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**Constructing the Intellectual Woman: Gender, Culture, and Narrative Voice in George  
Eliot's Novels**

**by**

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**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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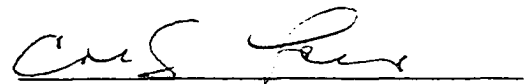
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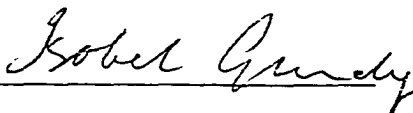
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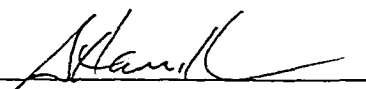
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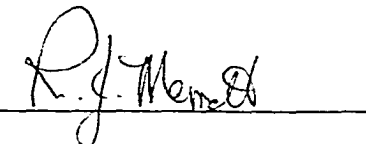
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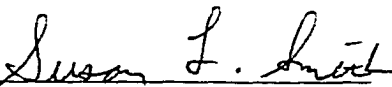
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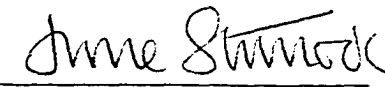
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To the memory of my mother,

Doris Hughes Sommerfeldt

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines George Eliot's conflicted relationship to Victorian constructions of culture and intellectual work with particular reference to the narrative voices of five novels: Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, Felix Holt, Middlemarch, and Daniel Deronda. It argues that both the narrative voices of the novels and Eliot's own construction of her identity as a writer and intellectual may be located generally within the discourse on culture, but that Eliot's relationship to this discourse is always ambivalent. While the "cultivated subject" produced by the discourse on culture is implicitly masculine, Eliot's narrative voices, which are ambiguously gendered, suggest a more inclusive version of this subject.

Chapter one examines how the narrator of Adam Bede characterizes "higher feeling" as a part of the trajectory of moral and intellectual development associated with culture and the cultivated subject. Chapter two suggests that contemporary debates over "useful knowledge" influence how Eliot represents the narrator of The Mill on the Floss. It shows how both the narrator's ambiguously gendered position and her sympathetic rendering of Maggie's experience combine to suggest that women's capacity for feeling should be given the status of useful knowledge. Chapter three looks at some of the more specific contemporary objections to Matthew Arnold's Culture and Anarchy, and suggests that in some ways, Eliot's conception of culture in Felix Holt repeats them. It argues that the narrative voice of Felix Holt appears to be aligned with the hero as the "man of culture" in the novel, but that other elements in the text undermine this alignment and foreground, for example, Felix's



(and the narrator's) exclusion of Esther as a cultivated subject. Chapter four examines the way in which Middlemarch constructs intellectual labour, and works out some of the implications of this construction for the role of the narrator (and the intellectual woman writer). Chapter five looks at some of the connections between constructions of nationhood and culture in Daniel Deronda, and argues that the narrator's alignment with a number of different characters valorizes different points of view in the novel and suggests that the conception of the cultivated subject should be widened to include other groups.

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## Introduction: Constructing the Intellectual Woman

Since John Holloway called George Eliot a Victorian Sage and classed her with prominent men of letters such as Matthew Arnold and Thomas Carlyle, she has for many critics uneasily represented some version of the “honorary man” among these prominent figures. Feminist critics have also tended to find her wanting because of what they see as her apparent investment in masculine intellectual life.<sup>1</sup> While more class- and gender-specific forms of self-definition have since been elaborated for both men and women engaged in intellectual labour, Eliot remains an anomalous figure who is difficult to describe in terms which acknowledge the complexity of her position as a woman writer.<sup>2</sup>

Stefan Collini’s Public Moralists and Daniel Cottom’s Social Figures are two recent works which provide more specifically classed and gendered ways of describing Victorian writers engaged in intellectual work. Collini uses the Athenaeum as a starting point for looking at “the complexities of social status involved in trying to

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<sup>1</sup> Recently, feminist critics such as Elizabeth Langland have disparaged Eliot, for example, for her failure to address, like Margaret Oliphant, “women’s discursive practices” as possible ways of constructing “selves” that “manipulate situations to their advantage” (89). This particular failure, for Langland, indicates a larger failure on Eliot’s part to understand the “performative nature of identity.” While it is true that the novels do not represent the domestic sphere as teeming with possible female “selves”, Eliot herself surely understood the performative nature of identity as much as any woman writer. See, for example, Smith, “George Eliot, Straight Drag, and the Masculine Investments of Feminism.”

<sup>2</sup> Deirdre David’s Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy is one reading by a feminist critic which examines some of the complexities involved in describing the work and position of intellectual women (she includes Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Harriet Martineau). Nina Auerbach laments that recent work on Eliot has tended to make her back into the “honorary” man and that she “decomposes into male and female, public and secret, self-creator and shapeshifter” (“Waning”, 353).

characterize the position in Victorian society of those who distinguished themselves by their intellectual achievements” (16).<sup>3</sup> He thus entrenches his description of what he calls the public moralist identity firmly in the social and economic life of men, but does mention in passing that there are a “few” women, such as Eliot herself and Mary (Arnold) Ward, who also could be classified as intellectuals. Cottom’s book, on the other hand, classifies Eliot as a “liberal intellectual” whose work, as part of “liberal intellectual discourse”, advances particular middle-class agendas. This reading of Eliot as an intellectual is fairly typical of new historicist, cultural materialist, and related approaches. Mark McLaughlin says, for example, that Eliot, “as a professional member of the middle class. . . attempted to mediate the threat of cultural disruption by providing in Adam Bede a normative moral and political narrative that celebrates the historical origins and ideological foundations of a middle class which would transform class-structured society into its own image” (56). The work of the novelist (and of the novel), according to these approaches, is thus propagandizing and impositional: novels are meant to resolve ideological contradictions and advance certain political agendas.

My general assumptions about Victorian intellectuals and their work more resemble Collini’s than they do Cottom’s. Despite his reference to “the relative homogeneity of the intellectual élite of this period” (18), Collini also notes that terms

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<sup>3</sup> Collini describes the voice associated with the position of the public moralist as an implicitly masculine one which is “always in some sense confident—confident of having the ear of the important audience, confident of addressing concerns and invoking values which were largely shared with that audience, confident of an easy, intimate, even conversable relationship with both Reason and History” (58).

like “liberal intellectual” are sometimes misleading because they do not take into account the various other identities (or subject positions) which, “taken together[,] constitute what we conventionally recognize as a particular social position” (27).

When Collini looks at John Stuart Mill, for example, he looks at the way in which the various social and economic positions he occupied (an employee of the East India Company, a sometime M.P.) produced contradictions or inconsistencies in his work. Certainly the social positions and discursive identities available to women were very different from those available to men. For a woman writer such as Eliot, the relationship between her narrators and her own material or social position is all the more complex—not least because of her unconventional liaison with George Henry Lewes, her estrangement from her brother, and her position as (unofficial) editor of the Westminster Review.<sup>4</sup>

I will be arguing that the narrative voices in Eliot’s novels reflect the inherently conflicted position of the public moralist and Eliot’s own anomalous position as a woman writer whose relationship to “culture” was ambivalent. Eliot sometimes mystifies and sometimes overdetermines the gender of her narrative voices, but they rarely operate monolithically. Many critics have in passing characterised the narrative voices of Eliot’s novels, often suggestively alluding to her manipulation of gender conventions and codes. Gillian Beer says of Eliot that “without ‘writing in milk’ she both incorporates and goes beyond the male persona,

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<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Ashton says that Eliot was “the actual editor of the Westminster, though unofficially so” (2).

transforming and extending him into her own image as a human scribe who is, historically, woman” (16). J. Russell Perkin suggests that the narrative voices of Eliot’s novels “appropriate the classical learning, the reflective commentary, and the ironical or satirical tone associated with a particular, largely masculine tradition of fiction” (“Narrative”, 25). Kristin Brady asserts that “[b]y assuming for the voice of her stories. . . both the class and the gender that possessed power in Victorian patriarchy, Eliot could give to her narrative those trappings of authority that were denied to the female author. The same device can also be read as calling into question the equation of authority with particular categories of class and gender—and also of race (61). Despite the fact that the narrative voices of Eliot’s novels may be located generally within a discourse on culture which suggests a particular kind of “work” for Eliot as a writer (or for the novel), Eliot’s relationship to this discourse is always ambivalent.<sup>5</sup>

I will also be examining Eliot’s relationship to contemporary constructions of culture which were elaborated most prominently in Matthew Arnold’s 1869 Culture and Anarchy. Since Arnold is usually seen as representative, and since he is the figure of culture who most frequently surfaces in Eliot criticism, most of my focus in

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<sup>5</sup> While I think it is possible to argue that there was a discourse on culture which included other concerns (such as morality and higher feeling), it is important to note that Victorian writers addressed them in terms other than those implied by “culture.” And, while it is also possible to argue that there is a discourse on culture within which Eliot positions her narrators (and her conception of herself as intellectual), I think that the term “liberal intellectual discourse” (Daniel Cottom’s term) suggests too large a discursive field. In Social Figures, Cottom makes liberal intellectual discourse account for everything from identity to morality. Like Collini, he “self-declaredly passe[s] over” (xvii) sex and gender, the very categories which in Eliot’s work at least potentially destabilize not just conceptions of the individual or of identity, but also his own generalizations about liberal intellectuals or liberal intellectual discourse.

speaking of culture will be on Culture and Anarchy. But I will also be drawing to some degree on the wide ranging “history” of the construction of culture outlined by David Lloyd and Paul Thomas in their 1997 work, Culture and the State, with an emphasis, of course, on those particular aspects of culture which have a bearing on Eliot’s own sense of herself as a woman writer and an intellectual, and on what I see as her reconstruction or revision (sometimes even rejection) of contemporary versions of culture. It is not often mentioned by critics who want to make Arnold’s construction of culture a definitive one that it was widely contested and debated when the first essay of what was later to become Culture and Anarchy was published in 1867. In addition, Culture and Anarchy, as Lloyd and Thomas note, is “only one culmination of an ‘idea’ that had been driving middle-class reformists for some time” (120). Clustered around culture are a variety of other concerns, such as the nature of higher feeling, the status of various kinds of knowledge, the function or role of professional intellectuals (and of art or intellectual work in general), and the meaning of national identity.

Because “culture” tends to exclude women, both as intellectuals and as potentially “cultivated” subjects, Eliot, who is both of these things, occupies a very complex position in relation to these constructions. The narrative voices of her novels, which bear the traces of or are constructed at the intersection of several discursive contexts at once, often manifest the conflicted nature of her position as a middle-class intellectual. When I describe the narrative voice in Eliot’s novels as an identity which is constructed within the discourse on culture, I am not suggesting that



there is always (or even very often) a direct correspondence between the woman writer “outside” the text and the pronouncements of the narrator “inside” it.<sup>6</sup> Nor am I suggesting that the narrative voice of a novel will somehow reveal more about a writer’s ideological investments than other elements of the text.<sup>7</sup> Certain perspectives, controlling ideas, or constructions may be implicit in any of these things as well as in the narrative voice of a text, and of course they may work against each other or seem contradictory in import. But the “performance” of narrative voice in a text is unlike other formal elements in that it can suggest critical distance from cultural norms as much as it suggests (for some critics) consensus about them. It also suggests distance between the writing self outside the text and the self constructed in discourse: this distance is particularly interesting in Eliot’s first two novels, because she inscribes the narrator as a specifically masculine one.<sup>8</sup> Even given this overt inscription, however, the gender (and at times the authority) of the narrator at any given moment in the text is very often an open question in Eliot’s novels.

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<sup>6</sup> The largest question my focus on narrative voice and the discourse on culture raises is that of agency. The terms “narrative voice” and “identity” suggest something deliberately constructed and manipulated by an author. I generally argue that Eliot herself constructs the narrative voices in her novels so as to “intervene” in debates about knowledge, feeling, nation, and so forth. The terms “cultivated subject” and “ideology” on the other hand, suggest postmodern conceptions of the subject constructed or positioned by discourse and “accounted for” by ideology. Culture can thus be said to “account for” or construct part of Eliot’s sense of her function as an intellectual and also to limit (to some extent) the scope of the narrative voices in her novels.

<sup>7</sup> Kristin Brady, for example, notes that “[in] even the most traditional of [Eliot’s] narrative structures, the gender plot interferes most violently with the teleological thrust of the narrative just at the point of conventional closure” (60).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Susan Lanser notes that “the authorial mode [third person narration] has allowed women access to ‘male’ authority by separating the narrating ‘I’ from the female body” (18).

Critics traditionally regard the third person-narrator in the nineteenth-century realist novel as a centre of authority which is meant to impose upon (or suggest to) the reader a certain way of seeing. Colin MacCabe (who uses Middlemarch as the classic example of a realist novel) says that “a classic realist text may be defined as one in which there is a hierarchy among the discourses which compose the text and this hierarchy is defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth. . . . Whereas other discourses within the text are considered as material which are open to re-interpretation, the narrative discourse simply allows reality to appear and denies its own status as articulation” (36-7). MacCabe downplays the ambiguity inherent in free indirect discourse, which can suggest a narrator’s varying degrees of distance from ideological constructs in the text. Other elements in the text which are not so closely “supervised” or “focalised” by the narrator, such as conversations between characters, allow the reader to imagine speaking positions other than the narrator’s, again at varying distances from the narrative centre of authority in the novel .<sup>9</sup>

Victorian readers appeared to expect that the narrative voice of the novel would provide a centre of authority and an interpretative guide for the reader. In Eliot’s case, Victorian readers found the narrative voice in Middlemarch particularly disturbing: “[o]ne reviewer’s feelings were so jarred by [Eliot’s] ‘interjectional remarks’”, notes Suzanne Graver, “that he accused her of sneering and railing ‘like a sort of womanly Carlyle at an unreal monster, called by her ‘good society’” (268). The expression

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<sup>9</sup> Melba Cuddy-Keane says that conversation which is “less obviously mediated” by a narrator “creates a challenge for the reader” because she “undergoes repeated repositionings” which create “a trajectory of different value systems and changing points of view” (139).

“railing like a sort of womanly Carlyle” suggests (among other things) that readers were uncomfortable with Eliot’s constructing herself in the public moralist role.

At the time Eliot began writing novels, what “marked” the narrative voice of a novel as “masculine” or “feminine” for a Victorian audience was substantially influenced by debates in the reviews about what constituted “manly” or “womanly” writing. In the 1850s, Victorian literary critics began to concern themselves more closely with characterizing writers of literary works rather than with characterizing readers, as they had done earlier in the century, when review discourse was constructing and being constructed by the “reading public.” According to Ina Ferris, “questions of taste and reading . . . more and more gave way to questions of truth and form, . . . and the physical and social world of readers, texts, writers, and reviewers constructed by earlier critical discourse drop[ped] out of sight to be replaced by abstract ‘capacities’ and ‘powers’ whose metaphoric ground [was] the cosmic ground of space and time” (26). Men with some kind of professional or vocational basis were expected to have knowledge particular to it. Women, being less involved with the public sphere in strictly professional terms, were not expected to be concerned with the higher knowledges informing public life. As one reviewer notes, “The purely human interests of life, the daily incidents, the circumstantial joys and sorrows, occupy largely the thoughts of women; and what occupies the thoughts works in the imagination” (467).<sup>10</sup> Review discourse thus privileged the production (and the

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<sup>10</sup> From [Anon.], “Novels by the Authoress of ‘John Halifax,’” in the North British Review 29 (1858).

vision) of “depth” and “breadth” (associated with male imagination) in a literary work as opposed to the “surface” and “superficial”, which tended to be constructed as feminine. The woman writer’s relationship to literary forms requiring this depth of vision, such as the high culture novel, was thus a vexed and complex one. Elsie Michie notes that

the traditional Victorian opposition between masculine wholeness and feminine fragmentation . . . raised particular difficulties for George Eliot because it was intertwined with the opposition between culture and anarchy which was so important to liberal intellectuals of the 1860s and 70s. . . The interconnection between those two models of difference meant that if Eliot endorsed the Arnoldian ideal of cultural wholeness, she was effectively supporting a sphere of knowledge which was implicitly defined as masculine and from which women were excluded because of their gender (17-18).

The contradictions inherent in a male writer’s constructing a narrative voice from such a position are problematic enough: a woman writer’s relationship to such a construction is more complex not least because the discursive identities available to her were masculine ones.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I am speaking here of the high culture novel. Margaret Oliphant argues in an Edinburgh Review article that “George Eliot’s books remain (with the exception of The Mill on the Floss), less definable in point of sex than the books of any other woman who has ever written. A certain size. . . and freedom in the style, an absence of that timidity, often varied by temerity, which, however disguised, is rarely absent from the style of women, seems to us to obliterate the distinctions of sex; and her scientific illustrations and indications of scholarship, more easy and assured than a woman’s ordinary furtive classical allusions no doubt added greatly to this effect” (quoted in Tuchman, Edging, 186).

The commentary of Eliot's narrators is fluidly constructed so as to suggest, often humorously, various degrees of distance between the voices of the novels and their feminine point of origin. The gap between Eliot the woman writer outside the text and inside it as narrator—her performance of both female and male voices—can be configured in all kinds of ways, many of which seem to involve a deliberate reworking of the relation of women to constructions of culture and cultural authority. In many passages in the novels, one may imagine that Eliot is playfully drawing attention to this gap: in Scenes of Clerical Life, for example, the narrator, complimenting the industriousness and skill of Milly Barton, says that she “was . . . trying to persuade her husband to leave off tight pantaloons, because if he would wear the ordinary gun-cases, she knew she could make them so well that no one would suspect the sex of the tailor”(58).<sup>12</sup> While this passage suggests that certain skills are beyond Milly Barton's ability, it also implicitly says that the division of labour is in some ways artificial, and that finished products (clothes as well as novels, perhaps) are not inherently marked with the gender of the producer. Although analysing the novels in such terms might tend to produce the kind of essentializing versions of gender that Eliot herself tried to militate against, there are some passages in the novels which the narrator clearly speaks as a woman. In Middlemarch, for example, the narrator says that “a man's mind—what there is of it—has always the advantage of being masculine,—as the smallest birch-tree is of a higher kind than the most soaring

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<sup>12</sup> All quotations from Scenes of Clerical Life are from George Eliot, Scenes of Clerical Life, ed. David Lodge (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). First published 1857-8.

palm,—and even his ignorance is of a sounder quality. Sir James might not have originated this estimate; but a kind Providence furnishes the limpest personality with a little gum or starch in the form of tradition”(21).<sup>13</sup> Eliot was delighted when “G.[H. Lewes] read the first part of ‘Amos’ to a party at Helps’s, [and] they were all sure I was a clergyman—a Cambridge man.” She adds that “Agnes [Lewes’s wife] thought I was the father of a family—was sure that I was a man who had seen a great deal of society . . . Blackwood . . . said, ‘Amos seems to me not in the least like what that good artillery man [he knew] would write . . . Colonel Hamley said I was ‘a man of science, but not a practised writer.’”<sup>14</sup> Later, when her publisher John Blackwood asked her to write “Felix Holt’s Address to Working Men”, she answered that “Felix Holt is immensely tempted by your suggestion, but George Eliot is severely admonished by his domestic critic not to scatter his energies” (4:397, 9 November 1867).<sup>15</sup>

Once Eliot’s identity was revealed with the publication of The Mill on the Floss, reviews often focused on the relationship between the voices in the novel and her “real” identity as a woman. It was very disconcerting to reviewers that her masquerade as a male writer in Scenes of Clerical Life and Adam Bede was so successful. One reviewer, no doubt nettled by his failure to detect the author’s real

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<sup>13</sup> All quotations from Middlemarch are from George Eliot, Middlemarch, ed. David Carroll (Oxford: OUP, 1996). First published 1871-2.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in appendix to Scenes of Clerical Life, ed. David Lodge, “How I Came to Write Fiction”, p. 430.

<sup>15</sup> All quotations from George Eliot’s letters (identified by volume, page number, and date) are from Gordon Haight, ed. The George Eliot Letters, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1954-78).

identity, wrote that it was not surprising that Eliot chose a clerical persona because clerics and women are similar in their tendency to be self-effacing. The clerical narrator “disguise”, he says, is one suitable for women because

[c]lergymen are debarred from the expression at least of many passions that laymen are allowed to exhibit without the same amount of blame; these are chiefly the rougher and coarser feelings of our nature and their outward signs; the consequence is, that the proceedings of the clergy are less direct, and, because less direct, more refined, and ultimately partake more of the character of female management than of the perhaps somewhat coarse energy of masculine methods; the single fact that parsons and women can neither strike nor be stricken, exercises upon both an influence that tends to produce a similarity in their views of life and methods of observation. (24)<sup>16</sup>

This description of the effeminate clergyman reveals as much anxiety about masculine identity as it does about the “transgression” (and success) of Eliot’s literary masquerade. At a loss to explain Eliot’s success, this reviewer argues that she cannot write like a “real” man—only like an effeminate one. If, as the Victorian ideology of gender tended to assert, women’s biological difference from men produced detectable differences in women’s and men’s texts, then a narrator like Eliot’s in Scenes of Clerical Life and Adam Bede who can fool a reviewer or reader into believing he is a man was unsettling indeed. Various degrees of anxiety about gender identity surface

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<sup>16</sup> From “The Mill on the Floss,” Westminster Review, n.s. Vol. 18 (July and October 1860), 21-33.

in reviews of Eliot's work throughout her career: that reviewers were unsettled by their inability to detect markers of gender at the level of the text indicates a deeper anxiety about boundaries between "masculine" and "feminine."

Eliot's case is also an interesting one because she spent some years working on the reviews, which, as Nicola Thompson points out, "were usually anonymous and often used the pronoun 'we'," so that "the individuality of particular critics was suppressed . . . [and] replaced by anonymous, oracular voices which seemed to speak with the authority of Culture behind them" (4). John Woolford says that

the editorial 'we' expanded to allow the critic to assume his role as delegate of the public and custodian of the criteria of artistic language. And hence. . . that odd combination of assertive language with anonymous format in Victorian reviews. The anonymity, with its overweening 'we', represents the extent to which the critic has dissolved his individual identity into the collectivity of a wider consensus; his virulence of language stems from the enormous and overbearing authority he derives from this centrality. (115)

Some reviews objected strongly to women writers' publishing under male names or seeking to adopt a "masculine" style: reviewers resented both the implication that their "serious" literary judgement was reserved for men (although it often was) and what they saw as the "presumption" of women writers in imitating "masculine" style: "It is a poor compliment to male critics", says one, "to suppose that the putting of a man's name in the first page of a new novel will therefore blind [us] to the real authorship of [a] novel. . . .A true woman's book will reveal its own



special charm. . . [in] striving to copy the man's free carriage, deep tones, and hard reasonings, she can only succeed in behaving like a better sort of monkey" (qtd. in Thompson, 22). Not unexpectedly, this commentary once again essentialises "women's" writing and locates its "special" qualities in the biological differences between men and women. Suzanne Graver notes that reviewers were also "disconcerted by the 'blending of the author's bitterness with her profound tenderness; the former, they feared, would undermine the latter, blocking the "powerful and even flow in every direction [of] the sympathies which bind her to her fellows" (Graver 270). They were thus uncomfortable not just with Eliot's assuming what they considered a masculine voice, but also with her apparent blending of both masculine and feminine qualities.

Certainly most of those writers who considered themselves proponents of culture were men—one might even argue that this identity was an ostensibly masculine one. Eliot develops throughout her novels a construction of culture to which she is always, by virtue of her gender, ambivalently related: she is as the narrator both its advocate and as a woman writer its apparently excluded object. As Elsie Michie notes,

liberal intellectual writers. . . were advocates of an ideal of "high culture" that was to become [sic] available to all through the new systems of higher education then being developed. Eliot found, however, that as a woman she was excluded from full participation in those educational systems, and, by extension, in the concomitant intellectual celebration of "culture" (4).

Although educational opportunities for women increased later in the century with, for example, the founding of Girton College Cambridge in 1869, women's relationship to culture in general tended to be ambivalent.

Post-marxist critics, as we have seen, usually take for granted Eliot's position as a middle-class intellectual whose novels function, for example, to "solve" certain ideological contradictions or to "propagandize" certain middle-class ideals. Mark McLaughlin's reading of the narrator's function in Adam Bede stresses the connection between the representation of narrative voice in Eliot's novels and the function of the intellectual: "the narrator", he says, like the characters, "is 'ideologically demarcated', and this signals, too, Eliot's affirmation of middle-class leadership. Even the most casual pieces of discourse. . . reveal the markings of the professional intellectual whose vast learning is a resource for cultural and political guidance." McLaughlin argues that "the difficulty we feel in referring to the narrator's gender bespeaks Eliot's own attempt to cover any traces of interestedness" (67). But as woman writer, Eliot's relationship to some middle-class ideals is always ambivalent. Although she is often compared in a generalised way with John Stuart Mill and with Matthew Arnold in the extent of her influence and in her affiliation with middle-class ideals, she is often too easily lumped in with them. Alan Kidd and R.W. Roberts have cautioned against an "oversimplif[ication of] middle class social thought and policy" which "has arisen from the attention given to publicists and propagandists, the professional intellectuals whose ideological position in their class whilst of great significance and influence should not necessarily be regarded as representative" (82).

The political historian Eugenio F. Biagini notes that marxist historians are “still struggling to explain the ‘anomaly’ of an organised labour movement which was solidly Liberal” (7).<sup>17</sup> While Eliot was both a professional writer and an intellectual, her position among the liberal intellectuals is more often than not an uneasy one, both because of her gender and of her social position.

