in the act of making her mistake. The first sentence takes neither the simple indirect approach ("she thought that she would be able to devote herself ...") nor the simple direct ("Now I will be able to devote myself ..."), but adopts the weird combination of the two ("Now she would be able to ..."). We catch the self-deluding excitement, what feels like the

pace of Dorothea's own thoughts, through the medium of the third-person voice. We both enter into Dorothea's individual consciousness and are held back from it. And as we move through this passage, we might mark the contrast between that first sentence and the ones that follow, taking us by almost discernible stages out of the free indirect style and back into simple indirect. The sentence "This hope was not unmixed . . ." begins, at least arguably, still in the form in which Dorothea might frame the situation to herself, but somewhere along the way we seem to have crossed back to the non-paradoxical safety of having a narrator simply tell us, in the narrator's idiom rather than in any character's, that a character was thinking something or was motivated in such and such a way, rather than remaining in the theoretically impossible but actually achievable condition of being in two places at once, in story and discourse, through the magic of free indirect style.

The final sentence of this passage from *Middlemarch* returns us to the issue of that dense interwoven-ness of Eliot's realism. Dorothea's decision to move from "inclination" in favor of Casaubon to "resolution" to marry him is propelled past its tipping point by certain "little events of the day which had roused her discontent with the actual conditions of her life." These have chiefly to do with the force of conventional opinion pressing on Dorothea in the form other people's expectations that she should take as husband that eager and genial paragon of conventionality, Sir James Chettam. Irritated by having such a mundane destiny foisted upon her on all sides, Dorothea, with fatal precipitancy, accepts Casaubon instead. Ethical decision-making is not conducted in a vacuum; each choice is surrounded by a cloud of factors, conditions, and influences that, on microscopic examination, can reveal cumulative, determining force. We do not live in the clear ether of ratiocination on discrete choices, but in a system of interacting elements wherein choices and fates are inextricably entwined. Eliot's favorite

metaphor for describing this condition in which every element acts and is acted upon every other is, of course, that of the web. She declares her purpose in *Middlemarch* as that of “unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven,” as involving painstaking analysis of the “particular web” that constitutes the social world of one English Midlands town and its environs. The most important and extended instance of this interwoven-ness, taking nearly the entire novel to play out, arises between the plot centered on Dorothea and another focusing on the young doctor Lydgate, who has a grand ambition comparable to hers but who, as a man, might seem better positioned to realize his plans. He settles in Middlemarch determined to revolutionize medical practice on principles which he has learned in the most advanced medical schools of the day and which he plans to develop further through independent research. Fittingly, the bold new vision he seeks to put forward involves “the conception that living bodies, fundamentally considered, are not associations of organs which can be understood by studying them first apart, and then as it were federally; but must be regarded as consisting of certain primary webs or tissues, out of which the various organs ... are compacted”; his goal is that of “showing new connections and hitherto hidden facts of structure ....” Arrogant, like Dorothea, Lydgate too soon finds himself hemmed in by more traditional thinkers, caught up in the imbrications of motives and interests, subjected to “the hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity.”

The web-like nature of human interaction had made itself felt from the beginning of Eliot’s career as a fiction writer, for instance in the recurrent theme of deeds and consequences, which emphasizes how much we are bound together *in time* no less than in our shared social space. Her first full-length novel, *Adam Bede* (1859), contains another clergyman operating as spokesperson for the narrator, the less than brilliant but kindly Mr. Irwine, who offers the young

