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HENRY JAMES ON DIGRESSION IN THE FICTION OF GEORGE ELIOT

By Christine Richards

Stemming from a genuine desire to grapple with the complex theoretical issues underlying nineteenth-century attitudes to the novel and its aesthetic, Henry James was one of the leading critics of the mid-Victorian period. Yet his conclusion in his early criticism that George Eliot’s digressions detracted from her style, was one of his less astute judgements. We know from his correspondence with Charles Eliot Norton in 1866 that James had for some time been looking for a novelist on whom to write a long general essay concerning quality, originally considering and then rejecting Harriet Beecher Stowe, and a glance across his criticism between 1864 and 1866, shows that the novelist on whom he had ultimately settled for his first signed essay was George Eliot. For comments on Eliot’s indulgence in ‘discursive amplifications of incidental points’, mentioned in passing in the Felix Holt review (1866), were clearly the beginning of a series of criticisms on digression continued not only in the longer, more exploratory piece on her work, namely, ‘The novels of George Eliot’ (1866, E&W 912-33), but also in the reviews of Middlemarch (1873, E&W 958-66) and Daniel Deronda (1876, E&W 973-74), as well as in ‘Daniel Deronda: A Conversation’ (1876, E&W 974-92), the review of ‘The Lifted Veil’ and ‘Brother Jacob’ (1878, E&W 992-94) and ‘The Life of George Eliot’ (1885, E&W 994-1010). This range of texts extending over a period of nearly twenty years gave James the opportunity of looking more widely and searchingly at Eliot’s oeuvre, and of taking up the point of whether her fiction stood his own personal test of verisimilitude and the problems he believed her digressive, reflective style posed for what he perceived as her realism.

Dealing with Eliot’s first six volumes of fiction, Scenes of Clerical Life, Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, Silas Marner, Romola and Felix Holt, the Radical, the 1866 essay covers a wide range of general topics as well as those already mentioned. Almost all of them are, in one way or another, related to James’s perception of Eliot’s realism and world view. Opening with the observation that the critic’s first duty in the presence of an author’s collected works is to seek out some key to their method, some view of their literary convictions, or some indication of their ruling theory, James considers that in some writers the critic will find explicit declarations, in others ‘conscientious inductions’ (E&W 912). In the former category, James is probably thinking of writers such as Balzac, who grouped his fiction under three main titles, Études de moeurs, Études philosophiques and Études analytiques, which indicated the purpose and scope of the novels (in the 1842-8 collected edition). But in his second category, James is clearly referring to writers who, in his opinion, give some indication of their intention through the form of the ‘authorial digression’ of which, he tells us, George Eliot was so fond (E&W 912). Taking this as his point of departure, James selects as his example the passage from the much-discussed chapter 17 of Adam Bede, ‘In Which the Story Pauses a Little’:

Paint us an angel, if you can … paint us yet oftener a Madonna … but do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house, those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work
of the world – those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs, and their clusters of onions. In this world there are so many of these common, coarse people, who have no picturesque sentimental wretchedness! It is so needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy, and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes.³

