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Review of Modernizing George Eliot: The miter as Artist, Intellectual, Proto-Modernist, Cultural Critic

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This distinguished work by a major Eliot scholar is the product of decades of reading, writing and reflection on her fiction and thought. It brings together in revised, homogenized form a series of essays from 1972 to the present day, including new material; and further, it engages with and amplifies two of Newton’s earlier monographs on Eliot, as well as his collection of essays by other critics on Eliot utilizing modern literary theory. Despite dealing with complex philosophical ideas, Newton’s writing is clear and lucid throughout, bringing to light new insights without the unnecessary jargon that occasionally taints modern criticism. Newton also considers nineteenth-century criticism, most usefully that of Lewes, making connections also with Austen and Scott and drawing fascinating parallels between the plots of Little Dorrit and Daniel Deronda: he places Eliot above these three writers as an artist, however. Despite some blemishes this comprehensive monograph demonstrates the radical nature of Eliot’s intelligence, her innovative experiments with literary form and her status as ‘both artist and … intellectual. [T]he two are not separable’ (69; emphasis added). Newton firmly establishes Eliot’s relevance for the twenty-first century – her affinities with writers from Yeats and Joyce to Derrida and Levinas, and with modernist and post-modernist ideas. Use of post-structuralist criticism helps tease out subversive sub-texts, highlighting Eliot’s intense scepticism and the range of her thinking in ethics, politics and philosophy. Newton places Eliot in the literary canon alongside Dante, Milton and Goethe, high – and probably merited – praise indeed. This work can come across as a sustained defence of Eliot against her detractors, but it offers considerably more than this.

Placing Eliot so high on her pedestal – an action to which the present writer must also plead guilty – may invite a repetition of early-twentieth-century attempts by envious writers to push her off that lofty perch: the ‘half malicious’ critics after her death, like George Meredith, referred to by Virginia Woolf in her centenary article, who ‘gave point and poison to the arrows of thousands incapable of aiming them so accurately, but delighted to let fly’. There has also been much disparagement of Eliot’s work on ideological grounds, of course. Raising an artist so high also creates a tendency to dwarf her peers. Newton thus, in reaction to assertions that Eliot is less ‘feminist’ than a writer like Charlotte Brontë, cites Pauline Nestor’s assessment of Jane Eyre as simply a ‘heroine of fulfilment’ – ‘a psychological fantasy of the extraordinary … assurance of Jane’s ego, … markedly at odds with the childhood circumstances that produced it. Such a fantasy is diametrically opposed to Eliot’s commitment to psychological veracity’ (n. 14, 197). Yet Brontë’s novels can also be seen as life ‘experiments’. Thus Lucy Snowe in Villette, subject to early trauma, is alienated, neurotic and prone to breakdowns.

Hopefully Newton’s cogently argued book (one of a cluster of accomplished works currently appearing) will counter iconoclastic tendencies. He undermines previous emphases on Eliot’s ‘earnestness’. She is, as he maintains, a great teacher of ethics, a moral philosopher with affinities with Kant – but tough-minded, avoiding sentimental concessions to preaching or gratuitous earnestness, and only too aware of the irresolvable difficulties most of us face. She dislikes either/or binaries and conceptual oppositions, and describes Kant as mistaken in regarding ‘synthetical and analytic judgements as two classes’ (50). In ‘More leaves from a Notebook’ (ed. Pinney) Eliot states paradoxically: ‘It is rational to accept two irreconcilables …’. With sophistication, Newton argues that her fiction ‘shows that moral choice cannot be
totally secure and thus free of anxiety since future events may reveal that a different choice should or could have been made’ – witness Maggie in The Mill, whose ultimate decision regarding Stephen cannot immediately be ratified as correct, because Maggie can have no knowledge of the future outcome of that decision. Newton comments pertinently: ‘Moral choice cannot be totally secure and thus free of anxiety since future events may reveal that a different choice could or should have been made. … [T]ime is not relevant for Kant [but] for Eliot the ethical cannot completely exclude the temporal’ (50). These poignant comments are especially applicable to Mordecai’s (and Eliot’s) pre-Zionism, which – an added complication – has created both winners (the Jews) and losers (the Palestinians), not unexpected preoccupations in a novel dominated by tropes of gambling and, Newton demonstrates, concepts like ‘moral luck’. Similarly to Derrida, says Newton, for Eliot, ‘to be human is continually to be confronted by undecidability and the need to decide’ (164). He also, in a subtle reading of that text which is crucial to us now, ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ , points to the difficult double bind of colonialism: the original Celtic inhabitants of Britain were largely exterminated by Saxon invaders, and the English are now a miscellaneous people who have been composed of a mixture of Romans, Vikings and Normans. The Americans too are a mixed people. Yet both countries have become ‘great’ nations. Should we say with hindsight that the original colonization of these countries, which involved extermination, was misguided? And how will posterity judge Israel’s establishment?