squire Arthur Donnithorne Eliot's first succinct variation on the theme: "Consequences are unpitying," he counsels; "Our deeds carry their terrible consequences, quite apart from any fluctuations that went before – consequences that are hardly ever confined to ourselves. And it is best to fix our minds on that certainty ...." The tragedy of this novel turns on Arthur's ignoring this advice and proceeding to seduce the dairymaid Hetty Sorrel, whom the title character loves and hopes to marry. In the later novel *Romola* the narrator analyzes the situation of the scheming Tito Melema and concludes that "our deeds are like children that are born to us; they live and act apart from our own will. Nay, children may be strangled, but deeds never: they have an indestructible life both in and out of our consciousness ....." The certainty that reverberations of our actions will travel the lines of interconnection that bind us with others makes crime or error terribly irreversible, as *Adam Bede*'s Arthur comes bitterly to learn. The privileged young man's lifelong habit has been "trying to make all offences forgotten in benefits," but he begins to see that the suffering he has caused to Adam "could not be cancelled; his respect and affection could not be recovered by any prompt deeds of atonement. [Adam] stood like an immovable obstacle against which no pressure could avail; an embodiment of what Arthur most shrank from believing in – the irrevocableness of his own wrongdoing." The Ancient Greek concept of a nemesis that will track the evil-doer down – embodied in the Erinyes of Aeschylus – receives a secular updating in Eliot's work. Even the minor tale of "Brother Jacob" provides "an admirable instance of the unexpected forms in which the great Nemesis hides herself." And perhaps the most unforeseen consequence of wrongful action is its coming home to roost, altering the character of the actor himself. Neither Arthur nor Tito is an altogether evil man, but both slide into wrongs by way of habitual self-centeredness and self-deluding rationalization, and one wrong seems to require the commission of others. "There is a terrible coercion in our deeds,"

*Adam Bede*'s narrator tells us, "which may first turn the honest man into a deceiver and then reconcile him to the change, for this reason – that the second wrong presents itself to him in the guise of the only practicable right." As *Romola* has it, "Our lives make a moral tradition for our individual selves, as the life of mankind at large makes a moral tradition for the race ...."

If social existence involves our being inextricably enmeshed in a web of cause and effect with those around us, such that the effects we cause on others turn into causes of effects upon ourselves, then our only choice is whether to spread benevolence or misery. Disconnection is not an option: as J. Hillis Miller has put it in another context, "if the relations between one [part] and another ... are not beneficent, they will be harmful." This is a line of argument shared by other Victorian novelists, particularly those dismayed by the gap they saw widening between higher and lower social classes; and Eliot prosecutes this particular version of the argument in both *Adam Bede*, with its clash between the laborer Adam and the landowner Arthur, and in *Felix Holt: The Radical* (1866), with its analysis of English class relations on the eve of the first great Reform of Parliament, in 1832, in a novel written on the eve of the second such Reform, in 1867. *Middlemarch*, too, is set against the backdrop of the 1832 Act, and involves the revelation of interlinked relations among the classes. With three notable exceptions, Eliot tends not to provide her characters with roles in which they can have large political or historical impact. Dorothea, in *Middlemarch*, longs for some grand social heroism, but she winds up celebrated by her creator for devoting herself to small acts "incalculably diffusive" throughout her particular web: and the novel concludes with the generalization "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." Lest it be thought that Eliot reserves this recommendation of modest good-doing to female

characters, restricted by Victorian mores to the domestic sphere, it is helpful to recall that very similar celebrations are bestowed on male characters such as Adam Bede and Felix Holt. In

*Adam Bede*, the title character exemplifies those

painstaking honest men, with the skill and conscience to do well the tasks that lie before them. Their lives have no discernible echo beyond the neighbourhoods where they dwelt, but you are almost sure to find there some good piece of road, some building, some application of mineral produce, some improvement in farming practice, some reform of parish abuses, with which their names are associated by one or two generations after them. Their employers were the richer for them, the work of their hands has worn well, and the work of their brains has guided well the hands of other men.

Felix Holt's approach to reform animates his statement that "the question now is, not whether we can do away with all the nuisances in the world, but with a particular nuisance under our noses."

Nor is it only working-class male characters who, along with women, can epitomize Eliot's morality of unheralded local action – as if characters from such a class are being offered effectiveness within a limited sphere as a substitute for national or international influence. From her first fictions, the good clergymen have also earned such praise. The Rev. Mr. Tryan, in the tale "Janet's Repentance," from Eliot's first book *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), calls forth this interjection for his sympathetic care of the title character in distress: "Blessed influence of one true loving human soul on another! Not calculable by algebra, not deductible by logic, but mysterious, effectual, mighty as the hidden process by which the tiny seed is quickened, and bursts forth into tall stem and broad leaf, and glowing tasseled flower." Likewise Mr. Cleves, in

the same volume's "Amos Barton" represents "the true parish priest, the pastor beloved, consulted, relied on by his flock," humbly efficacious in the zone of his immediate duties. Two of the exceptions to the rule that local "diffusive" impact is always to be championed over influence of wider scope are Dorothea's second husband Will, who enters Parliament, and the title character of Eliot's final completed novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1875), who leaves England for Palestine to dedicate himself to the Zionist cause. These destinies are achieved only at the end of their respective novels. Eliot's only sustained examination of a character exercising political power comes in *Romola*, with its incisive analysis of the historical Savonarola, and, while Will and Daniel are both rather idealized figures, Eliot's Savonarola exhibits the conflicted condition of all her finest character portrayals.