Eliot’s relationship to contemporary constructions of culture was also very complex. The usual sense of the word “culture” suggests a certain relationship between individuals and aesthetic works (painting, music, literature) –and also a certain status for the producers and consumers of those works. This relationship can be constructed in several ways, but for Lloyd and Thomas its most significant “conceptions. . . inform a nineteenth-century consensus on the formation of the proper subject for the state among bureaucrats, politicians and reformers as well as cultural critics” (4). The construction of this kind of subject, according to Rosemary Hennessy, is not limited to the Victorians: she notes that “the university has traditionally enacted a key component of the formation of subjects by acculturating a broad range of students to an ideal of the ‘cultivated citizen’. . . .A major requirement of the cultivated citizen is that she not “see” the historical conditions that make possible her position in the world” (9). Although “enlightened” cultural critics may

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<sup>17</sup> Eugenio Biagini also notes that “there were marked ‘elective affinities’ between plebeian radicals and left-wing intellectuals (86) such as John Stuart Mill, and that, for example, in a passage that was “often cited in the popular press” (87), “Mill praised the homestead farmer as the model citizen. While the factory proletariat was trained to work as part of a machine, the farmer was employed from childhood in an activity fostering independent thinking and creativity, and was free from the anguish and crushing misery that affected the factory worker” (86).

occupy a position which enables them to “see” these relations, the implication is that Victorian writers engaged in producing the cultivated subject, on the other hand, cannot. While Lloyd and Thomas do offer a “study of the contestations that took place around the gradual institutionalization of [culture]” (147), they maintain that “disinterest and the social disengagement of the intellectual are rooted in violence and maintain their conditions of possibility through the alternating exercise of coercion and hegemony” (147). Therefore, “oppositional stances or modes of resistance cannot work within ‘already constituted political and social subject positions’” (162). Hennessy (and Lloyd and Thomas to some extent), unlike many critics who position Eliot among liberal intellectuals, account for the sometimes similarly invested nature and the status of both literary criticism and liberal intellectual discourse.

Critics have not commonly distinguished between Eliot’s and Arnold’s constructions of culture. Lyn Pykett has noted that “it has become commonplace for students of George Eliot to reach for their Arnold when discussing the ideology of her later work” and that in Felix Holt she “made a common cause with the Arnold of the roughly contemporaneous Culture and Anarchy in the task of redefining the relationship between what is and what ought to be” (229).<sup>18</sup> She argues that Eliot uses what she calls “the ironic tone of the Arnoldian essayist” (231) in Felix Holt in order to “expose the warts of all sections of society and to undermine the reader’s stock responses, those responses of class or habit which Arnold so disparages” (232).

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<sup>18</sup> “Roughly contemporaneous” glosses over a slight anachronism—Felix Holt was published in 1866, the first essay of Culture and Anarchy in 1867. Catherine Gallagher, Carolyn Lesjak and Christopher Z. Hobson all discuss Felix Holt and Culture and Anarchy.

Catherine Gallagher has argued that Eliot's elaboration of culture in Felix Holt is very much like Arnold's, particularly in its idea of the "best self" (see Chapter 3). Mark McLaughlin notes, however, that "Eliot's understanding of the term. . . was not limited to the Arnoldian sense" (74).<sup>19</sup> In the last five years, however, critics have begun to elaborate more differences than similarities between Arnold and Eliot. Marc Wohlfarth, for example, argues that in Daniel Deronda "Judaism represents a nationalist-moral ideal in contradistinction to Matthew Arnold's ideal of a cosmopolitan culture", and goes so far as to call the novel "a polemic against. . . Culture and Anarchy" (190-203). Christopher Hobson, in his reading of Felix Holt, says that criticism of that novel "fail[s] to comprehend the ways in which Eliot breaks with the industrial novel tradition and differs with contemporary polemics about class, in particular those of Arnold" (21).

In the first chapter, I will be examining how the narrator of Adam Bede characterises "higher feeling" as a part of the trajectory of moral and intellectual development associated with culture and the cultivated subject. While the novel as a whole suggests that both religion and affection can do the "work" of culture and approximate its effects, the language of the narrator more often sets up a hierarchy of "higher feeling" which excludes certain characters from this development. In chapter two, I suggest that contemporary debates over "useful knowledge" influence how Eliot

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<sup>19</sup> McLaughlin is the only critic who speculates more specifically about what Eliot's version of culture might look like across all her novels: he says that "her mixing of 'social conditions' and 'moral tendencies' in the cultural metaphors of 'roots' and 'seed' suggest that "language, mind, and societies 'grow', so that 'culture' for [her] (as for us) signals a field of material, symbolic, and subjected relations,

represents the narrator of The Mill on the Floss. I show how both the narrator's ambiguously gendered position and her sympathetic rendering of Maggie's experience combine to suggest that women's capacity for feeling should be given the status of useful knowledge. In the third chapter, I look at some of the more specific contemporary objections to Arnold's Culture and Anarchy, and suggest that in some ways, Eliot's conception of culture in Felix Holt repeats them. I argue that the narrative voice of Felix Holt appears to be aligned with the hero as the "man of culture" in the novel, but that other elements in the text undermine this alignment and foreground, for example, Felix's (and the narrator's) exclusion of Esther as a cultivated subject. In chapter four, I examine the way in which Middlemarch constructs intellectual labour, and work out some of its implications for the role of the narrator (and the female liberal intellectual). Finally, in the last chapter, I look at some of the connections between constructions of nationhood and culture in Daniel Deronda. I argue that the novel is not as monolithic in its conception of the former as critics have asserted. The narrator's alignment with a number of different characters valorizes different and conflicting points of view in the novel and suggests that the conception of the cultivated subject should be widened to include other groups.

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each element individually exhibiting a 'process of development' which intervenes in or is intertwined with other developmental histories" (74).

## Chapter One

### **“Faith was a Rudimentary Culture”: The Language of Higher Feeling in Adam Bede**

In Chapter 18 of Adam Bede, which describes the funeral of Adam’s father, the narrator says that “the church service was the best channel [Adam] could have found for his mingled regret, yearning, and resignation; its interchange of beseeching cries for help, with outbursts of faith and praise—its recurrent responses and the familiar rhythm of its collects, seemed to speak for him as no other form of worship could have done” (245).<sup>1</sup> According to the narrator, this form of communal ritual gives coherence to Adam’s feelings and composes his experience into an understandable form. His “thoughts of Hetty. . . blended with all the other deep feelings for which the church service was a channel to him this afternoon” (245). The service “speaks” the feelings of the community and its inhabitants and is also associated with their collective history. There are old people who have “a few ‘good words’ by heart” and “who follow the service without any clear comprehension indeed, but with a simple faith in its efficacy to ward off harm and bring blessing” (242). For Adam particularly, there is a new sense of history and of self: the narrator says that for Adam as well as for “us”, “a certain consciousness of our entire past and our imagined future blends itself with all our moments of keen sensibility” (244-5).

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Adam Bede are from George Eliot, Adam Bede, ed. Peter Coveney (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). First published 1859.

The chapter articulates some of the ideas about community which are familiar and important to Eliot's vision as a whole, but at this moment in the novel, what makes Adam different is his ability to conceive or visualize the trajectory of his moral history or growth.

Moments of moral awareness like this one are often associated in the novel with religion, which, in Adam Bede at least, does part of the work of culture. Lloyd and Thomas argue that for liberal intellectuals such as Arnold and Mill, it is only culture which can produce "the ideal of the individual" (127). With access to culture, there begins "the formation of a disposition toward continual and ethical self-formation" (127). The process of "cultivation" also produces a sense of moral development in the individual, enabling him to construct a narrative for himself of progressive moral enlightenment. In Culture and Anarchy, Arnold stresses the similarities between religion and culture, but insists that culture "goes beyond religion" and results in a "harmonious expansion of all the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature" (64). While it might look somewhat anachronistic to compare the ideas of Culture and Anarchy with those in Adam Bede, it is important to note that Culture and Anarchy recapitulates a series of ideas about what Lloyd and Thomas call "aesthetic self-cultivation" (120) which were in circulation long before Arnold wrote the first essay of that work in 1867. In Adam Bede the narrator suggests that Adam is like "a painter or a musician" (574), a comparison which valorizes the trajectory of his moral development and suggests that he is becoming a version of the cultivated subject.



In general the narrator's emphasis on affection and religious sensibility suggests that the development of "higher feeling" in the novel is not always to be associated with art or culture. But "he" also makes the characterization of aesthetic feeling itself very complex. While the generalised use of "beauty" in the novel is much like Arnold's where it is related to high art, at least, its valorization of the aesthetic becomes problematic when the narrator attempts to describe, for example, how Hetty Sorrel's beauty affects Adam or others around her. The narrator's ambiguous characterization of higher feeling in the novel thus undercuts the otherwise idealised presentation of Adam. Another problem occurs when the narrator tries to assess the final meaning of Adam's evolution toward moral consciousness: while the narrator insists that "Adam could never thank God for another's misery" (573), it is clear that his happiness in the novel and his sense of his own history as moral development is predicated on Hetty's death. The novel's tendency to present selflessness rather than cultivation as an ideal associated with women generally (and Dinah especially) similarly reveals what is at stake in the formation of the cultivated subject.

The first instance of the novel's linkage of religion and culture occurs near the beginning: the narrator says that "faith" is a "rudimentary culture" to "the rough men and weary-hearted women" who gather to hear Dinah Morris preach (81). Faith "linked their thoughts with the past, lifted their imagination above the sordid details of their own narrow lives, and suffused their souls with the sense of a pitying, loving, infinite Presence, sweet as summer to the houseless needy (81-2). Adam, as we have

seen, has a similarly coherent vision of the past and present at his father's funeral. The narrator does not specify here, as she does with Adam, what the consciousness of the "linkage with the past" means for the "houseless needy"—all she suggests is that their sense of a "pitying loving infinite Presence" is a basic kind of comfort to them. The "link[ing] of their thoughts with the past" acts as a temporary escape or catharsis from the pervasive sense of hardship in their lives. Later in the passage, the most important consequence is seen by the narrator to be altruistic feeling rather than a new sense of history: "the raw bacon which clumsy Molly spares from her own scanty store, that she may carry it to her neighbour's child to 'stop the fits,' may be a piteously inefficacious remedy; but the generous stirring of neighbourly kindness that prompted the deed, has a beneficent radiation that is not lost" (82). By the end of this chapter Seth Bede "is resolving. . .to repress his sadness, and be less bent on having his own will, and to live more for others, as Dinah does" (82). This focus on selflessness, however, often becomes associated more with women and an ethics of service in the novel than it does with men, but at least in this passage, the value of religion is as a catalyst for social action.

As the novel progresses, the narrator's language of higher feeling, which tends to blend religious with aesthetic and aesthetic with sexual feeling, becomes more and more complex. Some critics have argued that Eliot creates for the narrator of Adam Bede a masculine position which is sometimes overdetermined, and which tends to

foreground the dynamics of the masculine gaze.<sup>2</sup> This overdetermination is especially noticeable in the narrator's descriptions of Hetty Sorrel. Kristin Brady argues that "he" at times "focalises the desiring perspective of Arthur Donnithorne" and at times "identifies closely with. . . Adam's blind idealization of her seeming innocence" (87). Eventually, says Brady, "Hetty's failings and her sufferings are seen as originating in her construction by masculine desire: [the narrator exclaims,] 'God preserve you and me from being the beginners of such misery'" (88). But it is also true that the narrator acknowledges the implications or consequences of "his" gaze at another level as well, and suggests that men are not the only ones implicated in it:

There are various orders of beauty, causing men to make fools of themselves in various styles, from the desperate to the sheepish; but there is one order of beauty which seems made to turn the heads not only of men, but of all intelligent mammals, even of women. It is a beauty like that of kittens, or very small downy ducks making gentle rippling noises with their soft bills, or babies just beginning to toddle and to engage in conscious mischief—a beauty with which you can never be angry, but that you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which it throws you, Hetty Sorrel's was that sort of beauty. (127-8)

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<sup>2</sup> Laurie Langbauer connects this gaze (which is for her inherently masculine) with realism itself and says that Eliot's participation in it implicates her in the reproduction of its oppressions (200). I think that sometimes the "gaze" of the narrator in *Adam Bede* is overtly masculine, but that more often it is ambiguous—she does, after all implicate "all intelligent mammals" in their reading of Hetty's beauty (see below). I call the narrator "he" throughout this chapter, but am not arguing that he is always inscribed as male—and part of the difficulty comes from having to use a gendered pronoun.

It looks here as if the narrator is attempting to make Hetty's beauty into something "merely" aesthetic, so that not just men but "all intelligent mammals" respond to it, but the narrator's inclusion of "all intelligent mammals" suggests that the kind of violence enacted on Hetty is not just masculine and not just directed at women—it is also bound up with (among other things) constructions of childhood. While the passage also reveals the way in which the responsibility for the strong feelings of aggression or confusion in the gazer are scapegoated onto children and fuzzy ducks and finally on to Hetty herself, that the narrator seems to valorize the response itself as a valid, and even common one to both children and women is more disturbing. What this aggression might mean in terms of women's feelings of anger toward other women is less explicit than for the "men who make fools of themselves" earlier in the passage, but certainly it suggests self-hatred, not so much a reaction to the "state of mind" into which women themselves might be thrown, but perhaps a kind of awareness of their own vulnerability to both male and female aggression. Only Dinah Morris' reaction to Hetty seems free from confusion: "the lovely face and form affected her as beauty always affects a pure and tender mind, free from selfish jealousies" (203); with this exception, both men and women are seen to project the responsibility for Hetty's victimization onto her.<sup>3</sup>

While the narrator sometimes works hard to separate Adam's misreading of Hetty's beauty from these more problematic responses, he also trivialises it when he

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<sup>3</sup> Although Dinah, insofar as she interprets Hetty's actions as wilful "sin", also gives this reading to her actions.

says that women are better at seeing the faults in other women than men are, and that much of this misreading (on the part of men) is responsible for the “tragedy of human life” (400). If “we look at the one little woman’s face we love, as we look at the face of our mother earth, and see all sorts of answers to our own yearnings” (254), then what can be said about the aesthetic experience which comes largely out of this delusion? Adam is said to be misguided in his “reading” of Hetty’s beauty and the narrator at length excuses his susceptibility by saying that “the beauty of a lovely woman is like music” and that “Beauty has an expression beyond and far above the one woman’s soul that it clothes [so that]. . . .The noblest nature [like Adam’s] sees the most of this impersonal expression in [it]” (400). Any problematic implications of this reading with regard to Adam are submerged in the narrator’s insistence that Adam’s response is merely the result of his “noble nature.” The rough equivalence of imagery in the narrator’s language suggests at several points that love, religious feeling, and aesthetic response are all experiences productive of that sudden flash of meaning which “concentrat[es] in one emotion of heroic courage or resignation all the hard-learnt lessons of self-renouncing sympathy” and “blend[s] your present joy with your past sorrow, and your present sorrow with all your past joy” (399). The narrator’s persistent abstraction of Hetty’s beauty and of Adam’s response to it belies the gender dynamics of higher feeling, and the hierarchy which he establishes elsewhere in the novel sometimes seems in danger of collapsing.

Although in Chapter 18 the narrator stresses the communal and personal significance of Adam’s responses to the church service, and echoes the language or

terminology of this passage at several other points in the novel, there are also responses described in this chapter which suggest the particularity or uniqueness of Adam's experience. The narrator says that Alick, the shepherd, "ha[s] a general impression that public worship and religious ceremonies, like other non-productive employments, were intended for people who had leisure" (232), which implicitly locates Adam's "personal" interpretation of the service—and possibly his whole moral development—in a certain social context and a certain way of interpreting moral life. His life is entirely defined by the work he does.

At the same time, however, the novel presents Adam's experience as exemplary. William Myers has suggested that "the conscious objects of sublime feeling [in Adam Bede]-a woman, a symphony, a god—are only different ways of entering a level of mind where distinctions break down and altruistic impulses are given life" (31). But in fact, the sense of past and present history—the production of some sort of narrative of meaning or sense of development—is at least as important for Eliot's characters as the altruistic impulse. Although altruism is implied in the language of Adam's moral development, as important are his increasing tendency toward reflection, his capacity for moral feeling, and his ability to reinterpret the events of his past. Some of this reflection occurs in the long passage where he regrets his treatment of his father and says "the real tough job for me 'ud be to master my own will and temper, and go right against my own pride" (247), but the narrator stresses most the effects of Hetty's loss.

Whereas at the beginning of the novel, Adam disdains reflection and the inward life, preferring what he sees on the “good” of productive work (see, for example, his thoughts about the Methodists in the first chapter of the novel), by the end of it, as he goes to Oakbourne to meet Dinah Morris, he realizes the value of reflection or inwardness:

He had often been to Oakbourne and back since that first journey to Snowfield, but beyond Oakbourne, the grey stone walls, the broken country, the meager trees, seemed to be telling him afresh the story of that painful past which he knew so well by heart. But no story is the same to us after a lapse of time; or rather, we who read it are no longer the same interpreters; and Adam this morning brought with him new thoughts through that grey country—thoughts which gave an altered significance to its story of the past (573).

Lest it sound as if Adam feels this new significance literally at the expense of Hetty’s life, the narrator works very hard to assure the reader that “Adam could never thank God for another’s misery” (573). He himself exclaims when Bartle Massey tries to comfort him that “somebody else’s good doesn’t alter [Hetty’s] shame and misery” (504). Eventually, however, he can say that “I should never her’ come to know. . . her love. . .if what I counted a blessing hadn’t been wrenched from me, and left me with a greater need so as I could. . .hunger for a better comfort” (559). The sorrow of Hetty’s loss has generated for Adam what is in Eliot’s novels as a whole probably the most important part of moral development: “the growth of higher feeling.” And, while the narrator has sometimes tried to divest this trajectory of moral

growth of associations with middle-class notions of taste or culture, he does say that the growth of this feeling “is like the growth of faculty, bringing with it a sense of added strength: we can no more wish to return to a narrower sympathy, than a painter or a musician can wish to return to his crude manner, or a philosopher to his less than complete formula” (574).<sup>4</sup> This suggests that the process of Adam’s moral development is roughly equivalent to the process of intellectual or aesthetic development associated with culture.

Adam, as we have seen, is the only character in the novel who is associated consistently with high culture. Dinah, who has both moral sensibility and sympathy, is seen to struggle only between an earlier sense of vocation to preach and the later development of her love for Adam. Adam later says that Dinah (rather conveniently for him) “thought it right to set th’ example o’ submitting” and has decided, with him, that “women do more harm nor good with their preaching” (583). Dinah herself says that with Adam she has “a fulness of strength to bear and do our heavenly Father’s will, that [she] had lost before” (576). While the narrator never suggests that Dinah’s struggle is misguided, he does mention that Dinah’s giving up her preaching is a “standing subject of difference between” the two brothers. She is the exemplar of altruistic behaviour in the novel: the narrator presents her as an ideal of feminine moral development. While it might be argued that her religion gives her a particular sense of evolution toward Christian perfection, at the end of the novel there is no

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<sup>4</sup> Kristin Brady has argued in a similar vein that the ending of the novel is also achieved at the expense of Hetty’s life.



sense that this development is significant for her character (except insofar as “th’ example of submitting” suggests this).

If culture tends to treat Hetty as an aesthetic object, religion insists on calling her an “unrepentant sinner.” When Hetty asks Dinah at the end of the novel, “do you think God will take away that crying and the place in the wood now that I’ve told everything?” (500), Dinah only says “Let us pray, poor sinner. . . to the God of all mercy” (500), as if she might not be within the reach of divine forgiveness. One has the impression that even with her confession, which to the reader mitigates her guilt, the moral frameworks of the novel are not sufficient to interpret her actions: Adam is perpetually horrified by them, the legal system unconditionally condemns them, and even Dinah says that “her poor soul is very dark” (502).

What moral development (if not self-cultivation) often means for women is a certain ideal of selflessness. However, Eliot also examines the problem of moral awareness in her treatment of lesser characters in the novel: there is usually a tacit acknowledgement on the part of the narrator that the moral assessments of the inhabitants of Hayslope are somehow reductive. There are moral subjects (especially women) who have little comprehension of larger moral frameworks, chiefly because they do not have access to the intellectual life or to the education that the narrator does. When the narrator says of Chad’s Bess, for example, that “Poor Bessy had always been considered a naughty girl; she was conscious of it; if it was necessary to be very good, it was clear she must be in a bad way” (75), the narrator seems complicit with the opinions of those around Bessy—certainly the condescension in the

phrase “naughty girl” is apparent, but the free indirect discourse suggests the rather paternalistic judgement of Bessy’s family or the larger community rather than the narrator’s.

Sometimes the narrator revises or reverses the categories which traditionally apply to the moral lives of women. The following passage, which paraphrases Solomon’s proverbial “wisdom” about women is complex and ambiguous: it is both a shot at the Victorian ideal of the selfless woman and a condescending exposure of the way in which self-effacement may constitute a kind of egoism.

Women who are never bitter and resentful are often the most querulous; and if Solomon was as wise as he is reputed to be, I feel sure that when he compared a contentious woman to a continual dropping on a very rainy day, he had not a vixen in his eye—a fury with long nails, acrid and selfish. Depend upon it, he meant a good creature, who had no joy but in the happiness of the loved ones whom she contributed to make uncomfortable, putting by all the tid-bits for them, and spending nothing on herself. Such a woman as Lisbeth, for example—at once patient and complaining, self-renouncing and exacting, brooding the livelong day over what happened yesterday, and what is likely to happen to-morrow, and crying very readily both at the good and the evil (87).

But what also emerges from this passage (and not necessarily at her expense) is Lisbeth’s lack of a sense of “self.” This lack is not so much a moral issue as a class and gender issue. While Eliot (without overt narrative intervention) suggests that Lisbeth’s deficiencies as a moral subject are to some extent class-based—a result of her

illiteracy, for example—"Well, how'm I to know? It sounds like a tex"—she makes it clear also that Lisbeth nevertheless understands that Seth (among others) "allays makes a peck o' [his] own words out o' a pint o' the Bible's" (90) as a self-authorizing strategy. The moral terms become even more ambiguous, however, for at the same time that the narrator calls Lisbeth's love for her son "idolatrous," he also acknowledges the complexity of the psychological dynamic between them:

[Adam] had no sooner gone a few paces beyond the door than Lisbeth became uneasy at the thought that she had vexed him. Of course, the secret of her objection to the [Adam's wearing his]. . .best clothes was her suspicion that they were put on for Hetty's sake; but deeper than all her peevishness lay the need that her son should love her. She hurried after him, and laid hold of his arm before he had got half-way down to the brook, and said, 'Nay, my lad, thee wotna go away angered wi' thy mother, an' her got nought to do but sit by hersen an' think on thee?' (260).

While at first the narrator's judgement of Lisbeth seems harsh (and the narrator notes more than once that Adam too is inclined to dismiss his mother's complaints), he does not otherwise attempt to direct the reader's reception of or feelings about Lisbeth's stream of complaints. There is a sense that Lisbeth's jealousy comes at least as much from Adam's dismissal of her as it does from her need for Adam's love. While Lisbeth eventually has some consciousness that "human love and pity are the ground and faith in some other love" (246), at the end of the novel her "pride in her

son and her delight in possessing the one daughter she had desired” keep her from “devis[ing] a single pretext for complaint” (578).

Although she is a comic character, Mrs. Poyser expresses some common cultural assumptions about the moral selves of women (and servants) which are similar to the narrator’s and which are sometimes as exclusionary: for her “there was no weakness of which she was less tolerant than feminine vanity, and the preference of ornament to utility”(118). She is condescending in her assumption that Molly’s “blameless conduct. . .shroud[s] a secret indulgence of unbecoming wishes” (118), and says to her that “that’s the way with you—that’s the road you’d all like to go, headlongs to ruin” (119). Although certainly she is concerned for Molly, the novel as a whole does not question her assumptions about Molly’s morality. The narrator’s own distance from characters like Molly is clear from his remark about Molly’s reaction to Mrs. Poyser’s harangue. Molly’s “whimpering” at Mrs. Poyser’s “Dantean picture of her future” (119) emphasizes his own (literate) distance from Molly because she cannot know that this vision is Dantean. But while the reference is comic, there is also a sense that the moral terminology of the novel perpetrates some exclusions.

Thus, the narrator’s encumbered and often contradictory language sometimes undermines the ideal of the cultivated subject as represented in the hero of the novel. The language of higher feeling, which the narrator connects with self-cultivation, also becomes encumbered because it has to account for too much. The narrator’s overdetermined masculine position also reveals the cultivated subject’s classed and gendered nature. While religion does to some extent approximate the work of culture

in the novel for the people of Hayslope, they, like the women of the novel, are excluded from the sense of self and the sense of personal history that Adam enjoys.