Two salient critical points emerge from James’s interpretation of this passage. First, he fails to pick up Eliot’s narrator’s privileging of content, namely urging that the world-view emerging from the depiction of one social class over another is not so much a matter of aesthetics as of politics; and, secondly, James accepts too readily the assumption that the writer’s aesthetic creed in fiction is based upon a rejection of rules which might restrict the depiction of a particular type of content, in this case working-class life, for he applies the latter concept not only to Adam Bede, but also to the other five volumes of fiction discussed in the essay. The extraction of a digression from a single text of a writer to exemplify commitment to a particular type of content across a whole oeuvre – a practice which James repeats some twelve years later in his review of ‘Brother Jacob’ – is of course critically dubious; and, as if to protect himself from the danger of this position, he comments that a brief glance across the principal figures of Eliot’s works indeed reveals that her main characters were, with the exception of Tito Melema, common people: Esther Lyon is a daily governess, Felix Holt a watchmaker, Adam Bede a carpenter, Dinah Morris a factory worker, Hetty Sorrel a dairy-maid, Maggie Tulliver a miller’s daughter and Silas Marner a linen weaver (E&W 913). Unfortunately, his selection overlooks the rather important instance of Romola, whose scholarship embodies a discourse of work far from the coarse carrot-scraping suggested by Adam Bede’s narrator. Instead, James praises the amount of attention Eliot pays to the lower classes in the Florentine population, a point on which, interestingly, nearly twenty years later, he changed his view, calling for more of the breath of the Florentine streets because the novel’s failure in realism lay in Eliot’s over-reflective and digressive style (E&W 1006). However, in his discussion of Scenes of Clerical Life in 1866, he praises Eliot’s depiction not only of her clergyman heroes but also of the more ignorant and obscure of their parishioners, a range which he observes shows the care with which she studied the manners of the lower classes in Loamshire. Noting the pathos and the anti-heroic tendency of ‘The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton’, James gives these qualities pride of place in Scenes of Clerical Life while at the same time puritanically berating Eliot for driving realism too far in ‘Janet’s Repentance’. The adoption of a heroine stained with the vice of intemperance is unpleasant, he tells us, the author chose it at her peril (E&W 916).

In spite of the narrator’s many digressions in ‘Amos Barton’, on which James does not comment, he gave this tale pride of place over the other two in Scenes of Clerical Life, but he still failed to recognize in the trilogy the seeds of the great novelist to come. He thought the narrative of ‘Janet’s Repentance’, was enfeebled by over-diffuseness and the author’s ‘recollections’. This last phrase shows that his conception of narrative at this stage was by-and-large historical (E&W 916), a model which goes some way towards explaining his elevation of writers of apparently self-effacing realism over those, like Eliot and Trollope, who made no attempt to curtail the presence of a first person narrator in their predominantly third person narratives. Nevertheless, the distance between Scenes and Adam Bede was not so much a step as a leap (E&W 915).
Focusing on the apparent over-diffuseness as well as the ‘abundance’ of authorial recollections, which he considered clogged the dramatic movement in ‘Janet’s Repentance’ as well as revealing Eliot’s comparative lack of control over her material, James struck the note already sounded in the Felix Holt review where he had argued that the dramatic movement of that novel had also been negatively affected by the reflective, digressive discourse. For James in the Felix Holt review the style had been ‘the same lingering, slow-moving, expanding instrument which we already know’ (E&W 907), but in the longer essay this criticism is a major theme, informing all his writing on Eliot. Thus, James’s attitude towards Eliot’s digressions is anomalous. James sees as positive those digressions in chapter seventeen of Adam Bede and in ‘Brother Jacob’ – he assigns Nemesis the same narratological concept as ‘the author’s own words’ (E&W 993) – because they provide insights into the nature of her intentions, but negative because they intrude on the truth and realism of the fictions.

In James’s criticism of Eliot, then, from beginning to end – with the exception of his later comments in the Prefaces and in his autobiography – her digressive and reflective style is seen to detract from her ‘dramatic’ realism and world view, although he argues that after Scenes of Clerical Life the stouter fabric of her story was better able to support the ‘heavy drapery’ of humour and digression (E&W 926). To describe Eliot’s humour and digressions as heavy drapery without making any distinction between the terms is certainly not theoretically sophisticated, and this sometimes uneven quality of analysis surfaces throughout the essay. For example, James believed that of the four English stories before 1866 (Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, Silas Marner and Felix Holt), The Mill on the Floss had ‘the most dramatic continuity, in distinction from that descriptive, discursive method of narration’ (E&W 928), while Romola, Adam Bede and Felix Holt are all criticized for their feeble dramatic movement.