*Middlemarch* draws toward its close with the words, "there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it." This vision had come to inform the way Eliot wrote her works at least since the composition of *Romola*. Of that text she told a correspondent, "It is the habit of my imagination to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself." The remark was made defensively, for some believed her historical novel research-heavy and clotted with period detail. Character and medium have to exist in a state of equilibrium, but some in saw *Romola* an overbearing medium smothering character and plot. Yet something like the principle Eliot articulated about *Romola* reaches back to her earliest works, and that principle reaches its fruition in *Middlemarch*. The inspiration for it Eliot derived, in part, from the natural scientific ideas of her partner Lewes. It has affinities, too, with the ecological perspective taken at the close of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which Lewes and Eliot had read together on its 1859 publication. The final paragraph of Darwin's *Origin* conjures up "an entangled bank" on which

one may find many species of plant and animal “dependent on each other in so complex a manner.” Lewes himself had argued that each living organism should be conceived of not as a discrete monad but as constantly engaged in “interaction with a surrounding environment.” In *Comte’s Philosophy of the Sciences* (1853), Lewes had written that “so far from organic bodies being independent of external circumstances they become more and more dependent on them as their organization becomes higher, so that *organism* and *medium* are the two correlatives of life.” Eliot would adapt such an outlook for use on the relationship between fictional characters and the social, historical, and topographical elements of their environment. Where character left off and medium began became a recurrent, driving question. In “The Lifted Veil,” we confront the spectacle of a protagonist “entirely open to his surrounding medium,” unable, as Sally Shuttleworth has put it, to “police his boundaries.” In most of Eliot’s other work, the boundary between character and medium affords the opportunity to explore the former’s permeability to or integrity against the latter, and to evaluate the various forms of openness and closedness for their possible contributions to human development. The constant traffic running across the character/medium borderline makes judgment of our own or other’s behavior, the proper ascription of cause or responsibility, tremendously fraught – as Dr. Kenn and other Eliot characters know or come to learn. In telling us that “Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds,” *Adam Bede* goes on to add, “and until we know what has been or will be the peculiar combination of outward with inward facts, which constitutes a man’s critical actions, it will be better not to think ourselves wise about his character.”

It should be evident that the category of medium contains much more than simply those local color aspects – period costume, particularities of decoration and cuisine, or even matters of historical fact – that some readers found oppressive in *Romola*. Characters are medium, too – for



each other. Minor characters provide the medium for major ones and provide Eliot's fiction with further forms of alternation and interplay that structure the experience of reading it. We tend to approach Eliot protagonists through the filter of commentary offered on them by the minor characters who embody public opinion. The transplanted weaver Silas Marner is the subject of considerable gossip, in the tale named after him, among the longer-settled inhabitants of Raveloe; Dorothea Brooke is introduced to us in *Middlemarch* as a figure who is "usually spoken of" in such and such a way: characters are talked about relentlessly, and we shuttle continually between the way characters see themselves and the way others assess them. The minor characters often act as a kind of chorus to the tragedy or comedy unfolding itself around the major ones. Furthermore, whole chapters break from a focus on protagonists' doings to set us down among obscure personages who talk of them, but also of assorted other matters. In a late chapter of *Adam Bede*, with the plot all but finished, Eliot turns to drawing character sketches of the laborers at the annual harvest feast provided by the farmer Poyser. Ethnography succeeds narrative, and the sad story of Adam, Arthur, and Hetty is subsumed in the larger rural culture from which they have, for a time, stood out as protagonists. In *Silas Marner*, interruption of the protagonist-centered tale occurs nearer the middle, with a chapter set at the local pub where townsmen banter on sundry topics until Silas, who has just been robbed, appears among them like a ghost. Even in this comparatively thin fable, Eliot seems to feel the need to resist the centripetal pull of the protagonist, to distribute the narrative's attention more broadly, to dislodge us from too settled an occupation of the protagonist's point of view. Commitment to both sides of the character/medium dyad seems to have dictated such recurrent acts of perspectival dislodging. Nowhere did she perform the act more abruptly and self-consciously than in *Middlemarch*, the 29<sup>th</sup> chapter of which begins like this: "One morning, some weeks after her