Eliot, in response to her depiction of moral dilemmas, has been disparaged as ‘confused’. Rather, she is complex and divided, aware of the limitations of seeing things from a single point of view. In my opinion it is virtually impossible for a great thinker to maintain an entirely consistent and coherent position. (Newton would see her as more in control of complicating contradictions).

In consequence of Barthes’s critique of realism, Middlemarch has been labelled ‘a classic realist text’, a grand narrative with an all-knowing teller who presents a consistent world view, part of a quasi-metaphysical perspective controlled by Nemesis (or the Deity), punishing misdemeanours without ironic deconstruction. Newton points out that a distinction needs to be made between the narrator, a construct, and the real author. The narrator is part of the novel’s world, at one remove from the actual writer, and is an interpreter who should be identified with ‘reality’ or ‘truth’ (62). ‘[T]he narrator is a persona who is integrated into the fiction with a tone of voice separate from the author’ (68). The content of Middlemarch, as well as its form, and the narrator, are sometimes at odds in Eliot’s work – deliberately so. Yet her modernist successors have largely assumed that her narrator, complicit in maintaining bourgeois or other ideologies, sustains the status quo without question. Others, fettering Eliot to Jamesian prescriptions for the ‘great realist novel’, have critiqued her deviation from these prescriptions.

In her approach to modernist and even post-modernist representations, some critics have suggested, alternatively, a preference on Eliot’s part for the fragmentary over monism. She is difficult to pin down. A post-modernist might regard Henry James’s comment that Middlemarch is ‘a treasure-house of detail’ but ‘an indifferent whole’ (1) as a compliment, which, together with Eliot’s ‘Finale’ to a novel that refuses complete finality, is in line with modern suspicions of absolute ‘truth’. The metaphor of the web, creating interdependence that binds together all social life and historic connections in Middlemarch, could be deconstructed: the strands of the web might be warring signifiers. Of course, Eliot’s novel that comes nearest
to a proto-post modernist text is Daniel Deronda. The daring marriage of a realist form with mythopoetic prose that has affinities with romance creates a feeling of fragmentation in some readers, although Newton contends that the two plots are connected by thematic similarities, the use of coincidence, and the spillage of one form into the other, not least in the use of coincidence. Much ink has been spilt, of course, over whether this new experimental form works. Newton rightly devotes a large portion of the monograph to this most modern and challenging of George Eliot’s novels.

