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HENRY JAMES AND GEORGE ELIOT: REALISM, REALITY, AND NARRATIVE FORM

by Nicola Harris

The narratives of the Victorian writers are infused with detailed expositions of living, felt pictures; it was inevitable given the expectations of their audience. Furthermore, writers-cum-critics such as Henry James testify to the difficulty of 'draw[ing] a hard and fast line on the border-land of explanation and illustration'.¹ James was central to the protracted Great Debate surrounding 'The Art of Fiction' which took place in 1884, and the discussion encouraged Robert Louis Stevenson to respond with his 'A Humble Remonstrance', a gesture which can be interpreted as a tactical manoeuvre to keep the debate open. Andrew Lang's own 'The Art of Fiction', though not unduly interested in facing the more contentious issues, particularly the relationship between Art and Life, does support the notion that artistic worth can be measured by its capacity to satisfy a particular 'taste'. More importantly, he also brings psychology, realism and pictorialism into close proximity, and states his preference for a novel with a good story,

above all the Bostonian nymphs who ever rejected English dukes for psychological reasons. But, to be fair, it is a matter of taste. A novel is a picture of life; many people like the picture to represent still life, or, as the French put it, *nature morte*.²

From the reductive point of view of both Walter Besant (the initiator of the debate) and Lang, 'the story is the thing', but this contingency for James diminishes the novel to 'an artificial ingenious thing', relegated from its 'immense and exquisite correspondence with life'.³ To counteract this tendency to diminish, James professes to see enormous potential for 'adventure' in the Bostonian illusion. The inner, lived experience is transformed into a 'picture' or 'portrait' demanding attentive scrutiny: 'I see dramas within dramas in that, and innumerable points of view. A psychological reason is, to my imagination, an object adorably pictorial' (*AF*, p. 41).

The expression of psychological realism through pictorial equivalence is typical of George Eliot, and though different from such as Thomas Hardy regarding the ontological status of reality, current reviewers homed in on this technical likeness and assessed Hardy's execution against that of the master:

The author of *Romola* and *The Mill on the Floss* is a great artist . . . The author of *Far from the Madding Crowd* is a dauber by comparison; but . . . a dauber who throws on the colours, and arranges the figures, and manages the composition with a vast deal of reckless skill.⁴

Seventeen years earlier, *Adam Bede* attracted the same figuratively-inclined response: 'Lisbeth is a very perfect picture' and 'Hetty is a wonderful piece of painting. One seems to see the little villain'.⁵ Such phraseology was common-place given the aesthetic bias of the contemporary reader and critic who liked to see, to visualize, their fiction. As Coventry Patmore describes,

No generation has known so well how to paint as our own. Indeed, no generation has ever attempted to paint itself in the same way and with the same fidelity . . . [W]e have had stores of 'fiction' which are only fiction in form; the substance being the very reality of contemporary life.⁶

There was an obvious penchant for picture-books and Hardy, for once, seemed willing to oblige, his most obvious contribution to 'pictorealism' being *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872). In pronouncing itself 'A Painting of the Dutch School', the novel implies an awareness of the connotations ascribed to the genre thirteen years earlier by Eliot in *Adam Bede* (1859):

It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence.⁷

It is this absolute and uncompromising truth to 'things as they are or have been' (*AB*, Ch. 17) which led her to be hailed, especially during the height of French realism in the 1880s, as the model of what true realism should be. Cecil may have lauded her as 'the first modern novelist', but in partially capitulating before the expectations of her audience, she in fact hindered the evolution of realism in England. Her artistic conservatism (however innovative she sometimes claims herself) clearly separates her from later novelists. Even so, in a characteristic inconsistency between theory and practice, Eliot protests against the imposition of 'any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art . . . these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people' (*AB*, Ch. 17). In 'Amos Barton', included in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), Eliot challenges those who desire escapist fiction by refusing to provide anything but the 'unmistakenly commonplace'. Withstanding prejudice, she denounces the suffocation of the real by the ideal; reacting against current fashionable literature, she contends that the failure of true perception occurs when those who hold a fondness for pictures then turn their attention to the working classes:

Our social novels profess to represent the people as they are, the unreality of their representation is a grave evil . . . Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience.⁸

James abjured what he saw as Eliot's failure to satisfy this premise. Although Eliot persuasively defends her treatment of 'everyday fellowmen' in *Adam Bede*, James felt the absence of a distinct sense of life; in the face of ethical restrictions, she succumbed to convention: 'The word which sums up the author's various groups is the word *respectable* . . . [P]assion proves itself feebler than conscience.'⁹ In conforming to the dictates of Grundyism, Eliot betrayed, from James's point of view, that sacred 'moral conscience', for the morality at work is sociological rather than formal. But Eliot's argument is convincing because it is delivered with such conviction and sincerity. She is not insinuating that the life of the poor is inherently more real or realistic than that experienced by other social groups; rather, she upholds that Art, instead of submitting blindly before the van-couriers of taste, should accept and respect its moral obligations, and 'always remind us' of these folk through 'the faithful representing of commonplace things' (*AB*, Ch. 17).