arrival at Lowick, Dorothea – but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one ...?” Eliot’s last two novels, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, are signal instances of the multiplot novel, and the pressure of distributing narrative attention, not simply across a single plot with major and minor characters, but across several, in which characters major in one plot may be minor in another, appears to find release in the abruptness of this self-interruption. Just as the complexity of Eliot’s prose style seems an ethical necessity in a world where humans interact in “mysterious complexity,” so too the multiplot form comes to feel the only adequate vehicle for grasping the web-like nature of our common life. Indeed, the plots of the later novels take as a major purpose the bringing of protagonists to dramatic shifts of perspective. In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea comes to ethical efficacy by undergoing a powerful shift from a viewpoint focused on her own circumstances to one that is radically decentered. Her sympathy with Lydgate’s many trials takes her out of herself: she comes to look at herself not as the protagonist of her story but as a *case*, an instance of common human destiny. She feels “the largeness of the world and the manifold waking of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.” Where she had once simply felt the vibrations of the web, she now sees it whole, as including herself, and this decentering of viewpoint charges her with ethical power.

Eliot’s fiction had always featured characters who possessed or who achieved in the course of her plots the kind of vision Dorothea experiences here: one senses that the modest Mr. Cleves, of “Amos Barton,” looks at the world much as Dorothea comes to. Eliot wanted her work to affect readers the way Dorothea is affected. Her realism springs from the desire to spread our sympathy, which can only be done by breaking down in us what she diagnoses in

many of her characters: the fatal tendency to solipsism, which she called our innate “stupidity”: a view of the world locked within our single consciousness, a view in which we imagine ourselves as the protagonist of the story and others as antagonists, foils, medium. In her first book, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, she had made a point of choosing the most ordinary, even the most seemingly mediocre, of characters as protagonists, arguing that “my only merit must lie in the truth with which I represent to you the humble experience of an ordinary fellow-mortal. I wish to stir your sympathy with commonplace troubles – to win your tears for real sorrow: sorrow such as may live next door to you – such as walks neither in rags nor in velvet, but in very ordinary decent apparel.” *Adam Bede* puts forward a notable defense of realism focused on life in its commonest aspect, aspiring to a “rare, precious quality of truthfulness” Eliot finds “in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise”; she finds “a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of world-stirring actions.” The idea that the ethical function of art is to expand our capacity to sympathize, and that sympathy involves a decentering acceptance of our commonness, already made a running theme of Eliot’s essays and reviews in the 1850s, and it animates all her fiction. It’s worth noting that Dorothea’s change of perspective, in *Middlemarch*, is triggered when, after a night of despair over her own broken heart and frustrated aspiration, her attention is drawn to a wholly commonplace sight: “She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view ... On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving – perhaps the shepherd with his dog.” This is the vision – it might well be found in a Dutch painting – that makes Dorothea feel “the largeness of the world” of which she is only a part.

As passages just cited suggest, Eliot tended to accompany her selection of definitively ordinary heroes and heroines with explicit argumentation: her rhetorical stance frequently involved combating prejudices she presumed readers to hold against the foregrounding of such figures. Even in *Middlemarch*, when she shows us Dorothea newly awakened to the disappointment of her marriage to Casaubon, in tears on her honeymoon, she adds that her protagonist's situation is scarcely "anything very exceptional" and that readers will hardly be disposed to find it tragic, since "we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual." Sixty chapters later, Dorothea herself, as we have seen, is deeply moved by something not at all unusual. But at this earlier point in *Middlemarch*, the narrator goes on to add something that would bear its fruit in Eliot's final novel, *Daniel Deronda*. Immediately following the words "we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual," we read

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.