## Chapter Two

### **The Gendering of Knowledges in The Mill on the Floss**

A reviewer of The Mill on the Floss wrote in 1860 that the “greatest of all obstacles to the early belief in the female authorship of” Scenes of Clerical Life and Adam Bede

was found in the depth and breadth of the information they revealed, and in the remarkable reserve with which that knowledge was displayed: we are constantly called upon to reflect by some turn of expression that implies familiarity with the most recondite learning or with the last result of scientific investigation. It was thought that no woman could wear such rare jewels of the mind with so little apparent consciousness. That tone of the highest intellectual intercourse it was imagined was found among men alone. (24)<sup>1</sup>

This appeal to “depth,” “breadth,” and “reserve” to describe the writing of men, or more particularly the distinctive perspective and wide knowledge that supposedly informed it, was, as Ina Ferris notes, typical of Victorian reviewers at the time Eliot was writing (25). Review discourse linked reference to a wide body of knowledge, unemotional distance from subject matter, and ability to abstract and interpret deep

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<sup>1</sup> [Anon.], Westminster Review, 74 (July 1860). This reviewer also claims that he was the first to speculate that “George Eliot” was a woman. Eliot’s comments on this review are revealing: “It is an ordinary weakness of human nature for each reader who happens to have a little personal knowledge of an author, to suppose that his book must be capable of thorough explanation by that personal knowledge. . . . Dr. Chapman, after learning from a private source that I was the writer of Adam Bede, and on that ground pronouncing in the W.R. that it was probably a woman’s work, allowed the writer on “The Mill” to begin his article with the assumption of superior acuteness in the Review as the first detector of that fact!” (4: 26, 23 April [1862] )

meaning, with masculine intellectual ability, and its logic ultimately stems from readings of biological difference. Women, not capable of absorbing wider kinds of knowledge, easily became absorbed with superficial details and inner feelings. Their inevitable attention to the surface of things supposedly prevented them from seeing deeply into their subject matter. Women's inability to achieve "objective" distance from their subject matter resulted from their lamentable tendency to become emotionally involved with it. The term "reserve" also suggests the prevalent idea that women who did possess an unusual amount of "masculine" knowledge were all too liable to show it off in a loud "unfeminine" way. This reviewer's reference to Eliot's confident "wearing" of the "jewels of the mind" suggests, of course, that women with a little knowledge are vain as well as noisy about the little they do have.

Assigning a gender to either the narrative voice or the narrative perspective in The Mill on the Floss, however, proves difficult to do. Eliot's narrator here does seem to exhibit very "naturally" (i.e. unselfconsciously) the expected marks of gender the reviewer describes above, drawing on, for example, emphatically "masculine" knowledges like mathematics and classics, displaying them with due reserve, and drawing profound and abstract conclusions, but not calling attention to them in a manner that would gender her as a trespassing woman. Her careful choice of these particular knowledges for her narrator suggests a larger examination of the way in which various kinds of knowledge are gendered in the first place and of the cultural boundaries which dictate that normally women possess one kind of knowledge, men another. Eliot also understood the link between the gendering of these knowledges

and the cultural authority accorded to (male) writers who had access to them and used them to represent and interpret experience. The text thus repeatedly draws attention to the way in which particular kinds of knowledge are gendered, from Mr. Tulliver's reference to "fellows as talk fine and write wi' a flourish" (56) to Tom's ability to make "beautiful whip-cord and rabbit-pens" (82) to the Misses Dodsons' superior knowledge of "due sugar and boiling in preserve-making" (97). In this context, Eliot's positioning of her narrator in relation to these knowledges suggests that certain kinds of feminine knowledge (especially those associated with feeling) ought to be accorded the same kind of status as more "masculine" knowledges.

By positioning her narrator in a certain relation to masculine knowledges, Eliot suggests in the novel as a whole that feeling too is a kind of useful knowledge worthy of the same status as other kinds. In the first part of the novel, Eliot's narrator, with her commentary on the educational methods of Stelling and their relation to the structures of cultural authority in St. Ogg's, suggests that an education in higher feeling should be included with Tom's course of study. Feeling, especially moral feeling, was usually attributed to women as a quality arising naturally as a result of their superior moral natures; it was a quality that also naturally benefited those (especially men) around them. But moral feeling as a female quality was notably unintellectualised, and could only be properly exercised in the home:<sup>2</sup> although

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Poovey quotes Peter Gaskell: "The moral influence of woman upon man's character and domestic happiness, is mainly attributable to her natural and instinctive habits . . . Her love, her tenderness. . . exercise a most ennobling impression upon his nature, and do more towards making him a good husband, a good father, and a useful citizen, than all the dogmas of political economy" ("Uneven", 198). Reviewers also made claims for the "ennobling" effects of the "dogmas" of science.



women were writing works of moral instruction, they were not seen as works that had the “wide” and “deep” insight that masculine intellects could provide: nor were they accorded the same kind of cultural authority as the writing of Mill or Carlyle, for example. In the second part of the novel, Eliot’s narrator, with her close sympathetic analysis of Maggie’s deep feeling and her emphasis on the lack of economic means she has to develop this “raw material,” suggests that women should be given the opportunity to develop such talents not merely as handmaidens to great men, but as legitimate purveyors of “useful knowledge.” The novel also considers the cultural consequences of this kind of self-assertion: the suggestion that Maggie ought to use her talents in this way links her with transgressing women in general (and suggests too, Eliot’s own life, intellectual ambition, and moral project). Maggie’s ambitions for her own life, of being known for intellectual acquisitions, mutate into a kind of sexual transgression: intellectual appetite is thus problematically linked to sexual appetite through the imagery of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

Eliot brings together concerns about this issue both in the decade (1820-30) in which the novel takes place and some twenty to thirty years later, when she was writing it. With the increasing claims of the middle class to various forms of expertise, there was an ongoing debate over the ultimate “usefulness” of particular kinds of knowledge, and the competing claims of various groups for certain kinds of expertise also registered a marked concern with gender. Scientific knowledge, as Judith Newton notes, was especially problematic, because it was available, through scientific societies, to men not educated at universities. Women were the most

obvious outsiders to both groups, but were, nevertheless, writing what male reviewers were quick to call “popular” scientific treatises. In the 1830’s, women like Harriet Martineau wrote about political economy, but the reviewers were careful to associate her with its practical rather than its theoretical side. At this time as well, men writing in the Edinburgh Review increasingly claimed various kinds of expertise, especially “scientific expertise,” as a basis for cultural and interpretative authority. When assessing women’s potential contributions to fields of scientific expertise, the Edinburgh Review “distinguished women’s limited authority as interpreters of history and social relations from the (male) reviewer’s own metatheoretical expertise.” This was especially “crucial in the case of women’s writing on natural science and on political economy” (Newton, Starting, 106). This distinction between “metatheoretical” and practical knowledge comes to repeat itself in critical discourse: men, with their access to wider learning and their ability to distance themselves from their subject matter, can synthesize and find new relations among knowledges, but women are too easily absorbed in surface details.

During the 1850s, there was some agitation at the University of London (later at Oxford and Cambridge), to add a science degree to the already long established ones in mathematics and classics. Scientific knowledge was increasingly presented as a kind of master-knowledge that encompassed and illuminated all other kinds, and it was one, furthermore, to which “ordinary” individuals could aspire: the “vast results” of Science, said one report, “are won by no other mental processes than those which are practised by every individual in the humblest and commonest affairs of

life”.<sup>3</sup> Presumably these “humble” and “common” individuals could not be women, because women could not apply ordinary mental processes in this way. Women such as Sarah Ellis in The Wives of England (a kind of domestic manual) had since the 1840s been promoting their domestic expertise as a kind of “science” in itself, and the science of domestic morality as one that encompassed the public sphere as well. Judith Newton notes that Harriet Martineau is “congratulated” in the reviews “for having voluntarily ‘undertaken to preach the practical truths and blessings’ of the science of political economy ‘rather than its mysteries and creed’” (Starting, 106). However, an 1859 Westminster Review essay, “What Knowledge is of Most Worth,” which is partly based on lectures on education at the Royal Institution of Great Britain, ends with the following paean to Science as a kind of implicitly masculine master-discourse which subsumes so-called “feminine” as well as “masculine” knowledges:

For direct self-preservation, or the maintenance of life and health, the all-important knowledge is—Science. For that indirect self-preservation which we call gaining a livelihood, the knowledge of greatest value is—Science. For the due discharge of parental functions, the proper guidance is to be found only in—Science. For that interpretation of national life, past and present, without which the citizen cannot rightly regulate his conduct, the indispensable key is—Science. Alike for the most perfect production and highest enjoyment of art in all its forms, the needful preparation is—Science. And for purposes of

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<sup>3</sup> Westminster Review, n.s. 19 (January and April 1861), 383.

discipline--intellectual, moral, religious--the most efficient study is once more--  
-Science.<sup>4</sup>

While claiming that this kind of knowledge was to some degree accessible to everyone (the “science as common sense” argument), those wanting to distinguish themselves for possessing it also had to present it, as Judith Newton notes, somewhat paradoxically as nevertheless distinctive in some way, so as to set themselves apart from others with less distinguished backgrounds and to prevent those others from claiming similar kinds of knowledge.

An education in the classics, on the other hand, carried traditional authority as a male privilege, but it had little strictly practical use. Women, although they might pretend to a certain knowledge of practical science, did not usually have access to classical learning. In “What Knowledge is Most Worth,” the writer notes that “the real motive for giving boys a classical education” is “simply conformity to public opinion.” Furthermore, “a boy’s drilling in Latin and Greek is insisted on, not because of their intrinsic value, but . . . that he may have ‘the education of a gentleman’--the badge marking a certain social position, and bringing a consequent respect” (40).<sup>5</sup> Those men who did have classics degrees, however, which involved some education in the sciences, needed also to distinguish their more prestigiously generalist and philosophical learning from those claiming expertise in one particular field. This latter group, in turn, wanted to separate itself from women who were claiming some

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<sup>4</sup> Westminster Review, n.s. 16 (July and October 1859), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

degree of scientific expertise, at least in the reviews, for themselves. This writing still left them open to disdainful charges of mere specialised (read limited and superficial) learning: it was, however, a charge which could also be applied to men of limited expertise. In a report on the Universities and Scientific Education, one writer attempts to work out some of these distinctions:

It seems to us most clear that the youth who is preparing himself for the work of his life by toilsomely making his way through a systematic course of scientific study, has a right to feel that he is not less worthy of the distinction conferred by an Academical degree, than is the companion of his school days, who continues to work up to the regulation standard of classical and mathematical lore, in blissful ignorance of anything but the mere names of those sciences to the acquirement of which his quondam companion may be devoting a far higher measure of intellectual energy. And the man who has prepared himself for the special pursuit of some one department of science by a comprehensive survey of its whole range, has a right to claim a title that shall be an authoritative attestation of his having done so, and shall distinguish him from the mere Chemist, the mere Geologist, the mere Botanist or Zoologist, who knows nothing beyond the boundaries of his own particular field, and has not been trained in those general philosophical principles that shall guide him in any venture he may make into new paths of inquiry. (385)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Westminster Review n.s. 19 (January and April 1861).

The writer carefully separates the “mere Botanist or Zoologist” from the man educated in wider “general philosophical principles,” wanting to link the new potential man of science with the latter rather than the former group, going as far as to assert that when “a man makes Science the business of his life, it is as truly his profession as Medicine or Law can be, and equally claims to have its status acknowledged by Academical distinction.”<sup>7</sup>

In The Mill on the Floss an education in the classics, although a mark of gentlemanly status, is already problematically irrelevant for Tom Tulliver, who finds that he has need of more practical knowledge in order to start in Deane’s business. Classical knowledge is, however, important as a knowledge belonging to both class and gender privilege: Maggie is excluded from it, but Eliot herself is well enough informed of it to describe Tom’s experiences at school. Tom’s tutor, Mr. Stelling, who is not at all progressive, belongs to that group of men which considers that “the only basis of solid instruction” is “instilling Euclid into the minds of” pupils like Tom, and that

all other means of education were mere charlatanism, and could produce nothing better than smatterers. Fixed on this firm basis, a man might observe the display of various or special knowledge made by irregularly educated people with a pitying smile: all that sort of thing was very well, but it was impossible these people could form sound opinions. (207)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> All quotations from The Mill on the Floss are from George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss, ed. A.S. Byatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977). First published 1862.

The narrator's free indirect discourse ironizes Stelling's narrowness when he looks down upon the increasing claims to specialised expertise of those not possessed of a university education. His use of "masculine" adjectives like "firm" and "sound" valorize his supposedly wide base of philosophical and scientific knowledge and suggests the kind of authority that a reviewer particularly might want to claim. Eliot, in ironizing Stelling's claim to apparently sound opinions, suggests the dubious knowledge that undergirds certain kinds of masculine authority.

The narrator's ironic analysis of the relationship between Stelling's claim to intellectual status and his ambitions, as well as of Riley's claim to status with Tulliver, come down, in the end, not to any real faith in the importance of learning, but to an appetite for money. In those "dark ages" when the novel takes place (240), the narrator reminds us that "income, by a logical confusion to which Fortune, being a female as well as blindfold, is peculiarly liable, was proportioned" not to the "wants" of gentlemen, "but to their intellect—with which income has clearly no inherent relation" (240-241). This ideal but ironically sound economic principle, attributed to the "logical confusion" of a feminine agency, ends up being a joke at Mr. Stelling's expense, underscoring with an ironic bodily emphasis both his greed and his appetite for money. The narrator presses her case when she asks how "Stelling should be expected to know that education was a delicate and difficult business? any more than an animal endowed with a power of boring a hole through rock should be expected to have wide views of excavation" (241). Stelling's "wide knowledge," in an amusing

reversal, becomes a kind of narrow specialization, and acquires the metaphorical narrowness of animal instinct.

The narrator also criticizes the “slight grounds” on which Riley, a man educated with what the narrator calls a “tincture” of the classics, recommends Stelling to Mr. Tulliver and thus exposes the social basis of a certain kind of masculine authority in Chapter 3 of the novel, when she describes the reasons for Riley’s “oracular” status with Tulliver. Riley’s recommendation of Stelling comes from both male networks (often tenuous ones) and from what she calls “a small family of immediate desires” (75). The recommendation, which comes vaguely from contact with a certain Gadsby, “whose first cousin was an Oxford tutor” (75), allows Riley, while “standing well with” the powerful businessman Timpson, “to help Stelling to a paying pupil,” and to “[impress] his friend Tulliver with additional respect” (77). Significantly, Riley’s authority is partly a matter of voicing and gesture, partly a matter of theatrical delivery. Riley’s “immovability of face and . . . habit of taking a pinch of snuff before he [gives] an answer [make] him trebly oracular to Mr. Tulliver” (64), but of course, says the narrator, “if you deliver an opinion at all, it is mere stupidity not to do it with an air of conviction and well-founded knowledge.” (76). Riley’s authority thus has a rather specious base. His education, his “tincture of the classics,” (of which nothing remains but a “subtle aroma from his juvenile contact with the De Senectute and the Fourth Book of the Aeneid,” and which can now “only be perceived in the higher finish and force of his auctioneering style,” (75) is enough for Tulliver, and enough for the not very “delicate scrupulosity” of the average observer.



The narrator also exposes how Riley can easily convince himself that these “slight grounds,” which include Stelling’s “having made a speech at Mudport on a political occasion,” Riley’s feeling for “Timpson’s large family of daughters” (some feminine ironizing here), and the familiarity of “Louisa Timpson’s face with its light curl,” so that it is “natural her husband should be a commendable tutor” are really very substantial. One of the elements in masculine authority seems to be the possession of appropriately dependent females. This dubiously grounded masculine authority also perpetuates itself easily: Riley “had no sooner recommended [Stelling] than he began to think with admiration of a man recommended on such high authority” (75-6).

If the narrator chides her audience ironically for being potentially “rather hard upon” Riley, her analysis of Stelling’s motives is at least as unflattering (76). She links Riley condescendingly with the material when she says that his “consciousness would have been a mere blank” had there not been “pleasant little dim ideas and complacencies [there] . . . along with the warm hearth and brandy and water,” but she does say that “most of us” live “with a small family of immediate desires” like this (75). Stelling, on the other hand, is more explicitly condemned for his greed: “Perhaps it is,” speculates the narrator ironically, “that high achievements demand some other unusual qualification besides an unusual desire for high prizes . . . perhaps it is that these stalwart gentlemen are rather indolent, their divinae particulam aurae”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Byatt’s note: “The passage, (Horace, Satires, II, ii, 79) is part of a long discussion of over elaborate and intemperate eating.” She translates these lines: “The body, clogged with yesterday’s excesses, weighs down the mind as well, and fixes the particle of the divine breath firmly to the earth.” Stelling does not, the narrator implies, learn the moral lessons in the works he has studied (676).

being obstructed from soaring by a too hearty appetite” (240). The men of St. Ogg’s almost never exhibit superior mental abilities, but rather, seem unusually embodied in their lack of analytical distance from their own motives and desires.

The narrator’s claim to other kinds of knowledge in The Mill on the Floss tends to be double-edged, especially when she looks at the middle-class life of Maggie’s relatives. On one hand, she authorizes her analytical method (and her “petty” subject matter) with a reference to natural science, and asks : “does not science tell us that its highest striving is after the ascertainment of a unity which shall bind the smallest things with the greatest? In natural science, I have understood, there is nothing petty to the mind that has a large vision of relations, and to which every single object suggests a vast sum of conditions” (363). On the other hand, her analysis of the life of the Dodsons is often mocking, and her readings of their behaviour makes use of “masculine” categories of analysis in order to diminish them, men as well as women, to some degree. The critique of masculine authority, which the narrator accomplishes with regard to Stelling and Riley partly by reversing the categories of mind and body usually associated with men and women respectively and partly by implying that their notions of what constitutes education are erroneous, continues with the Dodsons and Tullivers in the middle sections of the novel, and especially focuses upon the hierarchical nature of their marriages. The relationship between the Tullivers is very different from that between the Pulletts and Gleggs: Mrs. Tulliver occupies a traditionally submissive position in her marriage. In an earlier portion of the novel, Mr. Tulliver notes that he chose Elizabeth Dodson for his wife

because she was the mildest of the sisters. This is an arrangement that meets with much disapproval from the other Dodson women, who imply that Tulliver's rashness (and consequent loss of the lawsuit) are a result of Bessie's lack of control over her husband—more specifically, Mrs. Glegg charges her with handing over her money for him to make away with as he pleases. She, however, makes sure that she has control over her own money in her own marriage: "It's pleasant work for you to give my money away," she says to her husband, "as you've pretended to leave at my own disposal" (294). That the Dodson sisters see Tulliver's spending as an extravagance is something of a contradiction, particularly in terms of the bourgeois ideal respectable display, for in the Glegg and Deane families no expense is spared where display is important: women are clearly in charge of family reputation through due display of the "proper" accoutrements as marks of status.

While the narrator implies that the Dodson women's control over their own money after their respective marriages is a kind of virtue, she nevertheless makes it clear that this love for display fosters moral weakness. Mrs. Pullet's appearance at the Tullivers' for dinner while she is grieving for her friend is subject to mocking analysis by the narrator: "From the sorrow of a Hottentot to that of a woman in large buckram sleeves . . . what a long series of gradations!" she exclaims in mock wonder. "In the enlightened child of civilization, the abandonment characteristic of grief is an interesting problem to the analytic mind" (112). The narrator's "analytic" mind marvels at the way in which Mrs. Pullet, with a kind of "scientific" expertise, avoids abandonment, even when mourning the death of a friend. She presents the

mathematical “problem” of Mrs. Pullet’s unruffled entrance: “if with her eyes half blinded by the mist of tears, she were to walk with a too devious step through a doorplace, she might crush her buckram sleeves,” but “the deep consciousness of this possibility produces a composition of forces by which she takes a line that just clears the doorpost” (112). The Misses’ Dodsons’ “civilised” concern with appearance and social propriety appears as “natural” as Riley’s and Stelling’s with money, but Mrs. Pullet’s calculations are of an “expected” superficial sort. However, it is also clear that Mrs. Pullet’s appearance is really the result of “having leisure and money to carry her crying and everything else to the highest pitch of respectability” (114), and not of any innate feminine foolishness (or excessive feeling).

The narrator’s description of Mr. Tulliver’s and Mr. Deane’s “typically” masculine talk about politics following dinner also reverses gender categories. Mr. Tulliver, who likes few things “better than a chat with Mr. Deane . . . the ‘knowingest’ man of his acquaintance” takes care to arrange this chat without the “frivolous interruption” of the women (132). The narrator shows their analysis of the politics of the Catholic Question to be founded not on any superior knowledge of politics or sound ground for analysis, but upon Deane’s special or particular knowledge of trade with the Prussians, “the build of their vessels together with the unsatisfactory character of transactions in Dantzic beer . . . inclining him to form rather a low view of Prussian pluck generally” (132-3). Tulliver cannot lay claim to this kind of knowledge, and is instead comforted by its closeness to his economic situation. Pullet

sits “by and [listens] with twinkling eyes to these high matters” because, in an unexpectedly “feminine” way, he doesn’t understand politics.

In Chapter 3 of Book Fourth, the narrator emphasizes the important link between the “wide and arduous national life condensed in unfragrant deafening factories, cramping itself in mines . . . or else . . . scattered in lonely houses and huts on the clayey or chalky cornlands” (385) with the “very expensive production” of “good society” (385). The Dodsons and Tullivers clearly exist uneasily between these two extremes, but , in the absence of “light irony,” are more closely linked with “the arduous national life.” Maggie, with her religious fervour, on the other hand, is linked with “something that will present motives in an entire absence of high prizes, something that will give patience” and which “clearly . . . lies outside personal desires” (386). In her desire for this wider moral framework, Maggie is linked both with the “feminine” moral feeling and with the wider “masculine” perspective of the narrator. That she can achieve such a perspective despite or even because of her deep feeling underscores the novel’s general undermining of gendered distinction between “masculine” and “feminine” knowledges.

Maggie’s complex relationship to the Dodsons and to the narrator’s wide “masculine” knowledge is the most important aspect of Eliot’s rewriting of gender difference in The Mill on the Floss, and works along with Eliot’s stress on her own relationship to “masculine” knowledges. The narrating “I” speaks from a range of positions, at one end very close to Maggie, and at the other at some more “neutral” distance from her that has been encoded as masculine, not only at the time Eliot was

writing, but also by several early twentieth-century critics, who find the narrator's closeness to Maggie dismaying.<sup>10</sup>

These narrative positions are carefully orchestrated at the beginning of the novel. The impersonally focalised narrative description moves in and out of gender categories, and the eye that observes the landscape seems to draw on a body of knowledge and experience that the reader cannot definitely associate with a particular gender. The focal point in the landscape, the place where the Floss and the tide meet, is a site where the public, masculine world of trade and the private feminine world of domestic relationships coalesce. Eliot suggests that the "meaning" of the landscape does not much depend upon the gender of the observer, though the narrating "eye" will later come to be associated with an implicitly female body. When the focus moves outward to include a larger sketch of St. Ogg's, the landscape's "meaning" is primarily commercial and material (crops and bee-hive ricks and ships), but at the end of the first paragraph, the observer finds a specific private meaning in the landscape.

The productive activity of the mill then becomes the starting point for the narrative: "the rush of the water and the booming . . . bring a dreamy deafness which seems to heighten the peacefulness of the scene. They are like a great curtain of sound, shutting one out from the world beyond" (54). Judith Newton has noted that the "world" of The Mill on the Floss is a "world in which the ships of commerce must

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<sup>10</sup> F.R. Leavis, as Nina Auerbach notes, seems almost to wish Eliot were a man: he laments the dreadful feminine emotional connection implied by the narrator's apparent closeness to Maggie (Woman, 306).

be seen in relation to the pastures of a disappearing agrarian society, a world in which larger forces, like the waters of the Ripple, the Floss, and the sea constantly ‘meet,’ ‘embrace,’ and ‘flow’ into one another” (Women, 125). Newton asserts that the book insists on the perils of ignorance, particularly ignorance of the social and economic issues that impinge on private life. The narrator specifically situates herself in the private sphere here, along with the little girl isolated from the outside world, but the narrator, unlike the little girl, also possesses knowledge of the world wider than that usually associated with her ostensibly “feminine” perspective.

This amounts to a feminine authorizing of the narrative. It does not mean, however, that the observer sees the landscape in what would have been for Eliot’s audience an expected “feminine” way. At the beginning of Chapter Two, the first overt bit of narrative commentary seems consistent with a female observer in its tone of apparent dismay and its subject matter—the narrator is “afraid to think how long it is since fan-shaped caps were worn” (56), and also suggests a “feminine” horror at the possible reference to age. Further along, however, the narrative voice seems to ironize this feminine way of looking at the passage of time, and the narrator’s own distance from the time when these caps were “considered sweet things” makes her earlier dismay seem rather mocking. When the narrator refers later to Mrs. Glegg’s dresses, for example, as belonging “to a stratum of garments just old enough to have come recently into wear” (109), she seems no longer dismayed by this distance. Despite these more overtly feminine interventions in the narrative, the narrator is not only associated with “expected” feminine knowledge like that of the fashion world.

Her feminine authorizing presence becomes harder to define in gendered terms as the narrative progresses, but her close affinities with Maggie's perspective work to assert that Maggie, although without access to the kind of learning that Tom has, understands more about what constitutes "effectual wisdom" (380) than he or any other character in the novel does.

In "The Valley of Humiliation," the narrator, as we have seen, authorizes her study of Maggie's life and the life of the Dodsons and Tullivers in general by stating that "there is nothing petty to the mind that has a large vision of relations" (363). More particularly, when the narrator asserts that "the religious and moral ideas of the Dodsons and Tullivers were of too specific a kind to be arrived at deductively, from the statement that they were part of the Protestant population of Great Britain", this statement surely has an implicit counterpart: one can, on the other hand, know much about Maggie's circumstances from the statement that she is part of the female population of Great Britain. The "vast sum of conditions" that "produce" Maggie's experience are related to the ideology of gender.