Eliot acknowledges that the public so prefers 'misrepresentations of life and character that they are scandalized when art makes a near approach to the truth',¹⁰ but in her unswerving adherence to actualities she refuses to 'improve the facts' comprising pedestrian reality; she declines to 'touch it up with a tasteful pencil' (*AB*, Ch. 17), to placate conventional preconceptions. Envisaging her own contributions as 'real and concrete' as opposed to 'ideal and eclectic', Eliot confesses that her role is 'to exhibit nothing as it should be; I only try to exhibit some things as they have been or are' (*GEL*, II, 362). She knew that in declaring prosaic realities 'must be accepted as they are', she was running counter to 'idealistic . . . enlightened opinions and refined taste' (*AB*, Ch. 17).

Despite repeated affirmations of realistic intent, Eliot's rationale of the representative process — seeing things 'through such a medium as my own nature gives me' (*GEL*, II, 362) — repudiates her professed objectivity. The avowed intention of the realistic school was to show, not tell, to encourage the reader to draw their own conclusions; yet Eliot's omniscient narrators intervene persistently and James was correct in perceiving her doctrine of anxious mimeticism as a travesty of the organicist theory they held in common. In his view, Eliot's work could be comprehended only as 'an indifferent whole' because she was divided between abstraction and artistry. This marks an important remodification of James's critical position; he reduces the emphasis on 'philosophy' and instead attends to the unique work of the artist's 'personal impression', yet he still asserted that Eliot's novels contained excessive psychological analysis which interfered with the dramatic illusion. He appreciated the worth of *Adam Bede* 'as a picture, or rather as a series of pictures', but proclaimed that 'the author succeeds better in drawing attitudes than in drawing movements of feeling',¹¹ and described her as 'a critic rather than a creator of characters', as one who 'thinks for them more than they think for themselves'.¹²

Although James's allegation that Eliot is divided between artistry and abstraction is not always tenable, it is generally agreed that, for her, the concept is pre-eminent:

We feel in her, always, that she proceeds from the abstract to the concrete, that her figures and situations are evolved . . . from her moral consciousness, and are only indirectly the products of observation. They are deeply studied . . . but they art not seen, in the irresponsible plastic way. (*PP*, 51)

The link between things and thoughts is at the core of her creed. She sees objects as intentional entities; they are not inert, but saturated with human consciousness; they embody ideas. And it is this interactive association between the noumenal and the phenomenal which invests pedestrian realities with their essential significance: 'The secret of our emotions never lies in the bare object, but in its subtle relations to our own past: no wonder the secret escapes the unsympathetic observer' (*AB*, Ch. 1). In 'The Future of German Philosophy' (1855) she stated that

severing *ideas* from *things* is the fundamental error of philosophy . . . These abstract terms on which speculation has to build its huge fabrics . . . have no value except in connection with the concrete. The abstract is derived from the concrete. (*E*, 150-3)

The final sentence reverses the direction of the process James describes in his critique: Eliot initiates the reciprocal movement from the opposite perspective. She questions the validity of the current trend of German philosophy, rhetorically interrogating the expectations of a school of thought, 'the essence of which is the derivation of the concrete from the abstract'. Two years later, discussing the treatment of her characters — James's 'figures' — she explains how 'my stories always grow out of my psychological conception of the *dramatis personae*'. James concludes his discourse by classifying Eliot as a speculative realist, 'of being exclusively an observer', and finds her strength to lie in her 'union of the keenest observation with the ripest reflection'.

The adoption of this strategy directs Eliot to conceive her narratives in a manner to which she was actually opposed. James presumed that, for her, the novel was 'not primarily a picture of life, but a moralized fable, the last word of a philosophy endeavouring to teach by example' (*PP*, p. 50). Again, this heralds either a significant departure from his earlier position, or simple confusion. In 1866, he lamented the lack of 'felt life'; in the 1870s he congratulated the presence of an acute sense of 'life' which suggests a favouring of empiricism over intellectualism, and a preference for an author's ability to handle external realities with dispassionate objectivity instead of conforming to preconceived notions about 'character and life'.