Perhaps the most significant single word in this passage is "yet": Eliot raises the possibility of a future stage of human evolution – surely the culminating stage – when we might arrive at *omnisensitivity* capable of taking in and responding to the experience of every human being on the planet, in all its detail. The idea can conjure up a vision of paradise. As this passage suggests, it can also conjure up its own sort of hell.

By the time of *Middlemarch*, Eliot's separate dedications to the expansion of sympathy (which necessitated the choice of ordinary characters), to the vision of life as lived in webs of interaction, and to the proper balance of character and medium in her fiction had begun to converge, and Eliot seems to have been aware of the implications of the convergence. The practice of casuistry to which she gave partial approval in *The Mill on the Floss* – the “shadow of a truth” to which too many are blind – suggests that the more we know about the particular circumstances in which a character has acted, the less likely were we to reach an easy or self-satisfied condemnation. To repeat *Adam Bede*: “until we know what has been or will be the peculiar combination of outward with inward facts, which constitutes a man's critical actions, it will be better not to think ourselves wise about his character.” We know more, of course, much more, about the protagonists of her novels than about the minor characters; but then, the former are constantly being pressed on us as no more or less ordinary than the latter. Real ethics begin for Eliot when we make Dorothea's leap into passionate acceptance of commonality, the recognition that all are *both* character and medium. Eliot's realism, as Alex Woloch has observed of realism in general, is “infused with the sense that any character is a potential hero.” But what if every character were to *become* a hero? At some point, Eliot seems to have begun imagining the consequences, for both ethical efficacy and the novel form, of “a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life.” As I have written elsewhere, she seems to have grasped that “to give free reign to her powers of circumstantial analysis and sympathetic understanding might obliterate the distinction between minor characters belonging to [the] medium and major characters foregrounded against it” would constitute “a prospect nothing less than calamitous for the future of the novel, for a universalized fellow-feeling would petrify narrative fiction, an open-ended pluralizing of perspectives bring it to a grinding halt.” And in *Daniel Deronda*, she

focused much of her attention on the particular *limit* to spreading sympathy and embrace of commonality that is embodied in race and nationalism.

As we have seen, most of Eliot's earlier work had celebrated dedication to local spheres of action and care. A cosmopolitan intellectual, she exhibits a strong anti-cosmopolitan streak. From her own experience and from Romanticism, especially Wordsworth, she absorbed devotion to the rural landscape and a belief in the morally grounding force of rural childhood locales, and many of her novels contain passages lyrically praising that force – as does *Daniel Deronda*:

A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of earth, for the labours men go forth to, for the sounds and accents that haunt it, for whatever will give that early home a familiar unmistakable difference amidst the widening of knowledge: a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection, and kindly acquaintance with all neighbours ... may spread not by sentimental effort and reflection, but as a sweet habit of the blood. At five years old, mortals are not prepared to be citizens of the world, to be stimulated by abstract nouns, to soar above preference into impartiality. ... The best introduction to astronomy is to think of the nightly heavens as a little lot of stars belonging to one's homestead.

From these generalizations about the value of local particularity we go on to encounter the negative case of Gwendolen Harleth, one of the work's two protagonists, for whom "this blessed persistence in which affection can take root had been wanting ...." The effect is a young woman utterly selfish, though prone to "fits of spiritual dread," one who announces her life plan as "to do what pleases me." Consequences predictable at least in their general outlines ensue:

Gwendolen's story illustrates the truth that "'As you like' is a bad finger-post" and follows the established pattern of a moral "stupidity" requiring radical dislocation of perspective.

If a cosmopolitan anti-cosmopolitanism is one paradox in Eliot's outlook, another arises from her social model of the web. Such densely interwoven networks are not created overnight, and not created by design: they require a ponderous organic growth over centuries if not millennia, and they are allergic to revolution. A woman who exemplified certain of the most progressive attitudes of her age, Eliot managed also to be a conservative in the manner of Edmund Burke in imagining society as "incarnate history": as she wrote in her essay "The Natural History of German Life," societies have "roots intertwined with the past, and can only be developed by allowing those roots to remain undisturbed while the process of development is going on ...." A nation's history, for her, amounted to a chain of deeds and consequences stretching back many generations. In her final book, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, she declared (through the mouthpiece of the fictional Theophrastus) that

A common humanity is not yet enough to feed the rich blood of various activity which makes a complete man. The time is not come for cosmopolitanism to be highly virtuous, any more than for communism to suffice for social energy. I am not bound to feel for a Chinaman as I feel for my fellow-countryman. ... Affection, intelligence, duty, radiate from a centre, and nature has decided that for us English folk that centre can be neither China nor Peru.