In the middle of the novel, Maggie's thirst for "masculine wisdom" is tellingly ironic because of the gap between the trust she has in this wisdom as a "solution" to her dreary life and the actual content of Tom's old school books, which she supposes are repositories of important knowledge. She thinks that "if she had only books that she might learn for herself what wise men knew!" Stories of "[s]aints and martyrs" (perhaps "expected" reading for young women, the narrator tells us) "had never interested Maggie so much as sages and poets . . . Still, Latin, Euclid and Logic



would surely be a considerable step in masculine wisdom—in that knowledge which made men contented and even glad to live” (380). She finds “this wrinkled fruit of the tree of knowledge” (387) oddly unsatisfying, but still trusts that if she went “to some great man—Walter Scott, perhaps, and [told] him how wretched and how clever she was, . . . he would surely do something for her” (381).<sup>11</sup> The narrator also stresses the general unfitness of texts of masculine wisdom to describe Maggie’s experience: she has a “startled sense that the relation between Aldrich and this living world was extremely remote for her” (380). She has been trained to think the acquisition of this “masculine” knowledge difficult, but finds “a gleam of triumph now and then that her understanding” is “quite equal” to her “peculiarly masculine studies” and seems “to see herself honoured for her surprising attainments” (380). The narrator does not ironize this “expected” feminine reaction but instead sympathizes with it. An Eve with a spiritual appetite, Maggie “nibble[s] at this thick-rinded fruit of the tree of knowledge” without satisfaction, and without significant damage.

The narrator continues her analysis of bourgeois life in the section of the novel entitled “The Downfall.” Here, she stresses not only the market value, but the cultural value placed on certain kinds of knowledge, and implicitly adds her own knowledge as a woman writer to various competing claims of what constitutes useful

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<sup>11</sup> This consultation of “some great man” is a motif in the experience of some women writers who, profoundly doubting their apparently “unwomanly” vocations, sought the patronage, or at least the approval, of male literary figures (e.g. Charlotte Brontë and Robert Southey). Matthew Arnold apparently told Mary (Arnold) Ward on the publication of her first novel that “No Arnold can write a novel; if they could, I should have done it” (qtd. in Sutherland, 100). Although Maggie is not a writer here, her proposed consultation of one suggests that this is the only outlet that occurs to her as appropriate for her talents.

knowledge. The narrator's extended critique of educated professionals such as Stelling comes down in the end, as we have seen, to a critique of the use they make of their privileged knowledge, with the implication that the privilege of education carries with it some responsibility. More specifically, the narrator chastises Stelling for his lack of moral judgement and feeling when he undertakes Tom's education. For prosperous bourgeois families such as the Gleggs, Pullets, and Deanes, the possession of certain kinds of knowledge is directly linked to economic advancement, and knowledge has value for them only insofar as it results in direct economic reward: for Deane, it is just a matter of tapping into the right market. Gender and class also influence the way in which certain groups judge the "usefulness" or marketability of particular knowledges: we have seen Stelling's contempt for generalists who cannot form "sound opinions."

Eliot consistently ironizes various characters' perceptions of the economic "laws" that influence the fortunes of middle class individuals like Riley and families like the Dodsons and Tullivers in order to illustrate their ignorance of the moral complications that result when the law of supply and demand serves their "small family of immediate desires." We have seen, for example, that the narrator represents the apparently general feeling of male professionals, when Fortune, that blind and feminine agency which somehow decrees that income shall be proportioned to intellect and not to the "wants" of gentlemen such as Stelling. To Uncle Deane, Tom's knowledge of Latin is a frivolous acquisition: Deane associates this knowledge with members of the upper class who, he thinks, can afford it (like wig powder) as a

luxury that ought to be taxable; to Tom, preoccupied with fulfilling his own role as masculine provider for the family, Maggie's "feminine" knowledge is of no practical use, and he is impatient with what he sees as her groundless (albeit joking) offer to provide him with "useful knowledge": Maggie, he says, is "always setting [her]self above [him] and everyone else" (319). As a woman trained at Miss Firniss' school, Maggie has no practical knowledge with which she can help her reduced family: she can only go out to sew. The narrator's emphasis upon Maggie's difficulty in finding some economic means of helping her family in its reduced circumstances is not just part of Eliot's critique of the limitedness of women's education: it also demonstrates how knowledges considered "feminine" are drastically undervalued and underdefined. Although women like the Dodson sisters can produce household goods that are marketable (Mrs. Tulliver goes out to sell her pickles, made from a long-cherished Dodson family recipe, to the grocer), Maggie, who is clearly not of a domestic turn, but nevertheless intelligent, has no real market or outlet for her talents.

What Maggie does have, however, is moral judgement: the narrator notes frequently that Tom asserts his right to judge others' moral conduct because his gender gives him a strong sense of his own rightness: "You think you know better than anyone," he says to Maggie, "but you're almost always wrong. I can judge much better than you can" (319). It is clear, however, that the narrator thinks Maggie's power of judgment valid: it is, in fact, what Maggie shares with the narrator, along with the important basis of moral feeling. At the same time, however, this skill is not marketable for Maggie because she does not have access to the same kinds of public

economic opportunities as Tom does. Eliot, on the other hand, in presenting her narrator as a judge of and sympathizer with Maggie's moral dilemmas, is effectively exercising what can be seen as her superior claim to this kind of knowledge in the public sphere without being "contaminated" by it. The beginning of the novel, which makes clear a more direct correspondence between Maggie and the narrator, emphasizes the narrator's separation from the public life of St. Ogg's as well as her wide knowledge of the public sphere which informs it. Eliot also makes a claim for the ultimate usefulness of this kind of knowledge, with the implication that women ought to have access to its intellectual benefits. While Maggie also desires what she thinks is "masculine" wisdom, what the narrator calls in free indirect discourse the very "secrets of life" (379), it becomes clear that this kind of knowledge, especially for women, does not result in spiritual power so much as in a masochistic kind of self denial.

When Tom applies for a job at his Uncle Deane's, as we have seen, the latter is rather disdainful about the value of his nephew's education at Mr. Stelling's. Tom tells Deane about reading "English Poetry . . . Horae Paulinae, and Blair's Rhetoric," and the narrator ironically comments that Deane

felt in the position of many estimable persons when they had read the New Tariff and found how many commodities were imported of which they knew nothing: like a cautious man of business, he was not going to speak rashly of a raw material of which he had had no experience. But the presumption was,

that if it had been good for anything, so successful a man would hardly have been ignorant of it. (312)

The narrator's ironic descriptions of Deane's self-importance and high opinion of his own expertise underscore the excessive narrowness of the Dodson view. This obsession with money-getting, as a number of critics have noted, is part of Eliot's critique of the increasing commodification of bourgeois life in general. Although it is true, as we have seen, that the value of the kind of knowledge Tom gains at Mr. Stelling's was being debated at the time Eliot was writing the novel, Deane's unwillingness to consider the problem of his own ignorance (Tom has a similar problem with regard to Maggie's knowledge) is, for Eliot, an indication of moral failing. The Dodson relatives' unwillingness to help the Tullivers in their trouble is immediately felt as their particular moral failing by Maggie (and less explicitly by the narrator), and Maggie, much to Tom's chagrin, cries out against their selfishness:

'Why do you come, then,' she burst out, 'talking, and interfering with us and scolding us, if you don't mean to do anything to help my poor mother--your own sister--if you've no feeling for her when she's in trouble, and won't part with anything, though you would never miss it, to save her from pain. Keep away from us then, and don't come to find fault with my father--he was better than any of you--he was kind--he would have helped you, if you had been in trouble.' (296)

Maggie's implicit superiority in moral feeling and judgement is important in the narrator's overall analysis of the way in which gender and class factors contribute

to the cultural valuing of certain kinds of knowledge. The end of the novel has been read as a kind of warning against the dangers of strong feeling, with the flood representing the overwhelming nature of Maggie's sexual desire for Stephen, and the transgressive nature of female desire in general. Given Maggie's "transgression," it might have been easy for a Victorian audience to have read her as a character who "typically" falls prey to "feminine" excesses of feeling, and who, in her moral nature and her sexual downfall, embodies the contradictions inherent in woman's nature. Tom's readings of her initial meetings with Philip in the Red Deeps, then again of the proposed meetings at Deane's, and finally of her "lapse" with Stephen, are based on conventional readings of women's nature. Tom asserts his own manly role in Maggie's protection from Philip and Stephen using the logic of the division between the spheres: "You might have sense enough to see," he tells her, "that a brother, who goes out into the world and mixes with men, necessarily knows better what is right and respectable for his sister than she can know herself" (504). He emphasizes her lack of self-control in contrast to his own, telling her that he has "had feelings to struggle with—but . . . conquered them" (614). He wonders, finally, what will keep her from "doing wrong" (613). The narrator's account of Maggie's thoughts about Tom—that "he was narrow and unjust, that he was below feeling those mental needs which were often the source of the wrong-doing that made her life a planless riddle to him" matches her own declaration that although "[t]here was a terrible cutting truth in Tom's words," it was "that hard rind of truth which is discerned by unimaginative, unsympathetic minds" (504-5).

The other major reading of Maggie's near-elopement with Stephen in the novel is that of what the narrator calls "the world's wife," or public opinion. Tom's rejection of Maggie when she returns is taken as "proof" of some sexual impropriety: "her own brother had turned her from his door—he had seen enough, you might be sure, before he would do that" (621). The "world's wife, with that fine instinct which is given her for the preservation of society, saw at once that Miss Tulliver's conduct had been of the most aggravated kind" (620). The narrator later tempers this criticism of the unwarrantedly repressive feminine view of things by declaring that St. Ogg's was not "empty of women with some tenderness of heart and conscience . . . But until every good man is brave, we must expect to find many good women timid: too timid even to believe in the correctness of their own best promptings, when these would place them in a minority . . . . It was the general feeling of the masculine mind at St. Ogg's that women were not to be interfered with in their treatment of each other" (637). Although the women here are not acting on their "own best promptings", the narrator's comments also suggest that the men of St. Ogg's are wrong in "not interfering": "good brave men" implies men brave enough, presumably, to correct women's tendency to condemn other women. But hostile opinion is not entirely feminine opinion and not all-powerful in "reading" Maggie's situation either, for the narrator qualifies her earlier statements. It is now the men who have a tendency to gossip: "some of them were fond of scandal. . .to an extent that might have given their conversation an effeminate character if it had not been distinguished by

masculine jokes and by an occasional shrug of the shoulders at the mutual hatred of women” (637).

With the ending of The Mill on the Floss, the narrator explores some of the more problematic aspects of her general claim that women’s special province is feeling. She attempts to forestall more simplistic readings of Maggie’s nature by declaring, for example, that the “passionate sensibility” which “belong[s] to her nature . . . made her faults and virtues all merge in each other—made her affection sometimes an angry demand, but also prevented her vanity from taking the form of mere feminine coquetry and device, and gave it the poetry of ambition” (514). But

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the language of feeling cannot be completely emptied of gendered overtones.<sup>12</sup> The imagery of the fall which pervades the novel suggests prevailing readings of what feminine emotional life is. But in articulating her claim to women's participation in knowledges usually reserved for men through a narrator who exhibits the "masculine" characteristics of "wide knowledge," and "deep insight," but for whom "feminine" moral feeling clearly forms the basis of this insight, Eliot effects a kind of compromisory claim. She suggests that any improvements in society or in morality demand the provision of some intellectual outlet for particular female talents. With her narrator's participation in the debate on useful knowledge, Eliot also makes a claim for herself and other women writers.

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<sup>12</sup> Stefan Collini notes that the language of motivation was also problematically polarised between "selfishness" (or "baseness") and "selflessness" or unambiguous altruism (84-5).

## Chapter Three

### Culture and the Narrator in Felix Holt

Felix Holt was written when the high culture novel was on its way to becoming an almost exclusively male preserve in the late 1860s and 70s.<sup>1</sup> The meaning of “culture”, as we have seen, was being debated in one form or another by political theorists such as John Stuart Mill, and by men of letters such as Matthew Arnold. The fiercest debate was about who was to have access to culture, for part of the process of acquiring it meant having access to education. Although it was part of the rhetoric of the proponents of high culture to speak about it as if it were accessible to all, this was not actually true: women were not in a position to participate in it, and the working class even less so. It was commonly proposed as a “solution” to this problem that some kind of intellectual group was needed to be the purveyors of culture (and education) for the lower classes.

The idea that an intellectual “class” or other group ought to be the disseminators of “culture” had its roots in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s conception of the clerisy, a conception which he elaborated in On the Constitution of the Church and State (1830): for Coleridge, the work of the intellectuals was to be closely allied with that of the Church of England: their “object” being, as he said, “to secure and

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<sup>1</sup> This is Gaye Tuchman’s argument in Edging Women Out.

improve. . . civilization, without which the nation could be neither permanent nor progressive” (qtd. in Heyck, 67). Thomas Carlyle also believed that England needed a version of such a group of intellectuals (he called it the “Aristocracy of Talent” in Past and Present) and so did John Stuart Mill. As Mill put it, this group should be composed of “a great number of persons of the highest degree of cultivation which the accumulated acquisitions of the human race make it possible to give them”, so that “[f]rom such persons, in a community that knows no distinction of ranks, civilization would rain down its influence on the remainder of society” (qtd. in Heyck, 195). Auguste Comte, too, envisioned a kind of priesthood composed of “philosopher-priests” who should not, he said, marry or become involved in politics. It was important that the intellectuals keep a distance from politics, “in order”, as Comte put it, “to preserve that breadth and generality of view which is their principal intellectual characteristic.” The “specializing influence” of “practical affairs”, he thought, “would. . . impair their speculative capacity” (qtd. in Kent, 136).

Eliot herself shared this uneasiness (although not necessarily the Comtean version of it) about the participation of intellectuals in public life. When John Stuart Mill was running for Parliament, Eliot expressed some apprehension: “I am not anxious that he should be in Parliament: thinkers can do more outside than inside the House. But it would have been a fine precedent, and would have made an epoch, for such a man to have been asked for and elected solely on the ground of his mental

eminence” (4:196, 10 July 1865).<sup>2</sup> Certainly she saw herself as one of the disseminators of culture: when one reviewer compared her to Dinah Mulock Craik, she maintained that Craik was “a writer who is read only by novel readers, pure and simple, never by people of high culture. A very excellent woman she is, I believe—but we belong to an entirely different order of writers.”<sup>3</sup> Eliot’s letters as a whole contain several comments about the general public’s unappreciative reception of her work, an unappreciativeness which she attributes to their hankering after popular forms of entertainment: “I suppose”, she writes, that “the reason my 6s / editions are never on the railway stalls is partly of the same kind that hinders the free distribution of Felix. They are not so attractive to the majority as “The Trail of the Serpent” [by Mary Elizabeth Braddon]; still a minority might sometimes buy them if they were there” (4:309-10, 11 September 1866). When the 12s/ edition of Felix Holt did not do as well as she hoped, she wrote, “I suppose putting it in a yellow cover with figures on it reminding oneself of the outside of a show, and charging a shilling for it, is what we are expected to do for the good of mankind” (4:354, 21 March 1867).

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<sup>2</sup> In his chapter on Mill in Public Moralists, Collini says that there was some doubt about how Mill, as a “man of speculation and thought” would fare among the “men of action and routine” (the terms are Walter Bagehot’s, qtd. in Collini, 155). This suggests, like Eliot’s comment, that the function of intellectuals was seen as removed from political life.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in J. Russell Perkin, p. 26. Mulock (later Craik) had earlier (anonymously) voiced her own objections to Eliot’s “order” of writing in a review of The Mill on the Floss; while she said that it was “one of the finest imaginative works of our language”, she criticised the ambiguous import of the ending, saying that “it is not right to paint Maggie only as she is in her strong, unsatisfied, erring youth—and leave her there, her doubts unresolved, her passion unregulated, her faults unatoned and forgiven” (qtd. in Carroll, “Critical Heritage”, 160). She also said of the characters that “We are never quite satisfied in our detestation of the Dodson family, the more odious because so dreadfully natural that we feel we are all haunted by some of the race. . . [And] we are vexed with ourselves for being so angry with stern, honest, upright, business-like Tom. Women writers such as Margaret Oliphant and Charlotte Yonge tended to object either that Eliot’s novels were not didactic enough or that there was a troubling

But the concept and function of culture was thus by no means clearly elaborated when Eliot was writing Felix Holt in 1865-66. Matthew Arnold's 1867 article in the Cornhill Magazine, "Culture and its Enemies", is one of the best known contributions to the debate about the meaning of culture: it became part of the collection of essays that make up Culture and Anarchy in 1869.<sup>4</sup> Arnold's views were very hotly contested by his contemporaries: the later chapters of Culture and Anarchy are written defensively in the sense that they are a justification or response to contemporary critiques of the concept. The Daily Telegraph "described Arnold as a snob who boasted of teaching 'the gentlemen of England' but not the 'sons of tradesmen'; he was a man whose "'gentle limbs,' too tender for battle, were clothed in 'a flowered dressing gown'" (qtd. in Coulling, 185). Arnold's contemporaries were thus quick to point out the élitism of his rhetoric (and, here at least, to impugn his masculinity).

Frederic Harrison, a leading Positivist and frequent correspondent of Eliot's, was a particularly vocal critic of Arnold. In the 1867 piece "Culture: a Dialogue", published in the Fortnightly Review, he takes Arnold to task for borrowing his ideas from Comte. Harrison refers to Arnold's retirement speech from the Oxford Chair of Poetry, but does not mention him by name. The main character in the piece, a

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discrepancy between the moral tone of her novels and her "immoral" life. See Valerie Sanders, Eve's Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Novelists.

<sup>4</sup> This article, originally published in the Cornhill Magazine, July 1867, was the copy Arnold used for the lecture from the chair of Poetry at Oxford on June 7. It later became the first chapter of Culture and Anarchy, with some additions (for these see R.H. Super, ed., The Complete Works of Matthew Arnold, Vol. IX, The Last Word. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977, 2nd ed., 1978, p. 542).

gullible Englishman travelling “on the Continent”, meets a “young gentleman from Prussia”, Arminius von Thunder-ten-dronck, who says that he has heard of the “discourse upon Culture . . . in which from report there must have been fine things as finely said” but that he has also heard that there “were lurking traces” in it “of . . . your superlative dandyism, some of your flabby religious phrases, your hash of metaphysical old bones” (603). The Englishman, indignant, replies that “[i]t might have come . . . straight from some lost dialogue of Plato, such the ethereal glance of the idea, such the lyric charm of words.” Harrison’s choice of name for the Prussian is of course reminiscent of the Voltaire’s for the Baron in Candide. The character of Arminius is actually Arnold’s (Vogeler 82), but Harrison’s treatment suggests he is familiar with Voltaire’s mode of writing. His send-up of the naïveté and vagueness of the proponents of culture in the face of evidence to the contrary is like Voltaire’s mockery of the philosopher Pangloss, who, when faced with numerous disasters, insists on the goodness of Providence in the best of all possible worlds. Harrison also pokes fun at the verbal excesses of the reviewers when they praise writers like Arnold.

Arminius’ chief criticism of the lofty ideal of Culture (or at least of Arnold’s definition of it) is that he is never specific about how it is to be attained. When the Englishman rhapsodizes, “Culture . . . is perfection in all things; in everything it fixes standards of perfection, and standards which are real. Perfection in all things! . . . Ambrosial grace, immortal calm! . . . Culture. . . is nourished on the best ideas of the time. It diffuses these ideas, it clarifies them, it attunes them. As I have told you, its

function is to humanise all knowledge” (609, 607). It was a common complaint about Arnold that his definitions were vague, and that there was very little in his writings about how his new world of culture was to be established. In the person of Arminius, Harrison accuses Arnold of borrowing heavily from Comte and of not having a viable social “plan” for English society. Arminius says to the Englishman, “You have excellently described, in a vein which recalls to me many a fine bit from Goethe, and even from Plato, a very noble condition or state of the soul. . . . Let me now ask you to describe the process by which it is attained” (604-5), and the Englishman replies vaguely, “I suppose it comes” (605). Harrison denounced those who gave “the working man’s lack of culture as a reason for denying him the vote, or the educated man’s possession of it as a ground for giving him an extra vote” as “the very silliest cant of the day.” Culture was “‘a desirable quality in a critic of new books’, but in politics it meant ‘simply a turn for small fault-finding, love of selfish ease, and indecision in action’” (qtd. in Vogeler, 81).

Harrison’s charges are not without basis, for Arnold’s definitions in “Culture and its Enemies” are often vague. Culture, according to Arnold, is “the study of perfection” which “moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good”(59). It is “a harmonious expansion of all the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature, and is not consistent with the over-development of any one power at the expense of the rest” (64). Arnold subsumes under “culture” the work of religion, science, philanthropy, and education, a wide generalization which

suggests that it was more accessible than it really was. Eliot was not nearly as explicit in her evaluation of culture as Harrison was, but nor was she as vague as Arnold, even if the issue of who was to have access to culture was also a vexed one for her. Felix Holt reflects contemporary concerns with culture and its accompanying class and gender politics in its dual focus on the education of the lower classes through the hero and on the moral education of women through Esther's "transformation." The narrative voice of the novel, which is sometimes very close to Felix's as the voice of culture, also exhibits or reflects certain anxieties about it. These surface especially in the narrator's treatment of the relationship between the hero and Esther Lyon, and are compounded by the narrator's elaboration of the novel's larger political contexts and by the additional private story of Mrs. Transome. The novel both gestures toward a more complex definition of culture and represents an intervention in the debate about how the working class should participate in its production. It is finally ambivalent, however, about Felix Holt's role as a working class man in the new world of culture and fairly vague about Esther's; for all the unusualness of Felix's character, Eliot seems to fall back on traditional formulas for the portrait of Esther.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Felix Holt is based, according to Christopher Z. Hobson, on the working-class memoir of Samuel Bamford, Passages in the Life of a Radical, and for this reason Hobson argues that Felix is a type of what he calls the "labour-pioneer" whose "class loyalty" and "moderate working-class radicalism" (21). Felix Holt, he argues, is not like other industrial novels, which "deny a valid, continuing stance of worker radicalism[,] portray parliamentary politics as injurious or irrelevant to social reform; and hope to reform the attitudes of the ruling class so that class cooperation and paternalism can be renewed on a fairer basis"(22).



It has long been agreed by critics that Felix Holt's treatment of the historical and political context—the 1832 Reform Bill—is also relevant for the 1860s (specifically pre-1867 Reform Bill) context when the novel was written.<sup>6</sup> The narrator's portrait of the English countryside and its inhabitants show clearly her reading of both political contexts—for her, historical and social change are ambivalent in their import and effects, and so, by implication, will be the effects of reform. For example, the narrator's distinction between two modes of travel according to their fitness as “things to have in the memory” is a strange one in the context. It privileges the private and personal context of individual memory (which is by implication narrative material) over the larger social narrative of industrial progress. Indeed it is true of the novel as a whole that the narrator often locates culture and morality in the individual rather than in institutions:<sup>7</sup>

[T]he elderly man has his enviable memories, and not the least of them is the memory of a long journey in mid-spring or autumn on the outside of a stage-coach. Posterity may be shot, like a bullet through a tube, by atmospheric pressure from Winchester to Newcastle: that is a fine result to have among our

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<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Lesjak says that around this time “Culture and its related terms—education, responsibility, moral and intellectual fitness, obligation, trust, and so on—slowly came to displace questions of natural right; these cultural criteria took precedence over what properly constituted an individual's right to representation” (87).

<sup>7</sup> Josephine Guy writes generally of the Victorians' tendency to propose individual morality as a “solution” to social problems: “the particular nature of modern social life was understood to have arisen ‘unintentionally’ from the multitude (or aggregation) of individuals' private actions, rather than to have been determined by the decisions of political bodies. . . . In simple terms, classical political economy proposed that modern society was the ‘result of profit-seeking behaviour rather than of any plan known to and instituted by a political process or public authority’” (75-6). Quotation from James A. Caporaso and David P. Levine, Theories of Political Economy (Cambridge 1992), p. 34.

hopes; but the slow old-fashioned way of getting from one end of our country to the other is the better thing to have in the memory. (75)

What this privileging means is that we may read culture and history differently depending on whether the narrator locates them in individual moral lives or remembered experience for example, or in the larger narrative of political and social life. On the narrator's imaginary coach journey in the Introduction, the meaning of social change, for example, differs for the various inhabitants of the countryside too. To a shepherd labouring in a field, "Mail or stage coach belong[s]. . . to that mysterious distant system of things called 'Gover'nment'" which he feels "was no business of his, any more than the most out-lying nebula or the coal-sacks of the southern hemisphere" (76). The inhabitants of more prosperous parts of the country, however, are "sure that old England was the best of all possible countries, and that if there were any facts which had not fallen under their own observation, they were facts not worth observing: the district of clean little market-towns without manufactures, of fat livings, an aristocratic clergy, and low poor-rates" (78). Dissenters, "a population not convinced that old England was as good as possible" and among whom there are "men and women. . . aware that their religion was not exactly the religion of their rulers" see things differently again: their consciousness of superiority on the grounds of religion might nevertheless, says the narrator ironically, become the means to "alter many things which now made the world perhaps more painful than it need be, and certainly more sinful"( 79).