To all appearance, James seems to be in the process of establishing a polarity or juxtaposition. Firstly, there is the obscure query as to what sort of 'form' would elicit a valuable 'picture of life'. Secondly, he suggests that the 'absence of the aesthetic life' typifies Eliot's 'weakest' side, and that her 'figures . . . are not seen in the irresponsible plastic way'. Yet the feasibility of an 'irresponsible' perception of things is open to debate in any work of art, and offering 'form' as the antithesis of 'aesthetic' clouds the issue even further. James also uses 'irresponsible' interchangeably with 'self-forgetful' — that is, not didactic — an indifferent coinage of words which only accentuates the ambiguity. He estimated that serious art was unconcerned with the conventionally moral; it was 'irresponsible', or rather responsible only to the maintenance of its own internal organic consistency. The way James uses 'irresponsible' provides him with the means of clarifying the 'plastic sense', an ability which he saw as a gift in the French. At this stage, its implementation registers a shift from his previous understanding of the term which he had associated with the romantic tradition of Scott and Sand. Now, imaginative liberty was invaluable to observations of the phenomenal world untouched by preconceptions; fancy was obsolete.

In an attempt to explore these aesthetic complexities fully, Eliot employed another current metaphor: the mirror. The traditional view of art holding up a mirror to nature problematized rather than clarified the polemic, and for Eliot, the reflective medium distorted the truth. She conceives that the reality and fidelity of the representation hinges on the objective sufficiency of the neo-classical mirror, and subscribes to the ideal as described, though not continually pursued, by Wordsworth. That ideal is the

ability to observe with accuracy things as they are in themselves, and with fidelity to describe them, unmodified by any passion or feeling existing in the mind of the describer . . . [I]ts exercise supposes all the higher qualities of the mind to be passive, and in a state of subjection to external objects.¹³

Eliot argues for the ontological priority of reality and, falling back on the expected figure, declares, 'My strongest effort is . . . to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind' (*AB*, Ch. 17). James, picking up on the mirror metaphor, found Dinah bearing numerous indications of being 'a reflection of facts well known to the author',¹⁴ but it is in this personality that the problem lies; the ego perverts rather than protects the autonomy of facts. Eliot appreciates that the subjective mirror-image is at best an insufficient, deceptive two-dimensional replica of a three-dimensional phenomenon, and at considerable remove from the truth; after all, the mind-reflector is latently hindered in performing its expected function, the provision of a flawless and faithful image: 'The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused' (*AB*, Ch. 17), and Eliot is thus forced to detract from the truth and perpetrate the cardinal sin: falsism. There is a lot at work behind this admission. It certainly led James to evaluate Eliot's 'realism' as too cerebral, too subjective, too intellectually oriented. In a similar vein he found Balzac's view to proceed from 'the very complexion of the mirror in which the [subject] material is reflected',¹⁵ and his assessment of Trollope's mimetic accuracy was also affiliated with the quality of his mind:

He repeats in literature the image projected by life upon his moral consciousness. The lines are somewhat blurred by being thus reproduced, and the colours somewhat deadened; they have nothing of ideal perfection or radiance; but they are true; human nature recognizes itself.¹⁶

The phraseology resembles Eliot's own, but it is in the differentiation between 'my mind' and the 'moral consciousness' which demands closer scrutiny and explication.

The passage in chapter 17, potentially one of the most important observations concerning the conception and execution of her art that Eliot ever made, needs to be considered in conjunction with its re-appearance over a decade later in *Middlemarch* (1872). Here, the objective pier-glass focuses the perceiving process as the mind-mirror does in *Adam Bede*:

Your pier-glass . . . will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun . . . These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent.¹⁷

The reworked metaphor establishes the contradictory perspective on reality embraced by the author and clarifies her method. Reality may exist a priori, as something anterior to the narrative in which it is reproduced, but being 'mirrored . . . in my mind' implicates the irresistible workings of the personal creative imagination. Most importantly, the technique shows how the objective world of facts is itself perverted, 'disturbed' and made 'defective' as a result of the imperfect medium through which it must pass. The dislocating factor in each instance is the ego — 'my mind' — which glorifies the Self as the locus of the (not a) universe, and is oblivious to the existence of other individuals' 'equivalent centre of self' (*M*, Ch. 21). However, Eliot does admit the Other of 'any person' in the objective glass, something which is absent, and rightly so, in the subjective mirror allusion. Egocentricity, though it precludes sympathet-

ic access to other states of consciousness, ratifies the ultimate ambition of the sincere writer who 'never breaks loose from his criterion — the truth of his own mental state' (*E*, 367). Even so, there is something disorienting in the notion that all experience is subjective. If all that is experienced is a reflection of the perceiver, and if all reality is the creation of that perceiver, then there is a self-perpetuating, infinite reflection of ourselves in a vast universe of mirrors.

