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## The Transformation of Rage: Mourning and Creating in George Eliot's Fiction

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**Ian Sutton**

*The Transformation of Rage: Mourning and Creativity in George Eliot's Fiction* by Peggy Fitzhugh Johnstone (New York University Press), pp. xv + 207

The thesis of this book is as follows. In her early life George Eliot experienced a number of bereavements: the deaths of her baby twin siblings in 1821, after which her mother withdrew emotionally from her life; her mother's own death in 1836, when she was sixteen, and her father's death in 1849. Failing to complete 'the mourning process' adequately, and experiencing unconscious 'rage' as a consequence, Eliot had to work through these and other traumatic experiences as an adult, using her novel-writing as a therapy. Her own unconscious aggression comes out in the aggression of her heroines, of which she is to a large extent unaware. Thus by analysing this fictional aggression, we can lay bare Eliot's own psychological conflicts.

The first thing to say about this is that it stands logic on its head. There is no independent evidence that Eliot had these problems in coping with bereavement, or manifested any repressed aggression in later life. What Johnstone is doing is invoking A to account for B, when the only evidence of B's existence is A. The second thing is that in pursuing the trail (circular though it may be) she does expose a great deal of interesting material and makes us think again, in unconventional ways, about the processes of George Eliot's creativity and the very real possibility that she put into her novels more than she knew she was putting.

Ever since it was published, readers of *Adam Bede* have loved Hetty and disliked Dinah more than Eliot seems to have meant them to. Johnstone interprets Hetty as an 'incomplete self', a woman who needs help from others in finding her own identity, which is just what she fails to get. Adam, Arthur and Dinah all use Hetty to resolve their own conflicts. Adam's unconscious aggression is eventually purged by compassion. Dinah's is unacknowledged, although we are shown aggression in her preaching, and her ostensible desire to help Hetty comes to nothing when she 'goes away without leaving an address'. Hetty, says Johnstone, 'represents the side of herself that Dinah is unwilling to acknowledge: the sexual and the aggressive.' And Eliot's own failure to see this 'constitutes a denial of the aggressive impulses in herself.'

Applying the same method to the other novels, Johnstone finds hidden aggression in Maggie Tulliver's conduct towards her brother Tom, and by extension towards first Philip and then Stephen. 'Just as Eliot portrays Maggie's aggressive actions towards Tom as accidental, so she portrays her heroine's actions towards other men as innocent.' Again: Romola secretly wishes Tito dead, and can only avoid facing this aggression by getting into the boat and letting herself drift away. Dorothea, too, feels 'anger' (Eliot's own word) that she can only partly explain and which is only partly acknowledged by her creator.

This central idea of 'the transformation of rage' does not prevent Johnstone from going down other psychoanalytical byways. Silas Marner is diagnosed, sensibly enough, as an 'obsessive personality'. Tito suffers from 'pathological narcissism'. In *Felix Holt*, Eliot expresses 'her fear of the working man's potential for violence' – and, of course, her own.

The discussion of *Middlemarch* is full of unexpected insights, on Bulstrode, Rosamond and Lydgate (whose affair with the French actress before the novel opens is given much more weight than usual), while for both Dorothea and Ladislaw, Johnstone observes, Casaubon is in different ways a surrogate father. 'She and Ladislaw are symbolic siblings who murder their father and who, lacking a mother, marry each other.' (One's first reaction to this is to snort derisively. But after a while... well, why not?)

Gwendolen is another narcissistic personality, like Tito, but one who eventually achieves self-knowledge. 'She realizes that her contempt for others is a sign of deficiency in herself'. Her relationship with Deronda is a 'transference' relationship, like patient and therapist. (Well, again, maybe it is...).

There are very many of these intriguing and stimulating observations throughout the book – for instance, on the tension within the Tulliver family or the way politics, religion and the family coalesce in *Felix Holt*. It is fascinating to find how much – looking as a psychiatrist beneath the surface of a character's words and actions – Johnstone is able to find that rings true (which perhaps shows that Eliot was a good psychologist too).

Yet *The Transformation of Rage* is first and last Freudian, and for those of us who have been denied the gift of faith in 'the Viennese witch-doctor' there is bound to be something deeply irritating about it – about its method, about its tone about its assumptions and its language.

If a theory needs support, Johnstone's characteristic method is simply to quote other psychoanalysts. Their names pepper every page – Melanie Klein, Otto F. Kernberg, Richard D. Chessick, Heinz Kohut, and many, many others. The first eleven pages are nothing but a parade of these references – not a very pleasant experience at the beginning of a book. And, as one expects, Freudian opinions are not advanced as opinions, but as revealed truths. The less secure a statement, the more confident the tone. For instance, in Johnstone's relentless attempt to establish links between the life and the novels she has to rely (since Eliot only began writing when all the alleged traumatic events were long in the past) on hypotheses involving memory, re-enactment, anniversaries and 'significant numbers'. So: Eliot began *Romola* in March 1861, *exactly ten years* after her 'banishment' from Chapman's household, *exactly twenty years* after her move from Griff, *exactly forty years* after the death of the twins! Surely, this way one can prove anything.

Even within Johnstone's own terminology there are problems, of which the most serious is the cavalier way she applies the concept of the Oedipus complex to women, a point that seems curiously not to bother her. But at least there is not a single mention of penis-envy

or child abuse, for which we can only be thankful.

In the end, this is a book that repays study. Johnstone is a highly intelligent writer and a highly intelligent reader. Her gifts as a literary critic do shine through the dogmatic fog in which she chooses to veil them. But only just.