In the industrial towns, there are “powerful men walking queerly with knees bent outward from squatting in the mine, going home to throw themselves down in their blackened flannel and sleep through the daylight, then rise and spend much of their high wages at the ale-house with their fellows of the Benefit Club; here the pale eager faces of handloom-weavers, men and women, haggard from sitting up late at night to finish the week’s work, hardly begun till the Wednesday” (78). What is remarkable about each of these groups of inhabitants is their insularity, and the narrator reinforces this characteristic by describing one of the hamlets as itself turning away from its neighbours: “probably”, says the narrator, “it turned its back on the road, and seemed to lie away from everything but its own patch of earth and sky, away from the parish church by long fields and green lanes, away from all intercourse except that of tramps. If its face could be seen, it was most likely dirty; but the dirt was Protestant dirt, and the big, bold, gin-breathing tramps were Protestant tramps” (77). Through a combination of free indirect discourse and description which conveys where her sympathies lie, the narrator renders these attitudes with varying degrees of irony. It is clear that the Dissenters believe in their own superiority, but it is not as clear to what degree the narrator ironizes their vision of things. She is more definite, however, about the misguided religious prejudice (and implicit national pride) of those who would rather see Protestant poverty and Protestant tramps than be rid of these abuses (or see Catholic or foreign versions of them).

The narrator does not especially locate such evils with specific institutions: she rather implies that the difficulty is with the insularity and prejudice of individuals

taken as a whole. Even given her generally sympathetic eye, prejudices often surface in her commentary: there is, for example, the implication that the handloom-weavers are somehow morally deficient in their having to “[sit] up late at night to finish the week’s work, hardly begun till the Wednesday” (77). When the narrator says of the rectory that it is “one of those. . . which are among the bulwarks of our venerable institutions—which arrest disintegrating doubt, serve as a double embankment against Popery and Dissent, and rally feminine instinct and affection to reinforce the decisions of masculine thought” (329), she is ironizing narrow-minded views like the rector’s own about Rufus Lyon (330). However, while the implication here is that the idea of “feminine instinct” reinforcing “masculine thought” goes with the other narrow-minded views that the narrator lists, she in the end supports Esther’s occupying just such a position in her relationship with Felix (see below).

The narrator’s ambivalence about social change (despite her acknowledgement of its complexity), her tendency to privilege private over public contexts, and her uneasiness with class and gender politics all extend to the novel’s larger elaboration of the issues surrounding culture. It has been argued that Felix Holt functions as a representative of culture in the novel, and Catherine Gallagher has argued that its advocacy of the idea of the best self is its most prominent Arnoldian feature (“Politics” 131,134). Certainly, as Gallagher notes, there is one overt reference to this idea in the novel, when Felix says to Esther that “I want you to have such a vision of the future that you may never lose your best self. Some charm or other may be flung about you....and nothing but a good strong terrible vision will save

you” (366). Lyn Pykett argues that the narrator’s rhetorical strategies are Arnoldian, but this still does not mean that Eliot’s version of culture is Arnold’s. Eliot’s response to “Culture and its Enemies”, in fact, was lukewarm, and she agreed with Frederic Harrison’s criticism of it: “I have not been able to find Matthew Arnold’s article again, but I remember enough of it to appreciate the force of your criticism. Only in one point I am unable to see as you do. I don’t know how far my impressions have been warped by reading German, but I have regarded the word “culture” as a verbal equivalent for the highest mental result of past and present influences. Dictionary meanings are liable rapidly to fall short of usage. But I am not maintaining an opinion—only stating an impression” (4:395, 7 November 1867). That Arnold’s article did not especially strike Eliot enough for her to express a firm opinion about his ideas suggests that she formulated her conception of culture and her own role in it somewhat differently.

Felix might be said to work as a representative of “culture” in the novel, but there are some moments when the narrator implicitly critiques certain versions of it or features of its rhetoric. It is true, however, that in the social and political realms as the novel represents them, the effects of Felix’s role are vaguely felt. This vagueness is part of Eliot’s larger refusal (i.e. in her novels as a whole) to subscribe to any totalizing theory for reading or analyzing society. It is also a safer (less politically explicit) way of endorsing the moral improvement that culture promises than, say, the narrative endorsement of a programme of education for the working class (although Felix does come up with a plan to teach children). Eliot’s vagueness thus stems from

her unusual and contradictory position as a woman writer who is an advocate of culture.

Although Felix advocates some version of the Arnoldian idea of the “best self”, the narrator is not consistent in her portrait of the hero as someone who has achieved this ideal. It is true that the novel’s narrative voice allies itself fairly closely with the hero’s point of view at times, but it is not certain, for example, whether it advocates with this proximity Felix’s wholesale rejection of the middle class, or whether he is not meant to be slightly ridiculous in both this rejection and also in his rejection of social ties. It is hard not to read him as slightly ridiculous when he says (in internal dialogue unmediated by the narrator) that he will “never marry. . . [and] never look back and say, ‘I had a fine purpose once—I meant to keep my hands clean, and my soul upright, and to look truth in the face; but pray excuse me, I have a wife and children—I must lie and simper a little, else they’ll starve!’” (156). In addition, his distaste for what he imagines as moral failure resulting from the necessity of supporting a wife and child is certainly eccentric. The meaning of Felix’s initial refusal to consider marriage thus might be part of his portrait as a kind of cultural leader, but for Eliot to condone his nearly wholesale refusal of social ties would run very contrary to belief in the importance of the “first condition of human goodness” as “something to love; the second, something to reverence” (Scenes of Clerical Life 321).

The narrator also shows Felix to be condescending in the formulation of his grand plans to teach the children of miners: he has “great confidence in his powers of

appeal”, and thinks that “if he could move these men to save something from their drink and pay a schoolmaster for their boys, a greater service would be done them than if Mr Garstin and his company were persuaded to establish a school.” He adds to himself (through the free indirect discourse of the narrator) that one of the miners, Brindle, “had a bright good-natured face, and had given especial attention to certain performances with a magnet which Felix carried in his pocket.” As the narrator says, “Felix Holt had his illusions, like other young men, though they were not of a fashionable sort” (219). The narrator leaves unsaid whether the “illusion” is Felix’s vision of himself as a great teacher, or whether it is his estimation of the miners.

Eliot also has Esther’s dialogue function as a kind of destabilizing force to some of Felix’s loftier pronouncements in the novel. Her replies are witty as well as deflating. When they first meet, and Felix asks her to “justify [her] admiration” for Byron, she retorts, “I should not attempt it with you, Mr Holt. . . You have such strong words at command, that they make the smallest argument seem formidable. If I had met the giant Cormoran, I should have made a point of agreeing with him in his literary opinions” (151). When Felix talks to her about the importance of “opinions” over “taste”, and says to her that “the creature who has the sensibilities that you call taste, and not the sensibilities that you call opinions, is simply a lower, pettier sort of being—an insect that notices the table, but never notices the thunder”, she replies, “Very well, I am an insect; yet I notice that you are thundering at me” (209).

Esther’s retorts also undermine to some extent Felix’s claims to moral and cultural authority. When she tells him to “relieve” himself of the “burning truths” he carries

because she is “sure they must be troublesome to carry unuttered,” he takes her very seriously, and says, “Yes, they are. . . I can’t bear to see you going the way of the foolish women who spoil men’s lives. Men can’t help loving them, and so they make themselves slaves to the petty desires of petty creatures. . . . That’s what makes women a curse; all life is stunted to suit their littleness. That’s why I’ll never love, if I can help it; and if I love, I’ll bear it, and never marry” (212). Esther tells him later in the novel, “A woman must choose meaner things because only meaner things are offered to her. . . Her lot is made for her by the love she accepts” (525).

Because the concept of culture was often fused with that of moral development (for Arnold as well as for Eliot), Eliot’s reading of culture in the novel is bound up with its elaboration of the moral life. But here, the politics of gender enter into the question: the novel elaborates Esther’s moral life differently from Felix’s. Unlike Felix, Esther must be “converted” from her superficial tastes, which are false markers of class position, to a deeper moral experience which involves (at least ostensibly) a more active role in the improvement of social conditions. The necessity that Esther be seen as a woman in need of conversion reduces her search for some kind of “great good” to a choice between what the narrator calls “duty” and “self-indulgence” (the life of service with Felix Holt or the life of empty materialism with Harold). Felix’s choice (which he made, as he says, when he was “a poor devil . . . in a Scotch garret” (142) on the other hand, is not as morally loaded. His choice of the moral way seems related more to his personal distaste rather than to an “actual” danger, as it is in Esther’s case.



The narrator says that for Esther “It was difficult by any theory of providence or consideration of results, to see a course which she could call duty: if something would come and urge itself strongly as pleasure, and save her from the effort to find a clue of principle amid the labyrinthine confusions of right and possession, the promise could not but seem alluring” (524). Esther herself, then, clearly unaccustomed to what Eliot portrays as a kind of moral struggle, wishes that she might be rescued from the effort of working out her moral life by some simple mechanism that would transform it, for example, into the life of a fine lady.<sup>8</sup> It is important in the moral scheme of the novel, however, that she find some useful social niche removed from the genteel life of the Transomes, because their version of gentility is as morally suspect as the middle class acquisitiveness that Felix rejects. Despite this necessity, however, Eliot still gives Esther some sensibilities which make Felix’s aversion to such tastes seem slightly ridiculous; they also reveal that Eliot cannot quite dissociate these sensibilities from tastes likely to be associated with the middle class. In describing Esther’s response to the Transome way of life and her enjoyment of the company of refined people, the narrator implies that such things are not merely pretension.

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<sup>8</sup> Other critics have argued that Esther’s “choice” really is no choice, unlike Felix’s. Rosemary Bodenheimer writes: “Esther’s ‘womanly’ version of the doctrine of choice asserts a represented in Mrs. Transome, suggests that ambition in woman is illusory, ending only in a worse dependence. For Esther, and for the working class that is Felix’s other, remoter audience, to acquire the power of choice is to abandon the quest for direct social power. Freedom lies in the choice to submit to a higher ‘good’ rather than to a lower, more manipulative power. The rigidly limited choice asserts a familiar paradox: to rise correctly is to stay in place” (“Politics”, 105).

There is one moment in the novel, however, when the narrator suggests that Esther's sense of her own moral development is that of a fully cultivated subject. In describing Esther's vision of life with Felix (as opposed to her vision of life with Harold Transome), the narrator's description resembles those of Adam Bede's moments of moral awareness. Harold Transome, on the one hand, will bring a certain "languorous haziness of motiveless ease, where poetry was only literature, and the fine ideas had to be taken down from the shelves of the library when her husband's back was turned" (547). With Felix, however, the narrator says that it seemed to Esther "that she stood at the first and last parting of the ways" and "that the choice is [now] possible which gives unity to life, and makes the memory a temple where all relics and all votive offerings, all worship and all grateful joy, are an unbroken history sanctified by one religion" (551). This passage implies that the narrator wants to suggest the same moral status or the same sense of moral development for both Felix and Esther. But for the most part, the narrator persists in characterizing Esther's mission in the romanticised language of the ideology of womanhood.

The narrator also keeps Esther's relationship with her father and with Felix very carefully within certain boundaries: the power dynamic between Esther and Felix certainly emphasizes her moral subordination. While Esther might have a sort of power in Malthouse Yard (the dubious sort that the narrator has referred to, perhaps, as "feminine instinct and affection"), the terms of that rule or power belong to the realm of romance and fantasy. Mrs. Transome is also described in romance terms, from the beginning (see the epigraph to the first chapter), but in Mrs.

Transome's case, these terms more overtly illustrates the precise kinds of restrictions Mrs. Transome has had to bear: she was like, the narrator says, "an empress in her own right, who had had to rule in spite of faction, to dare the violation of treaties and dread retributive invasions, to grasp after new territories, to be defiant in desperate circumstances, and to feel a woman's hunger of the heart for ever unsatisfied" (104).<sup>9</sup> The narrator is careful not to rationalize this imagery so that it might be juxtaposed, for example, with the colonial oppression that Harold, whose wife was a slave, has perpetrated.

When the narrator says of Esther that "There will be queens in spite of Salic or other laws of later date than Adam and Eve", and here, in this small dingy house of the minister in Malthouse Yard, there was light-footed, sweet-voiced Esther (160), there is an echo of the kind of terminology that we associate with the ideology of domesticity, but here the narrator uses it with an ironic twist. Esther's "rule" is related to her delusions about her own place in society and to the indulgence of others—especially of her father. The narrator suggests one way of redefining the relationship between Esther and Felix when she says, "There is", on the other hand, "a sort of subjection which is the peculiar heritage of largeness and of love; and strength is often only another name for willing bondage to irremediable weakness" (161), but it is Rufus Lyon who epitomizes this ideal of subjection. With Annette

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<sup>9</sup> In one version of the MS, the narrator says of Mrs. Transome "If any one had wanted to paint an imaginary portrait of such a worn, eager, desolate-hearted empress, he might have found a good model in this velvet-clad, gray-haired woman on the background of the broad staircase with its massive balustrade, its worn matting and patches [orig. "bits"] of dark red carpet." (p. 648, n. 9).

Ledru, he experiences, the narrator says, “a period of such self-suppression and life in another as few men know” (173).

The novel, unfortunately, makes no provision like this for Felix: it is careful to place this kind of submission at the level of individual “good”—where it has its parallel perhaps in the novel’s vision of the working classes, which “Felix Holt” voices in “The Address to Working Men” as an acceptance of the status quo (i.e. the hierarchy of both class and gender). Felix says: “Whilst we resolutely declare against the wickedness in high places, let us set ourselves also against the wickedness in low places, not quarrelling which came first. . . .summoning those who have the treasure of knowledge to remember that they hold it in trust, and that with them lies the task of searching for new remedies” (625). Class inequalities can be resolved by the lower classes’ “trusting” to the sense of responsibility of the upper classes, who possess the knowledge and education to “change institutions” (620). These are the assumptions which, although here rendered in “Felix Holt”’s voice, underpin the class politics of the novel.

The novel also uses, as we have seen, what was later to be articulated as the Arnoldian idea of the best self, but it comes for Esther firmly associated with the traditional idea of woman as inspiration to some great deed. Esther’s transformation really doesn’t stand for itself as her own moral accomplishment. Felix wants her to be “the woman whose beauty makes a great task easier to men instead of turning them away from it” (366). Esther has no real involvement in this “great task”, and the narrative leaves undeveloped Esther’s position as a teacher of French. While

she does in fact draw Harold and his mother closer together, this is the closest the novel comes to a demonstration of her redemptive influence.

Esther's relationship to Felix is also described by the narrator in fairly traditional terms: the narrator tells us that a few weeks after their first meeting, "she had begun to find him amusing, and also rather irritating to her woman's love of conquest" (206). Again, there is a kind of ironic echo of chivalric or romance language, but it is also very clear that the real power dynamic between them leaves her subordinate: further, the narrator seems to collude in Felix's estimation of Esther. She very frequently calls attention to Esther's consciousness that Felix is right about Esther's superficiality, especially when Esther's retorts might be read as deflating his loftiness.

The final court scene represents Esther's nearly complete absorption into a traditional representative framework: "when a woman feels purely and nobly," the narrator says, "that ardour of hers. . . makes one of her most precious influences. . . Her inspired ignorance gives sublimity to actions so incongruously simple, that otherwise they would make men smile. . . In this, at least, her woman's lot was perfect: that the man she loved was her hero; that her woman's passion and her reverence for rarest goodness rushed together in an undivided current" (571). This is what Esther's moral development amounts to in the novel: the development of her feeling for Felix (which extends, presumably to some more diffuse project of good involving the objects of Felix's charity). The narrator thus colludes with Felix's

“reading” of Esther’s function to inspire some great man to great deeds. Apparently this is her reading of women’s role in the world of culture too.

The final complication in the novel’s presentation of Felix and Esther as apparent representatives of culture is in its contrast with the way in which the narrative voice renders Mrs. Transome’s story. Instead of presenting Mrs. Transome’s private errors as a kind of substitute for dealing with the morality of social and economic institutions, the narrator makes clear their contributions to her downfall; instead of resorting to an idealised version of womanhood to describe her, the narrator emphasizes the moral failure of the men around her; and, instead of reducing Mrs. Transome’s moral life to an overly didactic conversion story, the narrator acknowledges the complicated circumstances which have influenced her choices. The narrator’s reading of motive and character is also much more subtle in this portion of the novel—the ideological pressures which render the presentation of Esther and Felix cloyingly idealised do not seem to operate here.

The narrative voice of Felix Holt thus exhibits a number of contradictions in its presentation of the political context of 1832 Britain and of the private contexts of Esther Lyon and Mrs. Transome.<sup>10</sup> It is unusual in Eliot’s novels as a whole, and in this one especially given the portrait of Mrs. Transome, that Esther should function solely as a kind of cipher for “women’s moral growth” or “submission to a higher

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<sup>10</sup>The idea that the domestic realm somehow supersedes or becomes a substitution for the political or social one in the industrial novel (including Felix Holt) has been discussed by Bodenheimer and Guy, among others. Usually this substitution is seen as a fault in the novel or the author’s avoidance of difficult political questions.

good”.<sup>11</sup> If we may take this “good” to be a cultural “good”, its terms (like Arnold’s), are very vague. Eliot implies, by reverting to more traditional terms for describing Esther, that “woman’s nature” will adequately serve for the work of culture. Given Eliot’s own status as a woman and representative of culture, this implication is surprising. While there are moments in the novel which suggest that Esther should have the same moral status as Felix, in the context of the larger political debate about the working classes’ access to culture, and the general uncertainty about how “high culture” was to operate, these moments are often muted or lost among the novel’s other voices.

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<sup>11</sup> Even the narrator’s treatment of Hetty Sorrel, which is regarded by some critics as seriously flawed in its refusal to give her a degree moral awareness, is mitigated in Adam Bede by some awareness of the social conditions that produce her. The latter is also true of Rosamond Vincy in Middlemarch.

## Chapter Four

### Feminine Influence and Intellectual Work in Middlemarch

When Eliot had finished Felix Holt's "Address to Working Men", John Blackwood wrote to her that he wished "the poor fellows" [i.e. the "Working Men"] were capable of appreciating it. "If they were", he said, "we should be all right, but it will do great good" (4:402, 3 December 1867). In a later letter, he flattered her that "If the mass could appreciate rightly such words and feelings, what a grand nation we would become" (4:411, 28 December 1867). Although Blackwood says that the critical reception of the piece was lukewarm or indifferent, he insists on its value nevertheless: "In spite of the non-attention of the press the Address has I believe told well and it has been immensely admired. I have had two applications for permission to reprint, which I have granted. Some of our Societies should have applied to me for permission to print it wholesale for distribution" (4:417, 22 January 1868).

That it was Blackwood himself who suggested that Eliot write the "Address" might have something to do with his insistence that the project was worthwhile, but his equally persistent emphasis on the fact that the "real" audience for whom the work was intended would never get to read it is interesting: Blackwood assumes (despite the fairly obvious note of flattery), that Eliot's work is somehow significant for the nation, and he also takes its actual efficacy (its influence) as fiction for granted. But he also



cannot quite deny the fact that the social gap between writer and intended audience makes the whole question of influence problematic.<sup>1</sup>

The reports of Eliot's correspondents about the influence of her work are difficult to interpret, not least because critics have tended to stress Lewes's role in censoring negative responses to it. Certainly Blackwood had an interest in flattering her. Frederic Harrison too, wrote glowingly about Felix Holt, saying that "I know whole families where the three volumes have been read chapter by chapter and line by line and reread and recited as are the stanzas of *In Memoriam*" (4:286, 19 July [1866]). Such a comparison might have made some writers a little suspicious; even given Tennyson's immense popularity and also given the obvious merit of Eliot's own writing, it is hard not to read such declarations as slightly outrageous in their flattery. Eliot's immediate circle of friends certainly heavily stressed her work's influence on them, and she herself claimed to have received a large number of acknowledgements which encouraged her about its efficacy. Notwithstanding the reviews' common declarations about the influence of literary works (and notwithstanding the statistics about their circulation), what precisely constituted a literary work's "efficacy" is hard to determine.

While Eliot was writing Middlemarch, Blackwood continued to make fairly overblown declarations about the author's (and work's) wide influence. He writes to Lewes that "she who can administer to the world such glorious Tonics as

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<sup>1</sup> Blackwood suggested that Eliot write the Address after he heard Disraeli speak in Edinburgh.

Middlemarch must speedily cure herself of all ailments” (5:199, 9 October 1871) and that “the words of a great author tell in the most overpowering manner in every quarter” (5:200, 11 October 1871). Eliot’s own vision of the influence of her work was sometimes contradictory. While she clearly hoped that her novels would be read by large numbers of people, she tended most to speak of their influence on those close to her socially and intellectually. As we saw with the last chapter, she tended to emphasize that she was a writer to be set apart from “merely” popular writers: she was to be read by what she called “people of high culture”. When Adam Bede was re-published in serial format, she wrote to Blackwood that she was “vexed by the non-success of the serial. . . It is not, heaven knows, that I read my own books or am puffed up about them, but I have been of late quite astonished by the strengthening testimonies that have happened to come to me, of people who care about every one of my books and continue to read them—especially young men, who are just the class I care most to influence” (4:397, 9 November 1867).

Eliot thus clearly saw her work as “moral” or “active” in the sense that she thought it could have a kind of regulatory influence and lead implicitly wayward young male readers to some sort of productive work. But, as with discourse about the work of culture in general, there is a degree of vagueness what constitutes productive influence. Eliot gave the following account of her sense of her vocation to Clifford Albutt, a young doctor whom she met through Lewes just before she began writing Middlemarch:

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. . . to throw the whole force of one's soul towards the achievement of some possible better, is the brief heading that need never be changed, however often the chapter of more special rules might have to be written.<sup>2</sup>

Eliot is deliberately equivocal about the specific programme under which such “vital elements” may possibly be subsumed (one can imagine a number of possible political or ideological contexts). She speaks of her work as if its grand effects take place in a kind of ideological vacuum, but it is clear that she strongly believes its purpose is to generate such effects.

The writing in the reviews about the influence of the novelist and of the literary work tended to resemble later writing about the work of culture in its tendency to claim a certain universality. Mary Poovey, who looks at the 1830s and 1840s in Uneven Developments, gives the example of J.W. Kaye, who says of the writer's role that

It is no small thing. . . to influence public opinion—to guide men to light from darkness, to truth from error—to inform the ignorant, to solace the unhappy, to afford intellectual enjoyment to the few, or healthy recreation to the many. Of

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Ashton, Life, 305. Originally from George Eliot to Clifford Albutt, Letters 4:472 and 4:499, August 1868 and 30 December 1868.

all professions, worthily pursued, it is the least selfish. It brings the worker for his daily bread into constant fellowship and communion with thousands of his fellow-creatures. Thousands are indebted to him for a share of the instruction and amusement of their lives. (102)

This idealised view of the writer's work is troubled in a different way by the partly acknowledged social gap between the writer and his or her audience: "the many", who read literary works for entertainment, get "healthy recreation", and "the few" who can comprehend their deeper significance, are privileged to receive "intellectual enjoyment". Mary Poovey quotes an 1842 Blackwood's article about the influence of the writer which stresses that writers have a role in "constructing either the 'common ground of humanity' or the English 'national character'" (110).

Sentiments such as these immortal works embody. . . are the true national inheritance; they constitute the most powerful elements of national strength, for they form the character, without which all others are unavailing; they belong alike to the rich and the poor, to the prince and to the peasant; they form the unseen bond which links together the high and the low, the rich and the poor; and which, penetrating and pervading every class of society, tends both to perpetuate the virtues which have brought us to our present greatness, and arrest the decline, which the influx of wealth, and the prevalence of commercial ideas, might otherwise have a tendency to produce (110).

While part of the liberal intellectual critique of the middle class did include such things as deploring "the prevalence of commercial ideas", by the time Eliot was

writing Middlemarch and the Second Reform Bill had been passed, such a fantasy of class unity brought about by novel writing would be at the very least problematic. And certainly the role of intellectuals like Eliot was changing. Robert Gray notes, for example, that “the leaders of organised labour were another important grouping of intellectuals in the broad Gramscian sense; their significance certainly increased during the third quarter of the century, especially with the advent in the 1870s of working class representation in local and parliamentary government” (248-9).

### **The Ideology of Influence**

Middlemarch itself was the most influential of Eliot’s works in any sense of the word, whether one speaks of influence as a construction of the domestic sphere or gives it a more diffuse basis in social practice. But Middlemarch constructs its own work, as well as moral or intellectual work in the novel itself, at some distance from contemporary models. What is most notable about it is its reserve or circumspection about its own influence, and its reluctance to make grand claims for the work of its characters. Post-marxist and materialist readings of the construction of intellectual work and the ideology of influence, such as those of James Eli Adams, Norman Feltes, and Mary Poovey mostly deal with the writing of men: a woman writer’s position amid these constructs is more complex and contradictory.

According to James Eli Adams, “a wide array of Victorian intellectual vocations—Tennysonian poetry, Tractarian faith, Arnoldian culture, Paterian aestheticism, even Carlylean prophecy—came to resemble models of feminine activity

and authority, particularly the ‘influence’ assigned to the domestic woman” (1). As a result, those men “engaged in the work of Coleridge’s ‘clerisy’” [here Adams’s example is Carlyle] “made an especially vehement effort to claim. . . the status of normative manhood.” (1). A woman writer engaged in such work was not, however, automatically “authorised” in it by the ideology of feminine influence. “If the feminization of authorship”, says Mary Poovey,

derived its authority from an idealized representation of woman and the domestic sphere, then for a woman to depart from that idealization by engaging in the commercial business of writing was to collapse the boundary between the spheres of alienated and non-alienated labor. A woman who wrote for publication threatened to collapse the ideal from which her authority was derived and to which her fidelity was necessary for so many other social institutions to work” (Uneven, 107).