Here again is the "yet," leaving open the possibility that an omnisensitive, omnisympathetic humanity may one day evolve; but for the time being, it appears, we need nationalism to ground and to direct our "social energy." The problem with Daniel Deronda is that he seems to have

arrived at an omnisensitive and omnisympathetic personality too early: a man of the possible future, he is adrift in the nineteenth century. Until he discovers his Jewish identity (he has been raised as an Englishman), and with that identity the Zionist cause, he feels no reason to attach himself to any one cause over any other. So readily does he identify with anyone he might encounter or learn of that his grasp on his own identity seems alarmingly tenuous. He even has a tendency toward “half-speculative, half-involuntary identification of himself with the objects he [looks] at,” which leads him to wonder “how far it might be possible habitually to shift his centre till his own personality would be no less outside him than the landscape . . .” Here is a man preemptively and unproductively decentered, in a novel that reckons the cost of such a condition and prescribes nationalism as remedy. The plot focused on Daniel constitutes a colossal argument that a “many-sided sympathy” that reaches out in identification with all and sundry only “hinder[s] any persistent course of action” and ultimately cancels itself out, falling “into one current with that reflective analysis which tends to neutralize sympathy.” Before learning of his ethnicity, Daniel’s “too reflective and diffusive sympathy [is] in danger of paralyzing in him that indignation against wrong and that selectness of fellowship which are the conditions of moral force”; he longs for some stimulus that would “urge him into a definite line of action, and compress his wandering energy,” a force “that would justify partiality” and make him part of a “binding history.” When he finds it in Judaism, Daniel feels “as if he had found another soul in finding his ancestry – his judgment no longer wandering in the mazes of impartial sympathy, but choosing, with that noble partiality which is man’s best strength, the closer fellowship that makes sympathy practical – exchanging that bird’s eye reasonableness which soars to avoid preference and loses all sense of quality, for the generous reasonableness of drawing shoulder to shoulder with men of like inheritance.”



As with Dorothea and Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, here again the plots focused on Daniel and on Gwendolen intertwine: in notoriously suggesting that the Jane Austen-like Gwendolen plot be severed from the distasteful Daniel one, F. R. Leavis manifested a fundamental misunderstanding of Eliot's aim. Daniel comes to supply that dislodging, interrupting force that knocks Gwendolen "from her supremacy in her own world" and gives her "a sense that her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own was revolving." The novel does not end with their marriage, but with each character's newfound devotion to a different "particular web." Daniel even makes what would seem an outlandish comparison between the two societies – England and the not-yet-realized Jewish state: he tells Gwendolen of his aim of "restoring a political existence to my people, making them a nation again, giving them a national centre, such as the English have, though they too are scattered over the face of the globe." What does it mean to find this point of comparison between the world's most powerful nation, possessor of an empire of global reach, on the one hand, and Daniel's merely notional diasporic one? At the close of *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot seems to suggest that the spread of Britain's empire may have scattered British "social energy" no less than Britain's many colonizing agents, and that her country needs to recover some of Daniel's kind of "noble partiality." Gwendolen resolves to try "to be one of the best of women, who make others glad that they were born" – presumably in a career of "incalculably diffusive" local acts that will reap real benefit among English recipients and find its termination in an unvisited tomb. If the novel affords us any alternative to the antinomy of racialized nationalism and feckless universalism, we have to brush against the stubborn grain and root among the minor characters to locate it. As I have suggested elsewhere, those dissatisfied with the either/or of Eliot's final novel may wish to nominate Catherine Arrowpoint, the English heiress who defies her family and marries the

musician Klesmer – “felicitous combination of the German, the Sclave, and the Semite” – the true heroine of *Daniel Deronda*.