The 1870s: Multitudinous Worlds of Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda

Not surprisingly James reiterates and extends his 1860s theme of discursive clogging by reflection at the beginning of his review of Middlemarch, arguing, in the often puritanical language of his criticism, that, in spite of its being a rare masterpiece, Romola sins by excess of analysis (E&W 958), with too much description, too little drama and too much reflection. Similar critical criteria are then applied to Middlemarch, which is rather questionably perceived as a chain of episodes broken into accidental lengths and unconscious of a plan, instead of an organized, moulded, balanced composition with a sense of design and construction. Yet within this harsh and dubious criticism of its formal features (the artificiality of the Bulstrode episodes; the discursive scientific sections, indebted, as he correctly believed, to Messrs Darwin and Huxley; the stagnation of the dramatic current between the hero (Will) and the heroine (Dorothea) and the Brooke/Casaubon marriage, an episode penetratively analysed as failing in ‘great dramatic chiaroscuro’) there are signs of change. Where in the Felix Holt review James had paid tribute to the quality of Eliot’s mind, he now extends the compliment with one of his characteristically double-edged observations: ‘Certainly the greatest minds have the defects of their qualities, and as George Eliot’s mind is pre-eminently contemplative and analytic, nothing is more natural than that her manner should be discursive and expansive’ (E&W 958-59).
For despite James’s complimentary stance here, Eliot’s ‘brain’ (E&W 965) with its propensity for generalizing analysis, reflection, and digression is still perceived as not without its perils; and one of these is her movement away from the echoes of Goldsmith he had found in *Silas Marner*, to the discomforting scientific discourse of *Middlemarch*. Many of the discursive portions are, he asserts, ‘too clever by half’ – the Darwin and Huxley factor being one. William James’s greater tolerance of the work may have been responsible for Henry’s later reflection that he had judged *Middlemarch* ‘stingly’, and failed to make ‘a sufficiently succinct statement of its rare intellectual power’. However, at the time of his writing the review we can only assume that, even after first reading the novel and writing later to Grace Norton, ‘a marvellous mind throbs in every page’; James’s prejudice against the science in Eliot’s digressions was still so great that it blinded him to the fact that her writing, when compared to the scientific romances of, say, Poe and Hawthorne, did belong to the convention of realism. In fact, apart from *Middlemarch*, Eliot’s only real departure from this broadest of genres was in her explicitly scientific and occult tale, ‘The Lifted Veil’. Thus, in simply not recognizing that her style derives from both the English and French traditions of commentary and analysis within the narrative, which also included his hero Balzac, whose texts are at times heavy with ‘authorial’ commentary, James concluded that Eliot wished to recommend herself too strongly to a scientific audience.

There can be little doubt, then, that it was the combination of *Middlemarch*’s elaborate discursiveness, together with the apparent artificiality of the Bulstrode episodes, which led James to conclude that in it Eliot ‘sets a limit ... to the development of the old-fashioned English novel’ (E&W 965). However, somewhat inconsistently, when he came to write a brief review of the first instalment of *Daniel Deronda* three years later (E&W 973–74), nothing but praise is showered on the intellectual dimension of Eliot’s work, with no mention made of over-reflection in spite of the contentious phrase in the first sentence, ‘the dynamic quality to her [Gwendolen’s] glance’, which divided supporters of Eliot’s scientific discourse from those who, like James, felt art should be kept untainted by science. Indeed, James reverses his usual position in the *Deronda* review. James concentrates on the positive aspects of the serial publication of the novel, a process to which he normally objected, because now he argues how Eliot’s work is so charged with reflection and intellectual experience that it requires a month to think over and digest any given portion of it. Indeed so fine and rare a pleasure as a new fiction by Eliot needed a retarding element (E&W 973) and he speaks in classic realist terms of the luxury of the prospect of experiencing a kind of lateral extension into a multitudinous world, a concept developed in ‘Daniel Deronda: a Conversation’. This certainly suggests the beginning of a change in James’s intolerance of Eliot’s reflective style, and in two of his much later pieces, ‘Daniel Deronda: a Conversation’, and the review of the Cross biography, although the old preoccupations re-surface, they are accompanied by a much less ‘stingy’ admiration.

Since its publication in the 1940s as an appendix to F. R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition*, ‘Daniel Deronda: a Conversation’ has, with James’s *Prefaces* and ‘The Art of Fiction’, become one of his most famous pieces of criticism. The piece cannot be described as straightforward criticism, however. James structured it in the form of a Platonic dialogue between three ‘characters’, with the result that his own view of the novel, hedged in by the sometimes conflicting,
sometimes concurring, views of the characters, emerges as a complex one, somewhere between all three. On the subject of digression and organicism the following quotation is a characteristic example:

**Constantius.** Yes, I know what you mean. I can understand that situation presenting a slightly ridiculous image; that is, if the current of the story don’t swiftly carry you past.