Various versions of the ideology of influence were articulated at the intersection of several discourses: religious, domestic, sociological, and psychological. It was implicit in the characterization of much social and interpersonal activity, such as the maintenance of the home as a domestic space, mothering and the development of children, the regulation of husbands, the character of the nation, and so forth. While texts such as Sarah Ellis’s The Wives of England were notable examples of its construction in a strictly domestic context, the idea of influence (in the sense of motivation) was also under construction in various forms of moral discourse which stressed the development of character or the importance of altruism, some of which

encompassed the public sphere as well.<sup>3</sup> While intellectual labour as it was constructed, for example, by the reviewers did not carry quite this much ideological weight, writing about its *effects* tended to adopt the same kind of language. Its language tended to founder, as we saw in Blackwood's letter to Eliot at the beginning of this chapter, on its class dynamics, the claim that its benefits are accessible to all.

The similarities between the characterization of the moral work of women and the moral work of authors might also be used to the advantage of the intellectual woman who wanted to write. In one of her early periodical articles, Eliot herself argued that women's intellectual development was as important as men's by implicitly stressing their morally superior "natures": women ought to be "admitted to a common fund of ideas, to common objects of interest with men", she says, which in turn "must ever be the essential condition at once of true womanly culture and of true social well being."<sup>4</sup> Eliot is very cleverly appealing to her audience's cultural sensibilities here: the vague phrases "true womanly culture" and "true social well being" are wonderfully ambiguous, suggesting applications in both public and private contexts. The appeal to "truth" in what constitutes both woman and the social good at the same time is carefully calculated to appeal to an audience for whom the construction of such ideals is important.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See the chapters entitled "The Culture of Altruism" and "The Idea of Character" in Stefan Collini, Public Moralists.

<sup>4</sup> From "Woman in France: Madame de Sablé" (Byatt 36-37).

<sup>5</sup> In one of her letters, Eliot expressed another version of this ideology when she wrote that "as a fact of mere zoological evolution, woman seems to me to have the worse share in existence. But for that very reason I would the more contend that in the moral evolution we have 'an art which does mend

Daniel Cottom characterizes the work of the high culture novel as part of the practice of what he calls “liberal intellectual discourse”, which

is taken to be applicable to society as a whole—in fact, to be the essential revelation of society. The liberal intellectual’s special technique of power is the assumption that the practice of this discourse is society. According to this argument, it is within the procedures of this discourse that the whole of society in the past, in the present, and even in the future becomes available to human understanding. . . The role of the intellectual is taken to incorporate the very possibility of social truth. (21-2)

While it is certainly true that Eliot’s novels participate in one form or another of liberal intellectual discourse (for certainly Eliot is interested in “social truth”), and that, as we have seen, she liked to talk about her novels as effectively increasing the understanding of what she called “human life”, articulating their “effects”, historically or socially or economically, is difficult to do. Part of the difficulty has to do with the more general one of defining literature’s “effects”, but part of it has to do with the vagueness of the terminology. Cottom’s reading of the work of the high-culture novel (in a post-marxist or materialist context) is that it is part of “the characteristic middle-class argument. . . that the untrammelled pursuit of middle-class goals would. . . represent the interests of everyone in society”. The assumption is that “this attitude underlies the whole of middle-class discourse in the nineteenth

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nature’. It is the function of love in the largest sense, to mitigate the harshness of all fatalities” (8:402, 14 May 1867).



century. . . [and is in fact] the fable of middle-class enlightenment: the identification of the middle classes, or of the liberal intellectuals representing them, as the watchmen of society” (23). Eliot’s relation to these goals and identities is ambivalent.

Norman Feltes characterizes “intellectual labour” in the context of professionalization. For Feltes, the “professional project” during the Victorian period does not refer to “the goals and strategies of a given group” in nineteenth-century England, but rather to “the coherence and consistence that can be discovered. . . in a variety of apparently unconnected acts”; the “crystallization” of several professions. . . must be seen as “the general growth of institutions where rules of selectivity would guarantee social acceptability” rather than in the more conventional context of “a labour monopoly and place in the division of labour that is free of the authority of others over their work” (42). This fairly loose definition of profession stresses, then, the social and economic conditions which produce, for example, a doctor such as Tertius Lydgate, and a man of more generalised intellectual qualifications such as (ostensibly at least ) Fred Vincy. If, as Feltes says, the development of the professions had as one of its effects the creation of certain structures of social exclusion, or that the professions themselves are produced by the same mechanisms of exclusion, then what is important about Middlemarch when looked at in the light of Eliot’s work is how her narrative voice, as the voice of the “literary man” either calls attention to and/or repeats those exclusions. That masculine intellectual labour in the novel is, overall, characterised as ineffectual, has implications for Eliot’s position as a woman

writer and her own participation in the world of culture. Whether we align the work of the novel with that of Lydgate (at least ideally) or of Dorothea makes a difference.

Adams's reading of the intellectual labour of the (male) novelist as encumbered with issues of masculinity, Feltes's account of Eliot as a "professional" woman writer, and Poovey's of the masculine narrative of "individualizing authorship", all take into account gender as one of the determining aspects of "access to the world of professional letters" (107), but Feltes minimizes the very different conditions inherent in Eliot's being a woman writer "selling her intellectual labour power" (37) and Adams's and Poovey's concerns are with the representations of male writers. One might expect that a woman writer could capitalize on such a representation, and certainly Eliot's own writing about herself as a novelist tends to use the same sort of language, but in Middlemarch the representation of intellectual labour (which is mostly gendered masculine) is separated fairly emphatically from its representation of moral work. The narrator's use of the language of influence and effect sometimes aligns him/her with one, and sometimes with the other.

### **The Narrator of Middlemarch and the "Effect of Writing"**

Although Middlemarch has much to say about the nature of intellectual labour and the problematics of influence, it is circumspect about its own influence, even in the context of the discourse on culture and middle-class interests. The novel is in general optimistic about the power of knowledge as it relates to programs of social improvement, for example, or to the interpretation of history, but in writing about the

lots of the professional men in the novel—men who are engaged in intellectual labour—the narrator acknowledges social and economic constraints which limit the working out of “great social truths”. When the narrator asks “Who shall tell what shall be the effect of writing?” and says that “a bit of ink and paper which has long been an innocent wrapping or stopgap may at last be laid open under the one pair of eyes which have knowledge enough to turn it into the opening of a catastrophe” (407), or that “the stone which has been kicked by generations of clowns may come by curious little links of effect under the eyes of a scholar, through whose labours it may at last fix the date of invasions and unlock religions” (406-7), she is privileging a kind of knowledge associated with a certain economic and social position, a kind of knowledge which she herself has a claim to. Presumably the effects of its possession are important for the writing of history. However, this large vision of “the effect of writing” in the end narrows to the particular stories of a few people with a small amount of influence. The final paragraph of the novel, in which the narrator acknowledges that the “growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts”, and that if “things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, [it] is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life” (822). Thus, although the narrator’s pronouncements about the “effect of writing” and the “scholar” who will “fix the date of invasions” suggest that the possession of such privileged knowledge is most important for the writing of history, at the end of the novel it is individual histories which are at least nominally significant, and not “events” constructed as such.

While Eliot focused very much on “the possibility of social truth” and the individual’s role in its formation or discovery in Felix Holt, in Middlemarch the narrative voice does not make grand claims about individuals and their circle of influence: while Dorothea longs for a “great task” which is to have widespread effects, the novel’s conclusion is much more limited: “the effect of [Dorothea’s] being on those around her was incalculably diffusive”, but was not “widely visible” (822). It is even more problematic when the narrator tries to characterize the role that minor lower class characters play in the novel. What the narrative of Middlemarch seems to suggest, paradoxically, is that narratives such as Dorothea’s, and, less glamorously, that of Raffles, are really more central in the construction of larger cultural versions of “history” than their marginal status would seem to suggest. But, while the histories of genteel women such as Dorothea (and even ones who are less so, such as Mary Garth and Rosamond) are granted an important status in the “growing good of the world”, the narrator has more difficulty accounting for the dynamics of influence in terms of class. She takes refuge in a certain facetiousness, for example, when she talks about “low people” such as Joshua Rigg and their place in the narrative. Here, as in a later passage where she talks about the necessity of including Raffles in the novel, the narrator makes the assumption that an audience wants to hear about only “genteel” people, and that they will be placated if some sort of lofty parable can be made of their stories:

Having made this rather lofty comparison [--the “effect of writing” passage quoted above precedes this one--] I am less uneasy in calling attention to the

existence of low people by whose interference, however little we may like it, the course of the world is very much determined. It would be well, certainly, if we could help to reduce their number, and something might perhaps be done by not lightly giving occasion to their existence. Socially speaking, Joshua Rigg would have been generally pronounced a superfluity. But those who like Peter Featherstone never had a copy of themselves demanded, are the very last to wait for such a request either in prose or verse. The copy in this case bore more of outside resemblance to the mother, in whose sex frog-features, accompanied with fresh-colored cheeks and a well-rounded figure, are compatible with much charm for a certain order of admirers. The result is sometimes a frog-faced male, desirable, surely, to no order of intelligent beings. Especially when he is suddenly brought into evidence to frustrate other people's expectations—the very lowest aspect in which a social superfluity can present himself. (407)

The narrator here ironically uses the scientific language of genetic inheritance and evolutionary (in)efficiency to account for the way in which what she calls “superfluities” come about: there is a kind of randomness and uselessness in the production of the “frog-faced male, desirable, surely, to no order of intelligent beings.” It is very difficult to decide, however, whether the “authorization” for calling Rigg superfluous comes from the narrator or from the assumptions she is making about the opinions of her reading audience: certainly the latter is the case when she says that “it would be well if we could help to reduce their number” as if she were

speaking of improving evolutionary chances. On the other hand, despite this facetiousness, there is a certain mechanical feeling in the novel about the way that Rigg (and Raffles) function in it. Although the narrator at the end accounts for “insignificant people . . . preparing the lives of many Dorotheas” (822), there is a manifest difference in the meaning of “insignificant” for characters like Raffles and characters like Dorothea. Part of the problem is with the language of influence, which is sometimes bound up with a kind of determinism, and sometimes with morality. While we might argue that the narrator’s separation of “superfluities” like Rigg from, for example, “the indispensable might of that myriad-headed, myriad-handed labor by which the social body is fed, clothed, and housed” (248-249), the novel for the most part confines its reading of the dynamics of influence to a localised few.

Middlemarch constructs intellectual labour as the particular province of men, and the results of this labour, for the most part, are oddly ineffectual. The men in the novel who engage in intellectual work—the scholar Edward Casaubon, the cleric and naturalist Camden Farebrother, the political writer Will Ladislaw, the gentleman student Fred Vincy, and, of course Tertius Lydgate—all come up against very specific social and economic obstacles. Although one might expect that part of the novel’s work is to define “true” intellectual labour, the novel’s scale of values defines Dorothea’s life, rather than Lydgate’s or Ladislaw’s, for example, as having the right sort of moral influence. For both men and women, however, the accomplishment of “great work” is always hampered by “the conditions of an imperfect social state.”

While the narrator is clearly an intellectual or learned figure, as in Eliot's other novels, one is more apt to align her work with Dorothea's than with that of the male intellectual characters. So, while the narrator is deliberately inscribing her work within a certain model of feminine influence, it is a limited one in that Dorothea is an idealised figure, and in that the other women in the novel are more remarkable for their nonconformity to this model than for their likeness to the heroine.

The novel also debunks a number of particularly masculine versions of intellectual work. When the narrator describes Will Ladislaw's vision of his vocation, she pokes fun at several romantic commonplaces about the artist figure and the kind of influence it tends to construct. The image of frustrated intellectual labour that we see in Lydgate, Farebrother, and Casaubon seems to belie whatever larger declarations the narrator makes about its efficacy in the "effect of writing" passage. The narrator seems at pains instead to caricature the egoism inherent in calculating such effects:

The superadded circumstance which would evolve [Will's] genius had not yet come; the universe had not yet beckoned. Even Caesar's fortune at one time was but a grand presentiment. We know what a masquerade all development is, and what effective shapes may be disguised in helpless embryos.—In fact, the world is full of hopeful analogies and handsome dubious eggs called possibilities. Will saw clearly enough the pitiable instances of long incubation producing no chick, and but for gratitude would have laughed at Casaubon, whose plodding application, rows of note-books, and small taper of learned theory exploring the tossed ruins of the world, seemed to enforce a moral

entirely encouraging to Will's generous reliance on the intentions of the universe with regard to himself. He held that reliance to be a mark of genius; and certainly it is no mark to the contrary; genius consisting neither in self-conceit nor in humility, but in a power to make or do, not anything in general, but something in particular. Let him start for the Continent then, without our pronouncing on his future. Among all forms of mistake, prophecy is the most gratuitous. (81-2)

The narrator's refusal to make pronouncements about the eventual direction Ladislav's profession will take is part of the novel's larger and more generalised ironizing of the Romantic artist figure. Despite the fact that others see him as a version of this figure—Mr Brooke says that “He seems to me a kind of Shelley, you know” (355)—he is not so much one that the trajectory or narrative of his career can be predicted according to the literary conventions associated with it. The narrator gently makes fun of Will's optimism by invoking romantic versions of artistic calling, such as the waiting for a moment of vocation that Wordsworth relates in The Prelude. She also makes it clear that his general optimism about his lot is partly a result of the economic freedom his social position as Casaubon's nephew gives him, and not of some great calling. When the narrator says that “genius consist[s] in the power to make or do not anything in general, but something in particular”, she is being facetiously vague at Will's expense; the implication is that while he waits for some sort of lightning bolt he might be doing something specific. This deflation of



grandiose ideas falls in with the novel's tendency, again to confine its characters' energies to the particular.

Even genius, or a specific sense of vocation, does not always result in "a more active admiration" of the "vital elements which bind men together", the "something better" which Eliot envisions as the most important "work" or "effect" of (her) writing. In a similar passage which also mocks certain romantic conventions, but which concerns Lydgate rather than Will, the narrator makes fun of the sort of plot which concerns the frustrated labours of great men. "Some gentlemen", she says, "have made an amazing figure in literature by general discontent with the universe as a trap of dulness into which their great souls have fallen by mistake; but the sense of a stupendous self and an insignificant world may have its consolations" (637). The "usual" narrative of self is a romantic (and masculine) one, associated with classed leisure—we envision a literary man with the time and money to spend time writing about the pettiness of others and the narrowness of the medium his large soul must move in. Although the narrator expresses a certain (unusual) sympathy with egoism here, she is at pains to distinguish Lydgate's narrative from the narrative of such figures, and she stresses that Lydgate does not have the sense of "a stupendous self and an insignificant world." Lydgate envisions a "grand existence in thought and effective action lying around him" (637) which he cannot quite realize because of various social impediments. Will, on the other hand, does in fact end by becoming "an ardent public man, working well in. . . times when reforms were begun with a young hopefulness of immediate good which has been much checked in our times"

(819), but even here the narrator is reserved about the real efficacy of such work: she does not say that this “hopefulness of immediate good” is actually realised, only that Will is “in the thick of a struggle against [wrongs]” and is at last “returned to Parliament” (819). The statement, too, that such a struggle was somehow more successful, somehow less fraught with difficulties during the period preceding the period of the First Reform Bill, implies that when the novel itself is being written, such political activism is much less effective. The narrator’s reserve (and vagueness) about the effects of such work (or ideals) approaches the apologetic, and implies a certain limited faith in the efficacy of writing as social action.

The narrator ironizes at least one aspect of the usual version of the ideology of feminine influence in her account of Will’s search for a profession. When he finds an occupation which befits his literary skills and might be used for some kind of social improvement, the narrator makes it clear that his motivation in doing so is not some innate desire for “the greater good”, except in a generalised sort of way:

It is undeniable that but for the desire to be where Dorothea was, and perhaps the want of knowing what else to do, Will would not at this time have been meditating the needs of the English people or criticizing English statesmanship: he would probably have been rambling in Italy. . . and observing that, after all, self-culture was the principal point; while in politics he would have been sympathizing warmly with liberty and progress in general. Our sense of duty must often wait for some work which shall take the place of

dilettantism and make us feel that the quality of our action is not a matter of indifference. (454)

What is interesting about this passage is that its definition of productive social action is not, as we might expect, “meditating the needs of the English people” or “criticizing English statesmanship”; rather, these activities are given meaning only (or primarily) in the context of Will’s desire to be near Dorothea. The activities of “self-culture” and “sympathizing with liberty and progress in general”, which one could associate with the man of culture, are ironically dismissed by the narrator, whose tone suggests that such a generalised political sympathy is not remotely productive of social good unless combined with something other than self-culture. Given the traditional terms of the ideology of feminine influence, one might expect that Dorothea’s presence would inspire Will to do great work, but Eliot’s version of it here is quite particular and slightly ironised. The narrator later says that Will’s new work in Middlemarch is “not that indeterminate loftiest thing which he had once dreamed of as alone worthy of continuous effort”, but it suits him: “his nature warmed easily in the presence of subjects which were visibly mixed with life and action, and the easily-stirred rebellion in him helped the glow of public spirit” (455). If the ideology of influence is in operation here the narrator treats it in an amused way, especially when compared with, for example, Felix Holt’s version of it.<sup>6</sup> And here again, the narrator is very circumspect (although humorously so) about Will’s writing and its political

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<sup>6</sup> Felix wants Esther to be “the woman whose beauty makes a great task easier to men instead of turning them away from it” (366).

effects—she says that he has made “the ‘Pioneer’ celebrated as far as Brassing” and humorously adds, “never mind the smallness of the area; the writing was not worse than much that reaches the four corners of the earth” (455).

The narrator makes a kind of moral case out of Fred Vincy’s search for a profession, perhaps as part of Eliot’s own avowed intention to influence “young men”, but partly also as one of the novel’s versions of feminine influence. Fred’s decision to be a gentleman farmer is clearly a result of his desire to be a suitable husband for Mary. Fred also has the same sort of youthful confidence that Will has about his lot in life, but his search for a profession is more fraught with social pressure, both from his family and from Mary Garth. The narrator several times mentions Fred’s confidence that things will turn out all right for him—usually in connection with one of his episodes of financial “difficulty”—at the same time that she acknowledges his real professional dilemma. “What can the fitness of things mean”, she asks when Fred is disappointed in Featherstone’s present of one hundred pounds, “if not their fitness to a man’s expectations? Failing this, absurdity and atheism gape behind him” (133); she stresses, however, that “the working-day world show[ed] no eager need whatever of a young gentleman without capital and generally unskilled” (547). “[W]hat secular vocation on earth was there for a young man. . . whose friends could not get him an ‘appointment’” she asks, and “which was at once gentlemanly, lucrative, and to be followed without special knowledge?” (548). While Fred’s is only one version of masculine self-assurance in the novel (associated with youthful optimism) the narrator pokes fun at in the novel, there is at the same time an

acknowledgement of the wider difficulty of carving out a profession from a generalised education such as Fred's.

The novel does provide one amusing counterpoint to the portrait of Fred as the spoiled young man who cannot find a suitable vocation in the Garths' son Christy, who looks at Fred as a kind of example in fashion but not in learning. Christy, says the narrator, "held it the most desirable thing in the world to be a tutor, to study all literatures . . . and . . . was a sort of object-lesson given to [Fred] by the educational mother. [He] was always as simple as possible, and thought no more of Fred's disinclination to scholarship than of a giraffe's, only wishing that he himself were more of the same height" (562). Although the narrator comments on Christy's getting "cheap learning and cheap fare in Scotland" (393), she stresses Christy's longing for what he sees as Fred's social advantages. Christy looks at "his own threadbare knees, and then at Fred's beautiful white trousers" and thinks that "Certainly Fred's tailoring suggested the advantages of an English university, and he had a graceful way even of looking warm and pushing his hair back with his handkerchief (562-3). Later, Mrs. Garth will tell Fred that he "has paid his expenses for the last year by giving lessons, carrying on hard study at the same time" and that "he hopes soon to get a private tutorship and go abroad" (563). The narrator thus stresses the differences between Fred's and Christy's economic and social advantages (or lack of them) rather than "the sort of object-lesson" he represents to Fred.

At the same time that she has sympathy for Fred's difficulty in finding a profession, the narrator says outright that his optimism also has to do with his class

position—as does his careless management of his money. The Vincy children, says the narrator, “had no standard of economy, and the elder ones retained some of their infantine notion that their father might pay for anything if he would” (228). But, while Fred does “what might be expected of a gay young fellow” (234), the narrator partially excuses him by saying that “he was not a gambler” and “had not that specific disease in which the suspension of the whole nervous energy on a change or risk becomes as necessary as the dram to the drunkard” (233). Still, the narrator details Mrs. Garth’s reaction to Fred’s loss of her husband’s money in language which does not minimize the effect of Fred’s indiscretions on her family: “It was a little too provoking even for her self-control that this blooming youngster should flourish on the disappointments of sadder and wiser people. . . and that all the while his family should suppose that hers was in eager need of this sprig” (564). Fred is made to have two or three moments of remorse in the narrative, but they do not come primarily through Mary. Rather, Fred encounters Lydgate when he is in debt and playing billiards for money. The narrator says that “It was a strange reversal of attitude: Fred’s blond face and blue eyes, usually bright and careless, ready to give attention to . . . amusement, looking involuntarily grave and almost embarrassed as if by the sight of something unfitting” (662). Farebrother too, warns Fred that another man might win Mary’s affections if he continues to play billiards in secret. The narrator here describes Fred’s activities as if she were colluding with some of his [Fred’s] male friends when she says, “Mary being out of the way for a little while, Fred, like any other strong dog who cannot slip his collar, had pulled up the staple of his chain and made a small escape,

not of course meaning to go fast or far" (661). While this might be taken as a kind of good-natured depreciation of Fred's gambling tendencies, Fred's going off stands for a kind of defiance of the social ties of work and family, if a ritualised one, but after he marries Mary, he later confines himself only "rarely" to "a day's hunting" (816).

The narrator is ambivalent about the significance of these pursuits as they apply to Fred. (Lydgate's and Farebrother's pursuits are seen in an entirely different light). Pursuits associated with gentlemanly leisure such as Fred engages in leads to a certain moral carelessness in the novel, a certain disregard for the effect that they might have on others. The narrator says, for example, that "his pain in the affair [of the horse] beforehand had consisted almost entirely in the sense that he must seem dishonourable, and sink in the opinion of the Garths: he had not occupied himself with the inconvenience and possible injury that his breach might occasion them, for this exercise of the imagination on other people's needs is not common with hopeful young gentlemen" (247). By the end of the novel, however, Fred is one of the characters who, like Dorothea, casts off the advantages of his class position in order that he may live what he sees (and what the novel sees) as a more morally productive life. In the end, when Fred tells Mary that Farebrother was more worthy of her than he, she says "and for that reason he could do better without me. But you—I shudder to think what you would have been—a curate in debt for horse-hire and pocket handkerchiefs!" (818). There is a certain indulgence of Fred's faults which itself has to do with his class, but the narrator does not extend this indulgence to either Lydgate or Farebrother, who somehow are expected to do "something better."

Lydgate's work in the novel is classed in its effects neither with the fruitless scholarship of Casaubon, nor according to the model of influence associated with Dorothea. Dorothea and Lydgate are, however, alike in that their "failures" are not, like Casaubon's or Bulstrode's, attributed to egoism or some kind of personal weakness. Rather, the narrator invokes the "conditions of an imperfect social state" to explain the "struggl[es] which "young and noble impulse[s]" encounter (821). But her characterization of how men come to be failures is problematic for the larger model of feminine influence she propagates through Dorothea, because of the way she sometimes characterizes women's roles in this process. She initially compares a narrative of failed vocation to a narrative of (failed) courtship and marriage, which are similar, she says, in that they require "industrious thought and patient renunciation of small desires" (142). Then, however, she says that "not seldom the catastrophe is bound up with the other passion, sung by the Troubadours" (142), which in turn suggests (since the issue under discussion is masculine vocation) the woman's central role in its success or failure. She uses a metaphor of mass production to describe the development—and eventual failure—of an original vocation: "For in the multitude of middle-aged men who go about their vocations in a daily course determined for them in much the same way as the tie of their cravats [i.e. by virtue of their birth or class or gender] there is always a good number who once meant to shape their own deeds. . . The story of their coming to be shapen after the average and fit to be packed by the gross, is hardly ever told even in their consciousness" (142-3). Their failure might be the result of a number of things: "you and I may have sent some of our



breath toward infecting them, when we uttered our conforming falsities or drew our silly conclusions: or perhaps it came from the vibrations of a woman's glance" (142). The narrator implicitly allies herself with men here. She emphasizes the more confining aspects of public life—as suggested by “conforming falsities” and even what sounds like a masculine form of gossip in “silly conclusions”. That the comment ends with “a woman's glance” suggests that the result—the very striking alienation of the “earlier self. . . in its old home” making “the new furniture ghastly”—is aligned with domestic life. The implications are more serious if we take ‘conforming falsities’ and ‘silly conclusions’ to be women's—although it would sound strange in the structure of the sentence.