In my view Newton’s initial discussions of Eliot’s attitudes to race are the weakest portion of the book: the lumping together of Robert Knox and James Hunt, ‘the notorious racists’ (149), and the simple binary which sees polygenists as vulgar essentialists but monogenists (amongst whom Newton correctly includes Darwin and Eliot herself) as anti-racist. The matter is more complicated and nuanced. Newton cites Darwin’s reference to ‘Bushmen’ as ‘the lowest existing savages’ (ibid), although conversely he disliked slavery. In fact classic monogenism (‘ethnology’) had had its day by the time The Origin of Species appeared (1859), and at this period Eliot was forty and had looked at the many anthropological works that preceded Darwin. Primarily benign in intent (with lapses into hostility), the monogenist view of the early century was that, as all peoples share the same lineage, Britain had a ‘mission’ to carry ‘Christian civilisation’ across the globe so that the ‘families of mankind’ could be brought to the same level as Europeans. But peoples outside the select orbit gradually were viewed with hostility once they became intransigent, leading to James Hunt’s crude and vulgar, polygenist ‘negrophobia’, his endorsement of slavery and general distaste for ‘non-Europeans’. Before Darwin’s appearance on the horizon, Eliot had considered (and ultimately rejected) the essentialist ideas of Cuvier and the more complex theories of Lamarck, Spencer and Wallace. Unlike Hunt, Knox (though polygenist and anxious about ‘miscegenation’) was fundamentally benign. He wanted ‘others’ left alone – a different form of racism – and was strongly opposed to colonialism and slavery. Eliot had some sympathy with Knox and his ideas, alluding to him several times in Middlemarch. Knox compromised his brilliant career as a comparative anatomist by an unwise marriage and an unwitting involvement in scandal and murder connected with his professional work. Clearly, Lydgate was, in part, modelled on Knox. Defensive of Eliot, Newton sees ‘no simple and straightforward access to Eliot’s views on race’ (because of mediation through the narrator – 150). There are, though, her letters and private essays. Later, Darwinian monogenism was a compromise position between polygenism and monogenism, and ultimately Eliot subscribed to the view she shared with Darwin: the ‘affinities and repulsions’ model. This regarded mixtures between peoples at a similar level of cultural development, like Europeans (and Jews), as strengthening humanity (eg. Klesmer), but crossings of ‘disparate’ races, or between ‘close’ families, could be disastrous (see Letters, I, 246). These anxieties are played out in Felix Holt, in the characters of old Mr Transome and young Harry, both of whom share a similar ‘backwardness’ based on these ‘pathologies’, and romp together around the home as if soul mates. In ‘Notes on the Spanish Gypsy and Tragedy’ (in Cross’s Life) Eliot remarks that she required the ‘opposition of race to give the need for renouncing ... marriage’ between Silva and the Gypsy, Fedalma, an ‘incongruous’ mixture. However, as Newton points out, Eliot also had in mind an idealist construct of a future ‘fusion of races’ (172). While this is incredibly forward looking, one still hesitates to apply to Eliot the hackneyed phrase, ‘ahead of her time’. She was also very much of her time, as her interest in discourses like eugenics (obviously distasteful to
modern readers, but no fault of Eliot’s) demonstrates. Newton valuably trounces one-sided critics who simply see Eliot as racist and complicit with colonialism. She is neither, in nineteenth-century terms. Placed besides Dickens, Thackeray, Kingsley et al, her liberalism is remarkable for her time. She was primarily a cultural / racial relativist with a distaste for slavery and sympathy for displaced, ‘punished’ peoples.

Newton is at his most powerful, unravelling the interplay between psychological states and the (predominantly Darwinian) absence of any outward morality – an excellent riposte to critics who censure Eliot’s alleged use of Christian morality despite her agnosticism. Few readers of George Eliot: Romantic Humanist (1981) will forget Newton’s splendid analysis of Tito Melema’s subsidence into a terrible state of fear and consequent shock because of his rationalist belief that there is no moral order and he can therefore devote himself to self-interest. There are also powerful explications of a similar pathology in Godfrey Cass, Duke Silva and Silas Marner in the present work. There is, too, convincing explanation of the painful experiences and dilemmas of Deronda, to demonstrate that he is a flesh-and-blood character (though one would have preferred to feel these in the novel in the latter case, rather than have them explained). Since human beings are social animals, ‘Morality and justice are shown not to be immanent in the world ... but as ... purely human constructions, though not the less valid for that’ (133). ‘[F]or Eliot human identity is social in a constitutive sense and those of her characters, such as ... Christian in Felix Holt, who attempt to live purely individualistic lives, virtually cease to have human identities’ (ibid). If God does not exist, goodness based on human feeling is crucial for individual survival since ‘the ego itself is in a large degree a cultural product’ (33). No one is self-sufficient. On this basis Silva’s apostasy and rebellion against Spanish life in favour of Gypsy rebellion is scrutinized with clear-eyed sympathy as the cause of his breakdown and murder of Zarca. Furthermore, self dividedness and conflicting values like Silva’s cause immense suffering, being symptomatic of the complications of modern consciousness and the clashing of ethnic values as the world shrinks.

To sum up, despite certain criticisms expressed above, Newton’s new monograph as a whole is a remarkable work that reveals comprehensively Eliot’s engagement with ideas still relevant to the twenty-first century (many of which, like the modern and experimental nature of Silas Marner, or the disquisition on colonialism, could not be included here). It is an illuminating contribution to knowledge.

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