**Pulcheria.** What do you mean by the current of the story? I never read a story with less current. It is not a river; it is a series of lakes. I once read of a group of little uneven ponds resembling, from a bird’s-eye view, a looking-glass which had fallen upon the floor and broken, and was lying in fragments. That is what *Daniel Deronda* would look like, on a bird’s-eye view.

**Theodora.** Pulcheria found that comparison in a French novel. She is always reading French novels.

**Constantius.** Ah, there are some very good ones.

**Pulcheria** (perversely). I don’t know; I think there are some very poor ones.

**Constantius.** The comparison is not bad, at any rate. I know what you mean by *Daniel Deronda* lacking current. It has almost as little as Romola.

**Pulcheria.** Oh, Romola is unpardonably slow; it is a kind of literary tortoise.

**Constantius.** Yes, I know what you mean by that. But I am afraid you are not friendly to our great novelist. (E&W 975-76)

The prevailing tone is genially comic, characteristic of genteel society, with simplistic remarks like ‘My favourite novelist is Thackeray’, and ‘I am extremely fond of Miss Austen’ (976), together with moments of acute penetration, such as Constantius’s profoundly interesting interpretation of the fiction, when he argues that Gwendolen’s punishment is that the world in the form of Deronda’s exalted sense of mission has whirled past her; and this causes Constantius to speculate as to whether the whole heavy structure of the Jewish question in the story was not included for this purpose (E&W 990). At other times, such as in the above quoted passage, conversational exchanges are too metaphorical to be classified as serious, detailed criticism of Eliot’s digressions. Falling back on a comparison with Romola, a tactic which gets the discussion no further forward in an analysis of Eliot’s style, Constantius evades Pulcheria’s crucial question: what do you mean by the current of the story?, since the metaphor, although amusingly developed into the ‘series of lakes’ and ‘uneven ponds’, is at no time linked to the text. And later, when the question of Eliot’s style comes up again, similar figurative terms are employed. It is too long-sleeved, sometimes too loose a fit for the thought, a little baggy (E&W 984). Also, when the speakers debate whether Eliot’s intellect and philosophy get near to spoiling the artist in her and whether there is a want of tact in her moral reflections, no examples are given from the text.
Conclusion: critical maturity

Though the review of the Cross biography is notable for a more balanced and mature assessment of Eliot’s work than anything on her undertaken by James before its publication, he is still preoccupied with the problems of her ‘excess of reflection’ (E&W 1000). However, this view is now tempered by the (overdue) recognition that half the beauty of her work lies in its representation of the source of another kind of reality, for, as he now says, the secret of seeing one thing well does not deprive you of seeing anything else (E&W 1003). What Eliot sees is the result of what James clearly conceives as her procedure from the abstract to the concrete with her figures and situations being evolved from her moral consciousness. Rightly or wrongly, these are only indirectly products of her observation, he thinks, studied but not seen. At last, then, James has recognized that it is not a major flaw in Eliot’s writing for her to have the ‘philosophic door’ always open, creating the draught of an ethical purpose out of which her ‘types’ emerge. Although we would certainly dispute his definition of her characters as ‘types’, this argument enables him to conclude that the reason for Eliot’s dislike of Balzac, especially of Le Père Goriot, was that for her the novel in general was not predominantly ‘a picture of life’ capable of deriving a high value from its form, but a moralized fable, the last word of a philosophy endeavouring to teach by example. Yet oddly, James himself is incapable of noting the similarity of the narrative technique between Eliot and Balzac, both of whom at times exploit the concept of the moralized fable with its heavily embedded and integrated digressions. James’s deployment of the word fable here may be seriously open to debate but he was, nevertheless, the only Victorian critic to tackle such complex theoretical issues relatively head-on and relatively systematically.

Notes


5 Henry James, Letter to William James, 8 January 1873. Edel 1, 323-4.