The narrator characterizes this process with reference to men only: the danger lies not just with women who distract them from “shap[ing] their own deeds,” but is also somehow associated with the process of mass production, whereby raw goods are diverted from “higher” processes of refinement or transformation and instead “packed by the gross”, somehow cheapened, made ordinary, made available for mass consumption by domestication . What is also notable about this series of metaphors is that they proceed from a set of assumptions about women and their role (which is generally obstructive) in the narrative of the male's progress toward achieving his vocation. These assumptions are mitigated by the narrator's reference to “you and I” and “our conforming falsities” which may also constitute diverting forces (as opposed to “the vibrations of a woman's glance”). But the implied reader here, like the narrator, also seems to be gendered male. The process of men's becoming

“ordinary” is like an economic process which somehow limits and confines them, and this process is associated with women—the process of courtship and marriage and the settling down to domestic life somehow makes men’s history into a non-history. This process seems to be particular to Lydgate, who certainly makes the wrong choice in marrying Rosamond.

The relationship between Rosamond and Lydgate is the most problematic and negative representation of feminine influence in Middlemarch. Although the narrator, as we have seen, is at pains to distinguish Lydgate’s story from that of other great figures who are tragic because of the smallness of the world they must live in, much of the narrowness of Lydgate’s world is associated with Rosamond. The narrative of both Lydgate’s marriage and his vocation represent one version of the “failure” of feminine influence. Here again, the attribution is not so much to a flawed model—a criticism, for example, that it might be carrying too much ideological weight—as to Rosamond herself. At the same time, however, the narrator often ironizes Lydgate’s expectations about marriage in free indirect discourse which implies that he finds in Rosamond exactly what he is looking for. When, for example, Lydgate is comparing Rosamond to Dorothea, he says that “she did not look at things from the proper feminine angle” and that the “society of such women was as relaxing as going from your work to teach the second form, instead of reclining in a paradise with sweet laughs for bird-notes, and blue eyes for a heaven” (93). The narrator says outright that “that distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour, did not penetrate his feeling and judgment about furniture, or women, or the desirability of its being

known (without his telling) that he was better born than other country surgeons” (148). At the same time, however, the narrator’s commentary on Rosamond, as many critics have noted, is very caustic: at the end of the novel, Lydgate has “accepted his narrowed lot with sad resignation. . . He had chosen this fragile creature and had taken the burthen of her life upon his arms. He must walk as he could, carrying that burthen pitifully” (787). While it might be argued that Eliot is suggesting here that Rosamond models herself according to masculine expectations of what a woman should be, and therefore these expectations are at fault, Rosamond herself is often belittled by the narrator.

Following the passage about the consolation of a “stupendous self and an insignificant world”, the narrator says that Lydgate’s “discontent” with the world “was much harder to bear: it was the sense that there was a grand existence in thought and effective action lying around him, while his self was being narrowed into the miserable isolation of egoistic fears, and vulgar anxieties for events that might allay such fears” (637). These “egoistic fears” and “vulgar anxieties” are directly related to Lydgate’s financial difficulties, and the narrator goes on to speculate about her readers’ reaction to such troubles: “[They] will perhaps appear miserably sordid, and beneath the attention of lofty persons who can know nothing of debt except on a magnificent scale. Doubtless they were sordid; and for the majority, who are not lofty, there is no escape from sordidness but by being free from money-craving, with all its base hopes and temptations” (637). The narrator makes it clear that Lydgate’s professional experience makes him aware of the possibility of economic hardship

(“his profession had familiarised him with all grades of poverty, and he cared much for those who suffered hardships”) but she also stresses that he is naive about his own financial position, or rather about the relationship between it and the goods he thinks he is entitled to (344). Lydgate also judges Wrench’s economic position very harshly: he thinks “that science and his profession were the objects he should alone pursue enthusiastically; but he could not imagine himself pursuing them in such a home as Wrench had—the doors all open, ...lunch lingering in the form of bones, black-handled knives, and willow-pattern. But Wrench had a wretched lymphatic wife who made a mummy of herself indoors in a large shawl; and he must have begun with an ill-chosen domestic apparatus” (351). Through this free indirect discourse, the harshness of the expression “ill-chosen domestic apparatus” tellingly reflects on Lydgate—his “domestic apparatus” after all, will also prove to be “ill-chosen” according to his own system of classification—and, more problematically, the narrator appears to collude in this judgement in the novel as a whole. The language of economic and social impediment, which is invoked to explain the limited achievements of characters such as Lydgate, Dorothea, and even Fred and Farebrother, does not seem somehow to apply to Rosamond. Her family’s material success is not made to excuse her social ambitions or her attention to dress in the same way that they eventually excuse Fred. The narrator sometimes thus colludes subtly with readings of masculine resistance to women’s influence at the same time that she celebrates it in Dorothea.

Eliot in Middlemarch thus seems anxious to separate versions of feminine influence from representations of intellectual labour. For the narrator, it is Dorothea's "living faithfully a hidden life" (822) that is the most important sort of feminine work. The vagueness of the language which accounts for the effects of Dorothea's influence is characterised at the end of the novel as both a social and ideological problem, resulting from the limited power accorded her in the domestic sphere: "Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother" (820). While this statement implies that there are those who object to the sphere of feminine influence being limited specifically to the domestic or to the family, the narrator implies that there is also a kind of lethargy, an unwillingness to change existing frameworks that might result in a different reading: "no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done" (820). While it was also common for high culture novelists to portray their own labour as if it is somehow not involved with or "above" market relations and to emphasize rather its "human" benefit, Middlemarch's portrait of intellectual labour seems rather to stress the kinds of forces that interfere with its having the kind of idealised effects that reviewers (and authors) envisioned for it.

## Chapter Five

### **Culture, Nation, and the Narrator in Daniel Deronda**

I am going to discuss in this chapter some possible readings of the connection between culture and the politics of national identity in Daniel Deronda. In this novel, the centre of authority suggested by its narrative voice is undermined or destabilised by a number of other perspectives, including those of Deronda's mother and of the Meyrick women. Katherine Linehan and Oliver Lovesey<sup>1</sup> read Deronda's (and Mirah Cohen's) departure to found a Jewish nation as an implicit reproduction of English domestic life in what will eventually become a colonial context (the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine). But the narrator's unusual alignment in this work with both the hero, Daniel Deronda—who is, I would argue, another version of the “man of culture”—and with Ezra Mordecai Cohen—who articulates the novel's fullest version of Jewish nationhood—produces a more complex reading of both culture and nation than critics of the novel have tended to see.

Critics are very quick to point out some of the more problematic representations of particular groups in the novel—where, for example, the narrator articulates or constructs versions of national identity which intersect with various

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<sup>1</sup> “Eliot's primary interest in *Daniel Deronda* is the moral fatigue of the national community. The subject of female Jewish alterity and the representation of Mirah's otherness provide merely a focus for Eliot's bitter examination of England and Englishness, the necessary “requirement” of racial otherness for a bold narrative project” (Lovesey 518).

other contemporary discourses that privilege white British men. But the novel as a whole also envisions (as far as it can) national identity (its evolution and articulation) as particular or special to the cultures it might arise in.<sup>2</sup> In the novel as a whole, “culture” becomes accessible to those who are usually excluded from access to it: women, Jews, and, by implication, those of other races. Despite this generalised trend, however, sometimes the narrator appears to share some of the class (and race) prejudices of her characters. Deronda, for example, is seen to struggle with the usual associations between taste, class, and morality (what is conventionally called culture) when the narrator says that “He looked round [the Cohens’ house] with some wonder at the old furniture: the oaken bureau and high side table must surely be mere matters of chance and economy, and not due to the family taste” (446); finally, he says that “however unrefined their airs and speech might be, he was forced to admit some moral refinement in their treatment of [Mordecai]” (448). It is not quite clear whether the narrator’s and Deronda’s perspectives merge here, or whether the narrator is acknowledging that Deronda’s prejudices are wrong-headed.

Daniel says to Gwendolen that he will travel to the East “to become better acquainted with the condition of [his] race in various countries there. . . [He will] restor[e] a political existence to [his] people, making them a nation again, giving them

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<sup>2</sup> This is a very different position from John Stuart Mill’s for example, when he writes that “These [outlying possessions of ours] are hardly to be looked upon as countries, . . . but more properly as outlying agricultural or manufacturing estates belonging to a larger community. Our West Indian colonies, for example, cannot be regarded as countries with a productive capital of their own. . . [but are rather] the place where England finds it convenient to carry on the production of sugar, coffee, and a few other tropical commodities” (from Principles of Political Economy, qtd. in Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism, p. 59).

a national centre” (875).<sup>3</sup> The novel leaves what constitutes “a political existence” fairly vague, although before this moment, Mordecai does imagine a more or less specific version of a Jewish state. The functioning of culture in this state is also quite specific in that it is connected with the circulation or exchange of “great” ideas. In the development of nationhood, says Mordecai, “The life of a people grows, it is knit together and yet expanded in joy and sorrow, in thought and action; it absorbs the thought of other nations into its own forms, and gives back the thought as new wealth to the world; it is a power and an organ in the great body of the nations” (585). This vision of organic intellectual exchange among nations, in which others’ ideas are reformed or reworked as a “new wealth” to others is characteristic of the idealised vision of Jewish national goals in the novel, and also characteristic of the novel’s idealism about the functioning of culture. It is also contradictory in its import, sometimes claiming that a sense of national identity, of separateness from others is necessary, and at others implying that “nationhood” is really only a strong way of speaking about common experience. Mordecai can say on one hand that “The effect of our separateness will not be completed and have its highest transformation unless our race takes on again the character of a nationality” (594). However, he also says that “I cherish nothing for the Jewish nation, I seek nothing for them but the good which promises good to all the nations” (597), which suggests that national feeling merely forms a background to moral and cultural life.

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<sup>3</sup> All quotations from *Daniel Deronda* are from George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Barbara Hardy, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967. First published 1876.



In Culture and the State, David Lloyd and Paul Thomas have argued that nineteenth-century European constructions of culture and of the state are intimately related. Culture serves to “inculcat[e] . . . a peculiar mode of subjectivity: a mode of the subject that must somehow be produced as a prerequisite to participation in the business of the state, even if participation, here, means no more than accepting ‘being represented’” (46). “The decade from 1860 to 1870,” which was “the decade of the second parliamentary Reform Bill, enacted in 1867, and the Education Act of 1870,” they note,

sees the crystallization of Victorian state and its transition from a predominantly coercive to a hegemonic form. . . [T]hrough that decade, a convergence takes place between the ideological formulations of liberal thinkers on culture, education and representation and the state institutions that emerged in order to contain the demands of a highly mobilized and articulate working class. . . . Beyond the ad hoc measures of “governmentality,” the idea of the state and its concomitant notion of the ethical subject as citizen take on a self-evidence that regulates the very form of social institutions from the family to parliament itself. (115-6)

Among those ostensibly (but not inevitably) excluded from the category of “self-evidently” eligible citizenship were members of the working classes,<sup>4</sup> women, and those of “other”—especially Asian and African—races. Eliot’s representation of

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<sup>4</sup> Although the Second Reform Act of 1867 increased the electorate substantially, it was still a very small percentage of the population.

Jews in Daniel Deronda (as a large number of Jewish critics and readers have noted), if idealised, certainly puts them in the realm of the representable, in the political sense. But Eliot's version of culture in the novel is not necessarily Arnold's. Marc Wohlfarth, in a recent article, has in fact called the novel "a polemic against . . . Culture and Anarchy" (203). Eliot's version of Jewish culture, as William Baker has noted, "centers on the richest cultural period of Jewish history, the medieval Spanish Arabic Renaissance" (463). In this, she follows the Jewish historian Leopold Zunz, who believed that "knowledge of Jewish cultural-intellectual tradition would enhance Judaism's reputation and change the attitude of Jews, as well as non-Jews, towards it" (Baker 464). Her representation of Jewish culture is meant to promote racial and religious tolerance, but, like versions of culture closer to home, it tends also to promote a certain élitism. Mordecai envisions a state which is "merciful to the poor and weak and to the dumb creature that wears the yoke for us" (590), a state, in other words, where hierarchies and class differences still exist, but which are presumably mitigated by the national programme the novel sets out. While it is difficult not to see this Jewish state as a projection, "another try", in some sense, at the sort of ideal state intellectuals might have envisioned for England, Eliot is careful to represent England as a place where this ideal is no longer feasible. The narrator suggests at several points in the novel that such a vision cannot work because of the versions of racial and national exclusions that English colonial policy propagates.

This does not mean that the novel is not sometimes problematic in the way it articulates who should be allowed to become a citizen-subject, but its conceptions of

culture and of the state (specifically the Jewish state) do not always take for granted the kind of ideal of subject-formation that Lloyd and Thomas describe. Some of the novel's most ironically rendered characters represent a counterpoint to what Eliot sees as cherished and specifically British but wrong-headed opinions about representable subjects. Mr. Bult, for example, whom the narrator describes with a degree of irony as "a healthy Briton on the central table-land of life", is "a little amazed at an outburst of Klesmer's on the lack of idealism in English politics, which left all mutuality between distant races to be determined by the need for a market" (283); he "hardly regard[s]" Klesmer "in the light of a serious human being who ought to have a vote" (283). Part of Grandcourt's moral deficiency, the narrator implies, is in his failure to consider the political existence or claims of other groups. His "biographer", she says, "need not have read up on Schleswig-Holstein, the policy of Bismarck, trade unions, household suffrage, or even the last commercial panic" (645-7). "His views on [these subjects]," continues the narrator ironically, "can hardly be said to have wanted breadth, since he embraced all Germans, all commercial men, and all voters liable to use the wrong kind of soap, under the general epithet of "brutes" (645). The implication for both these men is that if they regard those culturally close to them (Europeans and lower class individuals) as "brutes" or unfit citizens, their opinions about marginalised groups such as the Jews will be that much more bigoted. Certainly the novel develops these implications more fully in Grandcourt's case.

The discussion of nationhood and national development in the novel is also bound up with Victorian ideas which also come under the heading of culture, such as

the function of learning and the meaning of social change. The narrator's statement about this collection of men in the Hand and Banner "drawn together by a taste not prevalent even among the heirs of learning and its institutions" (582) foregrounds the idea (unusual with Eliot's narrators) that social change (the development of nations?) goes on outside the reach of those in power as well as within it. During the discussion following, the narrative voice in the novel ostensibly aligns itself with Mordecai's vision of nationhood, but the assertions of the other characters are also given some force. When Goodwin says that "ideas are a sort of parliament, but there's a commonwealth outside, and a good deal of the commonwealth is working at change without knowing what the parliament is doing" (583), he too suggests that the forces of social change are not always with power structures—and possibly, too, that the programmes of these institutions are not as influential as they might be or like to think they are. There is a disturbing version of power politics articulated in his reference to the "ideas" which "work themselves into life and go on growing with it"—"It's the nature of wood and stone yielding to the knife", he says, "that raises the idea of shaping them, and with plenty of wood and stone the shaping will go on" (583). In some ways, this metaphor contradicts what Pash says about "the commonwealth working at change without knowing what the parliament is doing" because it suggests that it is the "shaping" and the "yielding" (language which suggests a certain power dynamic) that makes change possible—rather than a sort of benevolent mixing of forces. Pash's objection to all this, is that in this "ready mixing of ideas", some

groups which are not “suitable” for nationhood will get the idea: “I daresay” says Pash, that “the wild asses are snuffing [these ideas] and getting gregarious” (584).

Mordecai’s vision of the Jewish nation in this passage comes largely without the intervention of the narrator, but she clearly valorizes his visionary status.

Mordecai’s idealism is sometimes questioned by other characters, however, who cannot quite see things in his terms. Gideon, for example, says, “Our people have inherited a good deal of hatred. . . stiff settled rancour inherited from the times of persecution. How will you justify keeping one sort of memory and throwing away the other? There are ugly debts on both sides” (597). Such an acknowledgement of both racial and religious enmity suggests that Mordecai’s vision is too idealised, and that his stipulation that national founding myths and national memories can be purged of “ugly” content is at least problematic.

### **Domestic Life and the Nation**

Eliot’s own consistent emphasis on the importance of domestic affection also enters into her conception of national life, and, although there are moments when this application becomes problematic, it is not nearly the monolithic moral prescription that critics read it to be. Nor does “culture” or education entirely take the place of the domestic nurturance in *Deronda*’s case. The depiction of Jewish domestic life in the novel is connected very closely with particularly Jewish rituals, as when Cohen blesses his family: “the two children went up to him and clasped his knees: then he laid his hands on each in turn and uttered his Hebrew benediction; whereupon his wife

who had lately taken baby from the cradle brought it up to her husband and held it under outstretched hands to be blessed in its sleep” (447). Eliot also shows the family sharing “the memorial of the manna that fed the wandering forefathers” (448). Jewish readers of the novel, as Jane Irwin notes, “were amazed by the authenticity of the Jewish part. . . . Freud was to remark [that] George Eliot knew of things ‘we [Jews] speak of only among ourselves’”(xxx). So, while *Deronda*’s morality might be read as particularly English, it is combined with as authentic a version of Jewishness as possible. Given the prejudices against Jews which the novel was attempting to combat, this note of idealism in its domestic scenes can be read as polemical.

Furthermore, the novel is especially suspicious of English versions of domesticity which are speciously linked with public good and with class interests. For example, when Catherine Arrowpoint is arguing with her parents about the propriety of marrying Klesmer, her father says to her that “it will never do to argue about marriage. . . . We must do as other people do. We must think of the nation and the public good” (290). Catherine asks very pointedly, “Why is it to be expected of an heiress that she should carry the property gained in trade into the hands of a certain class? That seems to me a ridiculous mish-mash of superannuated customs and false ambition. I should call it a public evil. People had better make a new sort of public good by changing their ambitions” (290). Eliot here reverses the usual version of domestic ideology, which says that in the preservation of certain class interests through marriage, the “nation” and the “public good” will be served (especially its economic interests and good). Gwendolen’s uncle the Reverend Gascoigne uses a

similar logic to persuade Gwendolen to marry Grandcourt when he says that “I trust that you will find in marriage a new fountain of duty and affection. Marriage is the only true and satisfactory sphere of a woman, and [with Grandcourt]. . . you will have probably an increasing power, both of rank and wealth, which may be used for the benefit of others” (180). Gascoigne’s belief in this version of domestic ideology is strong: he says of Gwendolen that “he wished her not to be cynical—to be, on the contrary, religiously dutiful, and have warm domestic affections” (180).

This skepticism about domestic ideology creates problems of interpretation in a novel where the narrator elsewhere says that “girls and their blind visions. . . are the Yea or Nay of the good for which men are enduring and fighting. In these delicate vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affections” (160). The narrator’s idealism about domestic affections is not borne out everywhere in the novel, for if anything it documents the ways in which Grandcourt’s private treatment of Gwendolen is like England’s treatment of its colonies. The trajectory of Gwendolen’s moral development as traced by the narrator, for example (and supported by Deronda’s assessment of her moral condition) is not as convincing as her suffering.

Mordecai says that, symbolically speaking, Israel is “the heart of mankind”, which means in the novel’s terms “the core of affection which binds a race and its families in dutiful love, . . . the reverence for the human body which lifts the needs of our animal life into religion, . . and the tenderness which is merciful to the poor and weak” (590). The novel as a whole does not specifically associate this “core of

affection” with women or with domestic contexts, but rather with collective racial memory. Racial memory is closely tied to the narratives of the childhood experiences of Mirah and Mordecai. Mirah’s conception of her people as a suffering group is what gives her the initial ability to endure her particular troubles. Mirah says, “I thought of my People, how they had been driven from land to land and been afflicted, and multitudes had died of misery in their wandering—was I the first?” (263). This appeal to history and racial identity is sometimes problematic, however, because Eliot acknowledges that even here history and interpretation are not monolithic. Mirah has difficulty justifying her own wish to die in light of this history: “in the wars and troubles when Christians were cruelest, our fathers had sometimes slain their children and afterwards themselves; it was to save them from being false apostates. . . . But my mind got into war with itself, for there were contrary things in it. I knew that some had held it wrong to hasten their own death, though they were in the midst of flames” (263). For Mirah, moments in her childhood are blended with a sense of racial sacredness (such as the Hebrew hymn her mother used to sing to her). Mordecai too refers to “the Masters who handed down the thought of our race—the great Transmitters, who laboured with their hands for scant bread, but preserved and enlarged for us the heritage and memory”, and likes to think that there is a “faint likeness” between these men and “poor philosophers” such as himself (580). Gwendolen, according to the narrator, has not a life “well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of the earth, for the labours men go forth to”; her childhood experiences do not have what the that



“familiar unmistakable difference amid the future widening of knowledge: a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection” (50). At first, “[t]he best introduction to astronomy is to think of the nightly heavens as a little lot of stars belonging to one’s own homestead” (50), but this sense, implies the narrator, later develops into the sort of altruistic impulse she describes in *Deronda*.

Thus, the formation of personal identity echoes the formation of national identity: one begins with a sense of ownership, of consolidation in experience and moves on to a “wider knowledge” of others’ experiences, but the formativeness of this early experience is never lost. While for a time it seems necessary to emphasize the particularity of one’s identity, eventually it becomes blurred, whether in a widening of interest, or in the “downfall of habitual beliefs which make the world seem to totter for us in maturer life” (211).

The same connection between “rootedness” and “wider knowledge” characterizes the representation of nationalism in the essay, “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” from the 1879 collection called *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. “The eminence, the nobleness of a people”, says Such, “depends on its capability of being stirred by memories when an appeal against the permission of injustice is made to great precedents in its history and to the better genius breathing in its institutions” (138).<sup>5</sup> He attempts to separate the character of national feeling from the racism it usually issues in, without closing off the possibility of sharing of cultural heritage: “It

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<sup>5</sup> All quotations from *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* are from George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, ed. D.J. Enright (London: J.M. Dent, 1995). First published 1879.

is admirable in a Briton with a good purpose to learn Chinese, but it would not be a proof of fine intellect in him to taste Chinese poetry in the original more than he tastes the poetry of his own tongue” (139). He insists both that “I am not bound to feel for a Chinaman as I feel for my fellow countryman” and that “I am bound not to demoralise him with opium, not to compel him to my will by destroying or plundering the fruits of his labour on the alleged ground that he is not cosmopolitan enough” (139).

“What is wanting, he further says, is “that we should recognize a corresponding attachment to nationality as legitimate in every other people, and understand that its absence is a privation of the greatest good” (139). The construction of personal history and national history are thus very closely linked, but in both there seems to be a period in which a hybridity of heritage, a lessening of the focus on national or family roots is possible and eventually necessary in order for sympathetic understanding of other nations to operate. The voices of the novel and of the essay both suggest that Eliot struggled with imperialist versions of English identity and sought to replace them with hybrid constructs (or processes of construction).<sup>6</sup> As Amanda Anderson puts it, “what the story of *Deronda* suggests is the somewhat paradoxical proposition that the project of universalism will only become and remain viable if its terms are set by the excluded particular”(56).

We can see the process of separation in operation in the narrator’s account of Daniel’s childhood experiences. *Deronda*’s version of “eccentric morality” is very

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<sup>6</sup> Many of the characters in the novel have mixed heritages: Mrs. Meyrick is “half French, half Scotch” (238), Klesmer is “a felicitous combination of the German, the Slave, and the Semite” (77).

important to his national project, although we do not in the novel see the sort of state which Deronda finds. These childhood experiences are for him sacralised when he thinks that “Sir Hugo’s watch-chain and seals, his handwriting, his mode of smoking and talking to his dogs and horses had all a rightness and charm about them. . . which went along with the happiness of morning and breakfast-time” (211). Insofar as this experience is for Deronda an experience of both affection and of Englishness (at least upper class Englishness), it results in a moral rootedness which the novel says Gwendolen lacks, and it is Deronda, rather than Mirah or Gwendolen, who articulates the novel’s most important version of the moral life. The novel emphasizes that Deronda’s affections are of the right sort: “there was hardly any creature in his habitual world that he was not fond of. . . Daniel loved in that deep-rooted filial way which makes children always the happier for being in the same room with father or mother” (210). He measures all things by Sir Hugo’s opinions, but eventually this (natural child’s) idealism is horribly jarred: the narrator stresses that this represents “hardly a less revolutionary shock to a passionate child than the threatened downfall of habitual beliefs which makes the world seem to totter for us in maturer life” (211). Nevertheless, the narrator says that “Daniel’s tastes were altogether in keeping with his nurture: his disposition was one in which everyday scenes and habits beget not ennui or rebellion, but delight, affections, aptitudes” (208).

Eventually the novel more or less dissociates Deronda’s Englishness and status as a gentleman from his moral self. After Sir Hugo’s marriage to Miss Raymond, the narrator emphasizes that Deronda “see[s] his own frustrated claim [to inheritance] as

one among a myriad”, so that this “inexorable sorrow takes the form of fellowship and makes the imagination tender” (215). Such a tenderness and sympathy are later borne out in Deronda’s interactions with Gwendolen and Mirah (and implicitly with underprivileged persons in general). Deronda starts to grow away from his formerly idealised view of Sir Hugo and his Englishness. The shallowness of his particular version of culture is apparent when Sir Hugo says to Deronda that “we want a little disinterested culture to make head against cotton and capital, especially in the House. My Greek has all evaporated. . . But it formed my taste. I daresay my English is the better for it” (217). Sir Hugo’s prejudices surface clearly here—culture for him is merely a matter of forming tastes—almost a cipher for landed interest and the preferences of a certain class. The implication is that education ought rather to form the basis for moral life—and, in the sense that it modifies the young boy’s sense of “the Whigs as the chosen race among politicians”, it contributes to Deronda’s development. Education, then, is less important for the formation of the moral self than affection. The narrator also implies this when she says that the “main lines of character are often laid down” in childhood, “while adults are debating whether most education lies in literature or science” (210).

