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GEORGE ELIOT'S THEORY OF THE NOVEL

By Richard Freadman

By the time George Eliot began work on Scenes of Clerical Life late in 1856, she already had in mind a pretty clear idea of what a novel ought to be. Here her work for the Westminster Review and the Leader had been of great assistance, for it had enabled her to assess many contemporary novels as well as numerous works of historical, sociological, philosophical and topical interest. The 'theory' of the novel that resulted was not as comprehensive or integrated as the historic one formalised in Henry James's Prefaces fifty years later, and it clearly underwent alteration as George Eliot the novelist matured; nevertheless, these early writings remain a valuable and generally reliable guide not only to her conception of the novel, but to some of the aesthetic problems which beset her art and thought more generally.

Many of the most important statements are well-known and have been collected in Thomas Pinney's Essays of George Eliot (1963), hereafter given as Essays. Others occur in the novels themselves or are to be found in G.S. Haight's edition of The George Eliot Letters (1954-1978), here abbreviated as Letters.

At the heart of George Eliot's conception of the novel lies a belief in the social efficacy and necessity of truth in art. She praises Ruskin's 'doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature' (Essays, p.266) and gives several reasons in support of it. One is simply that 'nature', especially in its human manifestations, possesses an intrinsic value that warrants reverence.

Another is that the 'self-forgetfulness' (*Essays*, p.371) involved in attending to what is beyond the self is essential to personal and social equilibrium. A famous statement of this position comes in her majestic review of the social historian Riehl, entitled "The Natural History of German Life". She argues that

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

The 'extension of our sympathies' is the ambition of George Eliot's fiction and a capacity for reverent 'attention', for 'the fond minuteness of attention that belongs to love' (*Essays*, p. 382), the faculty it wishes to promote.

George Eliot was, however, too vigorously sceptical to overlook some of the problems inherent in this position. What, for example, is the status of the 'picture' offered by the great artist? How far may it be said to entail a direct or reliable transcription of reality? Chapter XVII of *Adam Bede* takes up these questions. The narrator declares that

my strongest effort is...to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind.

But the traditional mirror analogy is, she* realises, suspect. She continues :

The mirror is doubtless defective, the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.

Absolute truthfulness is, then, an ideal, but inevitably an implausible one. The novelist writes out of what she elsewhere calls 'the truth of his own mental state' (Essays, p. 367), but this state is necessarily subjective and somewhat undependable. It cannot mirror or retrieve 'reality' in its entirety. In part this is because the writer's self is not a fixed thing. He or she expresses an 'unfolding self' (Letters, IV/49) whose existential and perceptual orientation changes across time, indeed from moment to moment.

Complete truthfulness is also impossible because 'reality' is unmanageably plural. Life is simply more complex than anything a novelist – or indeed anyone else – can say about it. Hence George Eliot's resort to the witness-box analogy: it suggests a determination to be as full and faithful in 'narrating' 'experience' as possible, but it also implicitly concedes that narrative, novelistic and other, is inescapably selective. The laws of evidence provide a conventionalised framework within which narrative details are selected, omitted and interpreted. Novelistic realism, too, is in this sense conventional, though, as George Eliot often insisted, 'realist' novels are peculiarly authentic because their conventions of reading and writing assume an unusual concentration upon circumstantial and psychological detail.

* I use the feminine pronoun although the narrative voice in Adam Bede presents itself as masculine.

Adam Bede's equivocation over truthfulness reflects a more general unease in George Eliot's thinking. She read 'the great Kant' (Letters, 11/165) with interest and disquiet (see, for example, Essays p.150) and she returns again and again to what we now think of as a classic post-Kantian dilemma: is the mind a constructive or reflective faculty; does it in some way create or imitate what we take to be the 'real world'? It must I think be conceded that her answers to these questions vary and that she is more inclined to submit them to fictional experimentation – she described her novels as a 'set of experiments in life' (Letters, VI/216) – than to try conclusively to resolve them through abstract argumentation. Where she does broach these matters in her non-fictional writings the artist is at times imaged as a faithful transcriber of reality, at others as the possessor of a profoundly intuitive form of perception not unlike that attributed to the 'philosophical artist' by Coleridge in the Biographia Literaria. The fiction, too, seems undecided. "The Lifted Veil", Felix Holt, Romola and Daniel Deronda all contemplate or contain a visionary mode of experience, what George Eliot elsewhere terms 'a lovelier order than the actual' (Essays, pp.437–38), yet we rightly remember the novels for their emphasis upon the quotidian, the contingent, the stubbornly factual quality of experience.

