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Carroll, David, "Review of George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: a reading of the novels" (1992).
The George Eliot Review. 213.
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Stephen Gill

George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: a reading of the novels by David Carroll (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992)

Towards the climax of *Felix Holt* Esther Lyon moves centre stage. Mist around her own history and that of Transome Court dissolves to reveal a vista of possibilities. The narrator comments: 'Esther found it impossible to read in these days; her life was a book which she seemed to be constructing — trying to make character clear before her, and looking into the ways of destiny'. This lovely sentence might serve as the epigraph to David Carroll's study. A character in a novel, who is well-versed in romance narrative, finds herself an author, 'constructing' the book of her own life, interpreting not only her past but seeking to project its varying narrative lines into a future where they might cohere into a satisfactory ending. The actual reader of *Felix Holt* is engaged in a similar task, making sense of the interrelations of lives which have individually claimed our particular interest at different moments in the story. And there is the so-called omniscient narrator, opening up for the reader possibilities of interpretation which even she cannot finally determine.

According to David Carroll moments such as this, which occur throughout George Eliot, focus most intensely her 'awareness of the fundamental role of interpretation in all areas of life', an awareness which drives her to 'redefine the nature of Victorian fiction: its presentation of character, the role of the narrator, the structure of its narrative, the depiction of social and historical change'. The literary slant of this sentence is important. In his Introduction Carroll outlines the dynamic role of hermeneutics in Victorian intellectual life and rehearses the evidence that George Eliot was well equipped philosophically to enter at the highest level the debate on how to 're-create meaning and coherence' in the face of the 'loss of traditional forms of belief'. What is most valuable about Carroll's approach, however, is that it emphasizes that Eliot's contribution to hermeneutical endeavour is her novels. The intellectual who translated Feuerbach and could cope with discussions about Schleiermacher over breakfast with Lewes, was an imaginative artist, who recognized story-telling as fundamental to human beings in their attempt to make sense not only of their own lives but of life.

What follows the Introduction is a series of readings of the fictions, which can be whole-heartedly recommended. As might be expected from the editor of the invaluable *Critical Heritage* volume and the Clarendon Press *Middlemarch*, each chapter is painstakingly attentive to the detail of the texts even as it explores the significance of the larger narrative structures. But these are 'readings', interpretations, and they are not at all coercive. It is not the least virtue of the notably fine treatment of *The Mill on The Floss* that Professor Carroll draws every detail together for *his* interpretation of

the novel, while allowing, not conceding, that interpretations of the ending differ.

This book has many virtues, but I want to stress two in particular. The first is that Carroll lays out so persuasively the development of George Eliot's art. She did not repeat herself nor stand still. 'In the course of her career, George Eliot submits the major sub-genres of Victorian fiction — pastoral, *Bildungsroman*, legendary tale, the historical, political, and prophetic novel — to critical redefinition'. What Carroll demonstrates is that each redefinition is impelled by problems encountered and only partially articulated in the previous one. The artistic career is shaped by energies of its own making, which call into question fundamental narrative strategies, including the omniscient author convention. The result is that rarity nowadays, a critical book attentive to the particularities of each novel as a distinct work of art.

The second virtue is that the approach to the novels is humane and accessible. 'Life & action are prior to theorizing' — I would not be surprised to learn that Professor Carroll has George Eliot's wise dictum propped up on his desk. Unassumingly familiar with contemporary theory, he escapes altogether the deadening effect of much of it. Recognizing that Eliot was hostile to all systems and to theories claiming the final truth, Carroll writes about the characters in her 'experiments in life' in a manner appropriate to the author who declared that 'Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot'. Through the amplitude of his treatment of diverse lives he brings out afresh the generous humanity evidenced in Eliot's presentation of them. In other words, David Carroll writes like a Professor of English Literature who has not lost sight of the fact that George Eliot continues to matter to people outside universities because she engages them in the effort to "be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures'.