The importance of education in the formation of Deronda’s sensibilities is therefore limited: more specifically, he does not fit the model of masculinity implicitly associated with the education of a young man at Cambridge: “Daniel had the stamp of rarity” which consisted in “in a subdued fervour of sympathy, [and] an activity of imagination on behalf of others. . . [It] was continually seen in acts of

considerateness that struck his companions as moral eccentricity” (218). The narrator explicitly relates the sort of masculine behaviour expected of Deronda to the enactment of imperialist goals: “How”, she asks, “could a fellow push his way properly when he objected to swop for his own advantage, knocked under by choice when he was within an inch of victory, and, unlike the great Clive, would rather be the calf than the butcher?” (218).<sup>7</sup> Deronda’s “activity of imagination on behalf of others” is part of the vision of the future Israel as “the heart of mankind”, and is meant to be one of the founding principles of the Jewish state. In some ways, however, national claims (and perhaps identity politics in general) by definition exclude this “activity of imagination.”

### **The Narrator and the Representation of Race**

Critics have noted that in Daniel Deronda the Jews are conveniently shipped off to the East, so that Jewish blood will not mix with English. But in Impressions of Theophrastus Such, where Eliot is more specific about nationalism and what it means for the English, Such does not advocate the separation of races: “Are we to adopt the exclusiveness for which we have punished the Chinese?” (150), he asks, and then imagines particular objections to the blending of English blood with that of other races. While he admits that “[t]he tendency of things is toward the quicker or slower fusion of races”, he also says that if the “fusion happens before the development of

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<sup>7</sup> That readers experienced Deronda as a somewhat feminised hero is borne out by Leslie Stephen’s reaction to the portrait of Cambridge life in the novel. He remarked dourly in his 1902 George Eliot that “In the Cambridge atmosphere of Deronda’s days there was, I think, a certain element of rough common sense which might have knocked some of her hero’s nonsense out of him”. Eliot had consulted him about Cambridge scholarships (Qtd. in Irwin, 333).

distinctly national identities on both sides, it “degrad[es these societies’] moral status.” What is necessary is the “discerning and adjustment of opposite claims” (150-1).

Generally speaking, in Daniel Deronda it is the narrator who makes a large number of the racially directed (and many times corrective) comments in the novel. Much of her racial commentary is accompanied by an apologetic referral to various Christian atrocities, which adds another dimension of religious difference to the language of racial difference. When the narrator describes Deronda’s first musings about Mirah, she ironises in Deronda’s speculations what were probably common perceptions about Jews: “he took it for granted”, says the narrator, that “learned and accomplished Jews. . . had dropped their religion, and wished to be merged in the people of their native lands” (246). He sees “rapid images” of “hawk-eyed”, “rough-headed”, “not fastidious” people, but despite the fact that “his mind was not apt to run spontaneously into insulting ideas or to practice a form of wit which identifies Moses with the advertisement sheet”, “he could not escape (who can?) knowing ugly stories of Jewish characteristics and occupations” (246). This passage finally ends with the narrator’s imagining the responses of colonised persons to white (English) Christians. “Scorn flung at a Jew as such would have roused all [Deronda’s] sympathy in griefs of inheritance”, says the narrator, “but the indiscriminate scorn of a race will often strike a specimen who has well earned it on his own account, and might fairly be gibbeted as a rascally son of Adam. It appears that the Caribs, who know little of theology, regard thieving as a practice peculiarly connected with Christian tenets, and

probably they could allege experimental grounds for this opinion” (246). The narrator reverses the usual expectation of justifying such a claim by referring to (white) Christians as “rascally son[s] of Adam.”

Probably the most notorious example of the narrator’s invocation of racial categories occurs when she is speaking of Deronda’s tendency to keep his more passionate feelings to himself, and the narrator compares him to the Bushmen of South Africa. Deronda is said to be “open to that charm” exercised by the “fascination of [Gwendolen’s] womanhood.” This openness, says the narrator, is “mingle[d] with consciously Utopian pictures of his own future. . . he would be more likely,” says the narrator, “than many less passionate men to love a woman without telling her of it. Sprinkle food before a delicate-eared bird: there is nothing he would more willingly take, yet he keeps aloof, because of his sensibility to checks which to you are imperceptible. And one man differs from another, as we all differ from the Bosjesman, in a sensibility to checks, that come from a variety of needs, spiritual or other” (370). Critics have read this particular narratorial comment as an oddly racist “slip” “in a novel dedicated to promoting racial tolerance”; Jews “are regarded as only mildly ‘low grade’ in comparison to Asian despotism and. . . black savagery” (Linehan 339). While the comparison between Deronda and the “delicate-eared bird” emphasises both the bird’s and Deronda’s “sensibility to checks” which presumably mediate between its appetites and its actions, and also serves to complicate his attraction to both Mirah and Gwendolen, which “less passionate men”, apparently, would have declared. While the delicate-eared bird’s particular “checks” might

include its fear of humans, or its ignorance of the food sprinkled before it, Daniel's "capability of reticence" is more a result, it is implied, of the strength of his feelings: it is not, as the comparison with the bird suggests, from reservations about Gwendolen's nature or fear of women in general (despite others' characterizations of Gwendolen as a "Lamia beauty" or his own reservations at the beginning of the novel) that he does not declare his feelings. Exactly why Daniel's and the delicate-eared bird's "sensitivity to checks" should arise from "a variety of needs" which the Bosjesman does not share is not clear; if the narrator means to imply that this "sensitivity to checks" is part of "civilised life" or social structure, then the comparison with the delicate-eared bird does not fit: why the Bosjesman should not at least share "the variety of needs, spiritual or other" with the bird seems odd.

The moment in the novel where the politics of national identity are most explicitly articulated in terms of race is in the discussion at the Hand and Banner, where Deronda, Mordecai, and a number of others gather to talk about such things as "the law of progress", "the power of ideas", and "the causes of social change" (582-3). The narrator's account of the "party. . . assembled" there is notable for its racial dynamics: "Miller", says the narrator, "had at least grand-parents who called themselves German, and possibly far-away ancestors who denied themselves to be Jews; Buchan, the saddler, was Scotch; Pash, the watchmaker, was a small dark, vivacious, triple-baked Jew; Gideon was a Jew of the red-haired, generous-featured type easily passing for Englishmen of unusually cordial manners", and finally "Croop, the dark-eyed shoemaker, was probably more Celtic than he knew" (581). Although



the narrator herself establishes an explicit racial framework in order to foreground its problematics when she says that “pure English blood (if leech or lancet can furnish us with the precise product) did not declare itself predominantly in the party” (581), her overall point is that any given ancestry (even an ostensibly English one) is generally racially mixed and not always externally marked. Only three men in the party, says the narrator, “would have been discernible everywhere as Englishmen: the wood-inlayer Goodwin, well-built, open-faced, pleasant-voiced. . . the florid laboratory assistant Marrables. . . and Lilly, the pale, neat-faced copying clerk, whose light-brown hair was set up in a small parallelogram above his well-filled forehead” (581-2). There is a limit to the degree of mixing, however. While the narrator’s tone suggests a certain gentle mockery of Lilly’s hairstyle (possibly suggesting that the “parallelogram” represents Lilly’s wish to attain a style associated with a certain class for example), that she also refers to his “well-filled” forehead suggests that he is to be opposed to black racial stereotypes of the recessive forehead. And yet she also shows herself aware of, and jokes about, views of the English presence abroad (although possibly not in the colonial world): Gideon, she says, would be considered to have “unusually cordial manners” for an Englishman. So, while the narrator is somewhat anxious to propagate the view that appearance does not necessarily betoken the possession of qualities associated in certain discourses with race, she also betrays a certain anxiety that her articulation of racial ambiguities (mixed blood) may be read too literally and become all-inclusive, interfering at least with the articulation of nationalism “as a good.”

What is problematic about Daniel Deronda is that the narrative's criteria of racial difference as applied to Jews differ from those in its other readings of race, most often those articulated in the context of British colonial expansion during the time Eliot was writing the novel. Part of this difference results from the particularity of various considerations of Jewish religion and culture, the re-emergence of what has been called the eastern question, and the problem of what many cities saw as "alien" immigration. Not all of the constructions of immigrant Jews were negative: Bill Williams quotes a liberal M.P. in 1882 Manchester who says of Jews that "in every country where they were allowed the full rights and privileges of citizenship they conformed to the laws of that country; they blended with its institutions and they constituted an element in their societies of the finest and most useful description" (75). Williams notes that poorer Jewish populations, which were not so anglicised, however, were the target of much anti-Semitism in the popular press: the construction of the immigrant Jew as one who brings "inevitable squalor and the threat of epidemic disease to any neighbourhood in which [he] dwelt" and who "oust[s] the Britisher from the labour market" was common (80). While Eliot stresses the loyalty of the Cohens to the monarchy, for example, she does not insist that they be anglicised.

While in Daniel Deronda, the narrator seems fairly tolerant of eastern immigrant populations in general,<sup>8</sup> in Impressions of Theophrastus Such, the essayist is somewhat more ambivalent: while Such urges that Jewish immigrants in particular

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<sup>8</sup> Middlemarch's portrayal of Ladislaw also might be read to indicate Eliot's sympathy with eastern immigrants—she describes the kinds of prejudices Will comes up against as a result of his Polish extraction. His grandfather was "a Polish refugee who gave lessons for his bread" (361).

ought not to be turned out of England, his feelings about other foreigners are more ambivalently expressed, despite his argument that Englishmen have these faults as well. After a long diatribe about the ugliness of foreign English, he finally concedes that “[it] is not agreeable to find foreign accents and stumbling locutions passing from the piquant exception to the general rule of discourse. But to urge on that account that we should spike away the peaceful foreigner, would be a view of international relations not in the long-run favourable to the interests of our fellow-countrymen.” Like the narrator of Daniel Deronda, the essayist finally chastises the English for what are generally seen as foreign faults, using their own rhetoric against them. “For we are at least equal to the races we call obtrusive”, he says, “in the disposition to settle wherever money is to be made and cheaply idle living to be found” (150).<sup>9</sup>

Impressions of Theophrastus Such, like Daniel Deronda, also shows Eliot’s awareness of the oppressiveness of English colonial policy. In one passage, the essayist both speaks the imagined resistance of colonised peoples and shows how they come to be silenced:

The men who planted our nation were not Christians, although they began their work centuries after Christ; and they had a decided objection to Christianity when it was first proposed to them. . . . But since we have been fortunate enough to keep the island-home they won for us, and have been on

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<sup>9</sup> The rhythm of argument in this essay follows in general this pattern: the force of the essayist’s objections are often so strong that when it is later claimed that they are ironic, the irony loses some force and makes its later admission look a little like ambivalent concession.

the whole a prosperous people, rather continuing the plan of invading and spoiling other lands than being forced to beg for shelter in them. . . . The red Indians, not liking us when we settled among them, might have been willing to fling such facts in our faces, but they were too ignorant, and besides their opinions did not signify, because we were able, if we liked, to exterminate them. The Hindoos also have doubtless had their rancour against us and still entertain enough ill-will to make unfavorable remarks on our character, especially as to our historic rapacity and arrogant notions of our own superiority. . . but though we are a small number of an alien race profiting by the territory and produce of these prejudiced people, they are unable to turn us out; at least when they tried we showed them their mistake. We do not call ourselves a dispersed and a punished people: we are a colonising people, and it is we who punish others.

This passage both acknowledges the character of English colonial expansion, rendering both its arrogance and its xenophobia strikingly. At the same time, however, hostile responses to this arrogant nationalism are envisioned here in a way that they are not in Mordecai's vision of Jewish nationhood.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sophia Andres notes that this passage “blurs the boundaries between the civilised and the savage, showing how one designation partakes of its opposite other, while underlining the need to understand self through the other” (102). Susan Meyer, on the other hand, has said that in both Daniel Deronda and Impressions of Theophrastus Such, “Eliot is concerned with maintaining what are, ultimately, national boundaries. . . . As Eliot moves toward the celebration of ‘historic peoples’ and their national lives, any individual desires that are at odds with the society become progressively less important and more relegated to the status of selfishness” (75).

While Gwendolen, most prominently, is “educated” into a sympathetic regard for others, Daniel’s mother maintains until the end of the novel that she was right to reject her Jewish heritage (the role envisioned for her by her father) and become a singer, which comes with its own version of egotism or selfishness. “He never thought of his daughter except as an instrument”, she tells Daniel, and suggests that his version of duty is a stranglehold: “I did not want affection. I had been stifled with it. I wanted to live out the life that was in me, and not to be hampered with other lives” (688). This declaration is very different from the narrator’s earlier one about women bearing “onward through the ages the treasure of human affections”(160). Deronda’s mother mocks her son for speaking “as men do—as if you felt yourself wise” (726), and is quick to reduce his regard for his Jewish heritage to the mere result of his feelings for Mirah.

### **Culture and the Jewish State: Deronda as a Version of the Man of Culture**

Given the novel’s complex elaboration of the meaning of nationhood, its problematizing of the connections between national and domestic life, and its encumbered elaborations of concepts of foreignness and race, it is difficult to find in it the same kind of faith in morality or in the functioning of culture which characterize Felix Holt. Unlike that novel, it faces many of the contemporary contradictions which interfere with its more idealised conceptions. With the problematizing of Jewish history (except in Mordecai’s idealised construction) and of Deronda’s moral development, it is difficult to envision Deronda as the sort of man of culture Eliot

portrays (or wants to portray) in Felix Holt. In Daniel Deronda, the narrator plays a much less central role in the interpretation of narrative events: from the beginning of the novel, with Deronda's thoughts about Gwendolen being rendered in free indirect discourse ("Was she beautiful or not beautiful?") through to Mordecai's account at the Hand and Banner of the meaning of Jewish nationhood, it is noticeable that many of the more resistant or even radical opinions in the novel are offered by characters, rather than by the narrator. Nor does the narrator attempt, as she did in Felix Holt, to interpret the events of the novel through just one central character, despite the fact that Deronda exercises a moral influence over Gwendolen similar to Felix's over Esther. Deronda might be read as a sort of "man of culture" with his feminised morality and his sympathy with what the narrator calls the "Hagars and Ishmaels" (489), but there is much in the novel which makes the reader resist Deronda's being the moral yardstick by which we measure, for example, Gwendolen's account of her murderous thoughts toward Grandcourt. The narrator's idealization is at several points at odds with the import of the text. Even Deronda's (and Mirah's) self-sacrificing morality come under attack from Amy and Mab Meyrick. When Deronda and Mirah are discussing the story of Bouddha "giving himself to the famished tigress to save her and her little ones from starving", Amy asks: "'But was it beautiful for Bouddha to let the tiger eat him? . . . It would be a bad pattern.' and Mab concludes that 'The world would get full of fat tigers.'" (523).

The novel's articulation of the functioning of art and high culture (which also involves setting popular culture in its place) comes largely through Klesmer and

Mordecai. Klesmer relates the status of art if not quite directly to national morality, then at least to breadth and depth of feeling, which for Eliot is the beginning of the moral life. He says to Gwendolen: "that music which you sing is beneath you. It is - a form of melody which expresses a puerile state of culture - a dangling, canting, see-saw kind of stuff - the passion and thought of people without any breadth of horizon" (79). Not unexpectedly, however, the practice of high art is possible by only a few. Deronda tells Gwendolen that "most of us ought to practice art only in the light of private study--preparation to understand and enjoy what the few can do for us." (491). And, although Deronda goes on to say that "Miss Lapidoth is one of the few" (491), art (or artistic expression) by women in the novel almost never becomes the sort of high art that Klesmer and Mordecai value as important in the articulation of nationality. This is only partly because women do not always have access to the same artistic training as men. Daniel Deronda is like Felix Holt in that it too envisions a very limited role for women in the world of culture, but unlike Esther, both Mirah and Daniel's mother criticize prevailing modes of cultural authority--Mirah in her reacting of Jewish texts, and the Alcharisi in her choosing the life of a singer over that of a Jewish matron. It is Esther and Gwendolen who must take to heart the ideal of the "best self" rather than either of the heroes, but they are still not, even so, to be the purveyors of culture : they can only have access to culture through men.

In the Meyrick household, where the narrator says "there was space and apparatus for a wide-glancing, nicely select life, open to the highest things in music, painting, and poetry", Kate is an illustrator for a publisher and Amy and Mab

embroider cushions. This “openness” is made possible by Kate’s work, and the “best action. . . and habitual industry” of women in the Meyrick family, but the daughters are not treated so much as a national treasure as the eccentric result of French and Scotch parentage. There is perhaps a note of mockery or slight ironizing of men like Klesmer in Mab’s version of musical feeling: “oh-oh-oh! . . . I feel like the deluge. The waters of the great deep are broken up and the windows of heaven are opened. I must sit down and play the scales” (239-40). Hans too, in describing his series of Berenice pictures, “pretend[s] to speak with a gasping sense of sublimity” (514), and, when Deronda criticizes his rendering of her, “[throws] himself into a tragic attitude” and tells him, “think what you are saying, man—destroying, as Milton says, not a life but an immortality. Wait before you answer, that I may deposit the implements of my art and be ready to uproot my hair” (516).

Thus, although the relationship between Jewish high culture and national identity is fairly clearly articulated in Eliot’s reading of Jewish history, the bearing of this more-or-less Arnoldian framework on contemporary English life is more problematic. Eliot finds it easier to articulate the more formative stages in the process of consolidating both personal and national identities, but she also suggests that a certain hybridity is both possible and desirable. However, Deronda’s departure leaves a moral vacuum in the novel that its own process of idealised moral or cultural formation cannot fill. What stands out about Gwendolen’s moral transformation is her suffering rather than her declaration that she will be “one of the best of women, who make others glad that they were born” (882). The figures of morality and culture



who remain behind—Gwendolen, Klesmer, the Meyrick women—are, like Deronda, hybridised figures, but they do not have his moral power. While the novel does not fully articulate a program for the formation of female or non-British subjects, it does imply that both Jews and women ought to be taken seriously as moral subjects (and therefore at least potentially as citizens), and also deeply engages with the reasons they are not.

## *Conclusion*

I have focused in this thesis on aspects of George Eliot's relationship to various constructions, both Victorian and more recent, of culture and intellectual work. I have implied throughout that both intellectual work and culture are constructed as inherently masculine, and stressed that Eliot's status as a woman who was a high culture novelist and an intellectual was very unusual. Part of the reason for my focus on ostensibly masculine constructs is that Eliot herself tended to separate her work from that of other women writers, preferring to be judged by what she would have seen as more neutral (i.e. masculine) standards and not "merely" as a "great (woman) writer".<sup>1</sup> In some ways, my readings of culture and intellectual work (and of Eliot herself) might be seen to reinforce the boundaries that Eliot's contemporaries saw her as transgressing, as well as the boundary between "high" and "popular" culture which she was certainly more interested in maintaining. My consideration of "culture" has not included, for example, women's efforts to educate other women or

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<sup>1</sup> Mary (Arnold) Ward is a particularly interesting case for the testing of ostensibly masculine categories like "culture" and "liberal intellectual" because she was Matthew Arnold's niece and because her writing was very much influenced by Eliot's. When her first novel was published, her uncle Matthew Arnold said, "No Arnold can write a novel; if they could, I should have done it" (qtd. in Sutherland, 100). Like Eliot, Ward was unusual in her intellectual accomplishments. Like Eliot, she began her career with translation. Eliot's Mrs. Poyser had been quoted in parliament; Gladstone twice met Mary Ward to discuss her most famous novel, *Robert Elsmere* with him. Mark Pattison thought enough of her intellectual gifts to arrange for her to have access to the Bodleian Library, which was almost unheard of for a woman (Sutherland 34-5). And, like Eliot she was a successful writer who sometimes inspired very ambivalent as well as hostile reactions in both men and women. Although Ward met Eliot when she was working on Spanish literature and history and her novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888) contains specific references to *Middlemarch* (Sanders 188) she seems to have regarded her rather disdainfully later in her life, exclaiming in a letter, "What a prig is Adam [Bede], & what a Sunday school tone much of [the novel] has" (qtd. in Sanders, 46).

themselves outside institutional frameworks, or an analysis of other activities associated with culture such as museum- or concert- going.

I have also argued the narrative voices in Eliot's novels reflect in some ways the inherently conflicted position of the (female) public moralist, and that Eliot's ambivalent relationship to the discourse on culture manifests itself in the gendered voices of her narrators. Calling Eliot a "liberal intellectual" or "public moralist" may be seen, like the discourse on culture, to repeat the exclusions of those categories largely occupied by male writers, and similarly to separate Eliot from the women writers who had, like her, some vision of their writing as an important moral influence. But I have also stressed how Eliot's use of narrative voice suggests an identity for her as an intellectual woman which extends beyond those implied by masculine constructions of culture.

With the founding of Girton College, Cambridge in 1869, which enabled some women to have access to intellectual life in a more systematic way, it is possible that the ideal of the cultivated subject, while always classed, could now be at least imagined as female. Eliot's enthusiasm about this project is palpable when she tells her friend Sara Hennell that "There is a scheme on foot for a women's college, or rather university, to be built between London and Cambridge, and to be in connection with the Cambridge university, sharing its professors, examinations, and degrees!" (4:401, 22 November 1867). When Lloyd and Thomas claim that liberal intellectuals saw the formation of the cultivated subject as a prerequisite for political representation, they do not look at debates about women's suffrage. Many women

writers certainly would have seen themselves as versions of cultivated subjects and did not at the same time subscribe to this cause.

Eliot claimed that her novels were consistent in their conception of both character and life. After Daniel Deronda was published, Eliot wrote to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps that

though I trust there is some growth in my appreciation of others and in my self-distrust, there has been no change in the point of view from which I regard our life since I wrote my first fiction—the ‘Scenes of Clerical Life.’ Any apparent change of spirit must be due to something of which I am unconscious. The principles which are at the root of my effort to paint Dinah Morris are equally at the root of my effort to paint Mordecai. (6:318, 21 December 1876)

In the novels as a whole, the men of culture such as Adam Bede, Felix Holt, and Daniel Deronda are not at base very different from each other in their sensibilities, but Eliot’s conception of women’s relationship to culture became more complex and underwent some revision. The encumbered language of aesthetic response and higher feeling is particular to Adam Bede, and in both Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda Eliot more thoroughly examines the problem of women as aesthetic objects and the complexity of aesthetic response. In Middlemarch Will Ladislaw says to Dorothea Brooke that “Art is an old language with a great many artificial affected styles, and sometimes the chief pleasure one gets out of knowing them is the mere sense of knowing. . . . If I could pick my enjoyment to pieces I should find it made up of many different threads” (203-4). These assertions suggest that the cultivation of aesthetic

response is of secondary importance: Dorothea replies that “it is painful to be told that anything is very fine and not be able to feel that it is” (203), which emphasizes her exclusion from some forms of aesthetic education. In Daniel Deronda, where art becomes part of the articulation of national culture, the status of women and their artistic productions becomes more ambivalent. While Eliot wants to make large claims for Jewish art and culture, women’s status in relation to this culture is always, like her own, contradictory.<sup>2</sup>

Although the terminology I have used to describe Eliot’s novels suggests that my reading of them at least leans toward some version of a post-marxist (or materialist) approach, I have avoided describing Eliot’s position as an intellectual in, for example, Gramscian terms, partly because sometimes readings of the function of the intellectual tend to reduce her to a kind of propagandist: certainly Daniel Cottom’s does. But novels, as Mary Poovey notes, do not perform ideological work in the same way that other discourses do (Uneven, 124). Although Lloyd and Thomas make large claims about how “culture” functioned, for example, as part of the discourse on education from as early as the 1830s, Eliot’s representation of “scenes of instruction” suggests that her conception of women’s education went beyond institutional frameworks and that “self-cultivation” should be associated with domestic contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> Earlier in her life, Eliot had explicitly opposed the vote for women saying that “woman does not yet deserve a much better lot than man gives her” (2:86, 1 February 1853). However, she seems to have been undecided about it later. She wrote to John Morley, for example, that “your attitude in relation to Female enfranchisement seems to be very nearly mine” (4:364, 13 May 1867). Haight notes that Morley had supported Mill’s “amendment to Gladstone’s Reform Bill to permit women to vote” (n. 9, 364).

That Eliot's novels work to produce some version of the (masculine) cultivated subject is fairly clear. But in The Mill on the Floss and Middlemarch especially, Eliot presents masculine educational institutions as failures, and men as educated, but not cultivated.

Many feminist critics continue to find what Sherri Smith calls Eliot's "investment in the masculine" (100) life difficult to read past. Smith speculates that perhaps "the inadequacy of Eliot's investments, from a late twentieth-century feminist perspective, reflects not Eliot's lack of relevance as a feminist, but masculinity's lack of fixity and unity as a cultural and historical product" (106-7). Whatever the source(s) of Eliot's apparent "failure" to address certain issues, she was certainly aware that history (both masculine and feminine versions of it) were unstable constructs. Even if it is true, as Nina Auerbach laments, that two generations of critics have been unable to construct a George Eliot who is neither an honorary man nor a monstrous man-woman ("Waning" 353), the apparent contradictions of Marian Evans's life and work consistently inspire us to revise and to question the critical categories and ideological investments which inform our critical activity.

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