It is clear that Eliot's desire is to discover the 'vital' composite 'elements' which exist in complete opposition to the 'more transient forms' of life (*GEL*, IV, 472). One of these vital elements is character, the true vehicle of her psychological realism. Where Dickens falls short in delineating the 'psychological character' (*E*, 271) of his meticulously delineated population, Eliot assimilates these internal processes with the organic evolution of the narrative itself. 'Character too is a process and an unfolding' (*M*, Ch. 15). But discovering the appropriate method of execution by which these living processes can be realized through fiction conspired to haunt her and received frequent qualification and remodification. In 1857 she claims that 'my stories always grow out of my psychological conceptions of the dramatis personae', but by 1866, after completing *Felix Holt*, her position had altered radically. The problems and difficulties of composition

press upon me, who have gone through again and again the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me first in the flesh and not in the spirit. (*GEL*, IV, 300)

Given the nature of received ideas which saturated the contemporary climate, Eliot despaired of ever being able to produce 'breathing individual forms' and of composing them in 'the needful relations'. She was totally conscious of the danger of being too schematic, and eschewed the idea of the 'portrait' as the basis of a novel or of the 'story' being governed by her personal 'psychological conceptions' of character.

James described his work as a series of 'experiments in form';¹⁸ Eliot offers hers as 'simply a set of experiments in life' (*GEL*, VI, 216), and although the integrity of character and narrative was as important to Eliot as to James, she is less likely than he to exclude descriptive details and concentrate on one telling feature. In seeing character as 'something living and changing' (*M*, Ch. 72), Eliot presents narratives that are vital and fluid, 'not something solid and unalterable' (*ib.*). Dealing as they do with the very processes of creation themselves, the narratives transcend the neat, conventional expectations of tidy beginnings and neat endings; the pattern is cyclical rather than linear: 'Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending' (*GEL*, II, 324; *M*, Finale). The assumption that 'men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning' (*DD*, I.1) begs revision; it is an artificiality that Eliot willingly subverts. The novel as an art form offered itself as a fertile testing-ground, an arena in which various images of reality could be explored. Eliot took full advantage of that opportunity.

Notes

1. Henry James, *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan, 1888), 256. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as *PP*.

2. Andrew Lang, 'The Art of Fiction', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 39 (April 30, 1884), 1-2 (p. 2).
3. Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *The House of Fiction*, ed. Leon Edel (London: Rupert-Hart Davis, 1957), 41. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as *AF*.
4. Anon. review of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Observer* (Jan 3, 1875); rpt. *Thomas Hardy: Critical Assessments*, ed. Graham Clarke, 4 vols (Sussex: Helm Information, 1993), I, 70-2 (I, 71). Hereafter cited as *TH: CA*.
5. *Blackwood's Magazine*, March 31, 1858; Oct 4, 1858 respectively.
6. Coventry Patmore, *St James's Gazette* (April 2, 1887); rpt. *TH: CA*, I, 156-8.
7. George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1959), ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), Ch. 17. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as *AB*.
8. George Eliot, *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 271. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as *E*.
9. Henry James, 'The Novels of George Eliot', *Atlantic Monthly*, 18 (Oct 1866), 479-92 (480, 481).
10. George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London Yale University Press, 1954-78), III, 176. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as *GEL*.
11. James, 'The Novels of George Eliot', 487.
12. Review of *The Spanish Gypsy*, *North American Review*, 107 (Oct 1868), 624.
13. Preface to *Poems* (1815), in *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, ed. N. C. Smith (London: 1905), 150.
14. James, 'The Novels of George Eliot', rpt. in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (London: Methuen & Co., 1966), 43-54 (49).
15. Henry James, *The Question of Our Speech [and] the Lesson of Balzac* (Boston, Mass; and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1905), 80.
16. Henry James, review of *Linda Tressel*, in *The Nation* (June 18, 1868), 494.
17. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1872), ed. W.J. Harvey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), Ch. 27. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as *M*.
18. Henry James, *Henry James: Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, 4 vols (London: Macmillan, 1974, 1978, 1980, 1984), II, 193.