In fact she clearly assumed that certain features of experience are relatively constant, not least the 'perennial human nature' (Essays, p.262) to which it appeals, and that art could discriminate between what is 'vital' in life and its 'more transient forms' (Letters, IV/472). In the case of verbal art she concedes that the process of discrimination and recall is highly complex. In her revealing late essay "Leaves From a Notebook" George Eliot asks

how story-telling succeeds in ordering seemingly random impressions into persuasive narrative sequences. She concludes that 'we get interested in the stories that life presents to us through divers orders and modes of presentation' (Essays, p.444) and that narrative structures rationalise and reinforce associative 'processes' (Essays, p.445) which link various aspects of experience. Stories are thus seen as imitating or repeating fundamental tendencies in the mind. Hence, as Barbara Hardy suggests in Tellers and Listeners (1975), their deep and abiding appeal.

But what of the relationship between words and the 'world' they project or represent? This problem, which has so preoccupied literary theorists since Saussure, was familiar to George Eliot and some of her contemporaries and she refers to it often in essays, letters and novels. Indeed the now contentious term 'sign' occurs frequently in her writings. Here again her thought is interestingly and admirably inconclusive. If the witness-box view of narration tends to suggest that words can approach a faithful account of things as they are, other comments suggest that language is inevitably inexact, though (in some instances) less so as it develops historically. In "The Natural History of German Life", for example, she argues that in any language 'one word stands for many things, and many words for one thing; the subtle shades of meaning, and still subtler echoes of association, make language an instrument which scarcely anything short of genius can wield with definiteness or certainty' (Essays, p.287). Language is more than a system of 'algebraic signs' (Essays, p.228) such as is employed by the scientist. Such a medium, she asserts 'will never express life, which is a great deal more than science' (Essays, p.288).

Still other statements suggest that language is so approximate and unstable that not even 'genius' can 'wield' it 'with definiteness or certainty'. One such occurs in Book Second, Chapter One of The Mill on The Floss where the narrator in bemoaning the elusiveness and inescapability of metaphor in language laments that 'we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else'. This is very much what is now termed the 'poststructuralist' view, but I do not believe it to be the dominant one in George Eliot's aesthetic. On the whole she assumes that words can achieve a high degree of precision by reference to shared social conventions of meaning, but that there will inevitably be subjective regions of communication, whether written or spoken, in which language functions in more exploratory and individual ways.

Some of the late discussions are strikingly detailed in their analysis of linguistic systematics. "Notes on Form in Art", an essay written in the late 1860s but not published during George Eliot's lifetime, anticipates structuralist theories of binary relations within sign systems. Knowledge, and so language use, grows by "alternating processes of distinction and combination" (Essays, p.433). Great works of literature repeat these 'processes' with particular intricacy and intensity through 'the relation of multiplex interdependent parts to a whole which is itself in the most varied and therefore the fullest relation to other wholes'. (Essays, p.433). The greatest literature is that which is most relationally rich, both internally and in respect of more general social conventions and systems of understanding.

This late version constitutes a great advance upon the Adam Bede mirror analogy, yet it, too, emphasises the necessarily subjective quality of any

narrative report. Its idealist stress on a determining 'sequence of mental states in the constructor' (Essays, p.433) suggests that verbal art cannot simply 'picture' a palpable and fixed thing called 'life'. Rather, mind, existing language structures and various orders of sense perception interact in fashioning an image of the world.

For George Eliot, of course, a very important aspect of this image was not strictly visual. Her fiction aspires to a full description not only of the circumstances of life but of its impact upon individual consciousnesses. Her recurrent question as a novelist and critic is: how does life feel and appear to particular persons in particular situations; what is the resultant quality of the inner lives they lead? She declares in a famous letter that: 'It is the habit of my imagination to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself' (Letters, IV/97); elsewhere she requires of the writer a depiction of the 'real complex human being' not of 'types' (Essays, p.362). Her characteristic emphasis is upon the interconnectedness and the interpenetration of 'external conditions' and 'internal conditions' (Essays, p.287), of mind and circumstance. This relationship was, she believed, a particularly appropriate subject for the novelist because here was a form of writing capable of both extended psychological and sociological report. The novel could be at once subjective and objective, faithful and speculative; it could use language both to imitate an ostensible 'reality' and to reflect upon the processes of language itself. Above all, it could encourage a 'generous leap of impulse' (Essays, p.451) in the reader whereby social and literary prejudice would capitulate to a compassionate and sympathetic interest in others,

irrespective of rank, reputation or superficial appeal. Like so much else in her theory of the novel, George Eliot gave this commitment classic expression before she began writing fiction in earnest. A memorable passage in "The Natural History of German Life", dated July 1856, encapsulates her general outlook and heralds the great works of fiction that were to follow :

If any man of sufficient moral and intellectual breadth, whose observations would not be vitiated by a foregone conclusion, or by a professional point of view, would devote himself to studying the natural history of our social classes, especially of the small shop-keepers, artisans and peasantry, - the degree in which they are influenced by local conditions, their maxims and habits, the points of view from which they regard their religious teachers, and the degree in which they are influenced by religious doctrines, the interaction of the various classes on each other, and what are the tendencies in their position towards disintegration or towards development, - and if, after all this study, he would give us the result of his observations in a book well nourished with specific facts, his work would be a valuable aid to the social and political reformer. (Essays, pp.272-73)