2006

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IMAGINATION, MORALITY, AND THE SPECTRE OF SADE IN GEORGE ELIOT’S ROMOLA AND DANIEL DERONDA

By Margaux Fragoso

In her final book, Impressions of Theophrastus Such, George Eliot vocalizes her contempt for writers who dismiss morality ‘as a sort of twaddle for bibs and tuckers, a doctrine of dulness, a mere incident in human stupidity’ (Impressions 134). It is well known that Eliot subscribed to a complex system of morals that each successive novel brings closer to fruition. Eliot’s last novel Daniel Deronda is her closest inspection of the conflict between egoism and morality. It explores the psyche of a woman who is made to develop moral sensibilities: Gwendolen’s ‘bad’ luck in marrying Grandcourt creates conditions that foster her spiritual and moral growth. Romola presents an inversion of this theme: Tito Melema is the recipient of many ‘lucky’ occurrences such as political connections, marriage to a beautiful wife, money; all of this assists in the cultivation of evil in Tito: every success leads him farther from any kind of redemption. With all this emphasis on contingency, it should come as no surprise that Daniel Deronda opens with Gwendolen at a roulette table losing her money: unlike Tito she will suffer a run of bad luck, and also unlike Tito, she will have an opportunity to redeem herself.

The Marquis de Sade also deals with issues of contingency, destiny, and morality but unlike Eliot, Sade sees morality as a static trait, which is clearly illustrated in Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue, 1787. Bad luck and the resultant agonies at the hands of her malefactors produce no palpable change in the victimized Justine’s code of unceasingly ineffective moral principles. As noted above, Eliot presents the acquisition of morality as a lifelong process often facilitated by suffering. To her, morality is dynamic and ever-changing: an initially kind-hearted character such as Tito may become evil due to poor choices; and inversely, an egoistic and sometimes cruel person like Gwendolen Harleth can develop a system of morals. Sade portrays morality as consistently flat and empty as a value: despite incredible torture, the virtuous Justine’s morals are fixed; she never adapts her morality to suit the demands her environment presses on her. To Sade, morality is a form of idiocy, even lunacy; whereas to Eliot, morality is the highest form of intelligence and creative capacity: characters like Dorothea and Maggie, both presented as intrinsically moral, continue to adjust their moral systems based on the needs unsuitable environments have engendered in them: Dorothea marries the morally inferior Will, Maggie continues to visit Philip in the Red Deeps in direct opposition to her brother’s wishes. Eliot views morality as an active force directly linked with and fed by the imagination while Sade perceives the opposite: it is immorality that is based on the imaginative faculties; morality lacks any creative agency and is therefore incapable of invention. Their systems are so diametrically opposed that reading Sade in conjunction with Eliot creates a compelling dialectic: what is the relationship of morality to imagination?

I will now point to evidence that suggests Eliot read Sade and was perhaps even influenced by his work. In the chapter, ‘Moral Swindlers’ of Impressions, Eliot in the voice of Theophrastus, puts forth the proposition:

Suppose a Frenchman—I mean no disrespect to the great French nation, for all nations are afflicted with their peculiar parasitic growths which are lazy,
hungry forms, usually characterized by a disproportionate swallowing apparatus: suppose a Parisian who should shuffle down the Boulevard with a soul ignorant of the gravest cares and the deepest tenderness of manhood, and a frame more or less fevered by debauchery, mentally polishing into utmost refinement of phrase and rhythm verses which were an enlargement on that Shaksperian motto, and worthy of the most expensive title to be furnished by the vendors of such authentic ware as *Les marguerites de l’Enfer*, or *Les Delicacies de Beelzebuth*. (135-136)

Editor Nancy Henry points out that these are mock variations of Baudelaire’s poems; however, *Les Delicacies de Beezlebuth* could also refer to Sade’s *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir* or *Justine, ou Les Malheurs de la Vertu*. Indeed, Eliot finds fault with several French authors as indicated by the plural ‘parasitic growths’ and in *Debasing the Moral Currency*, she observes ‘that even now much nonsense and bad taste win admiring acceptance solely by virtue of the French language’ (81).

As a lover of French culture, it comes as no surprise that Eliot would familiarize herself with its decadent underbelly. The *Oxford Reader’s Companion to George Eliot* asserts that Eliot saw French literature as ‘one of the three greatest literatures in the world together with English and German’ (Rignall127) and that ‘her knowledge of it, acquired through a lifetime’s reading was unrivalled among English writers of her time’ (127). Steven Marcus claims in *The Other Victorians* that ‘French pornographic writings, particularly those by Sade’ were ‘well known through the upper reaches of English literary society’ (Marcus 37). According to Colette Michael’s annotated bibliography *The Marquis de Sade: The Man, His Works and His Critics* most of Sade’s major work was published in the late eighteenth century or the early to mid nineteenth century; and Eliot, who visited France frequently, could have easily accessed it. This essay will only address works by Sade that were published early enough for Eliot to have read.

Returning to the central issue at hand which is to establish a dialectic between Sade and Eliot that will illustrate both the thematic similarities and philosophical divergences of their work, I will now turn to *Romola* published in 1862, and *Daniel Deronda*, 1876. These novels are inverted versions of the same moral dilemma. Tito, assisted by a favourable destiny, follows his basest instincts (in a truly Sadiean fashion, I may add) and becomes successful but also unredeemable: a state which is to Romola, and presumably to George Eliot, ‘a sorrow that has no balm in it and that may well make a man say, — “It would have been better for me if I had never been born”’ (*Romola* 538). *Daniel Deronda*, instead of being about the spiritual ruin that is a consequence of egoism, is rather about the birth of conscience that comes from the destruction of a pathological egotism: this is presented as positive just as Tito’s corruption is obviously negative.

Sade reverses the tenets of this kind of basic morality tale. His major works *Juliette*, 1797, and *Justine*, 1787, are inverted versions of the same story and serve to illustrate, as Maurice Blanchot contends, ‘the basic tenet, the very cornerstone of his work: to Virtue, nothing but misfortune; to vice the reward of constant prosperity’ (Blanchot 44). The converse destinies of the righteous Justine and her immoral sister Juliette support Sade’s conviction that the person ‘of absolute egoism can never fall upon evil days’, that he or she will ‘without exception be
forever happy and happy to the highest degree’ (Blanchot 45). In George Eliot, the opposite holds true: the egoist’s luck always runs out and he inevitably falls victim to the machinery of events set in motion by his own crimes. A single evil deed will follow one forever, regardless of any attempt at reconciliation; we see this in Gwendolen, who at the end of Daniel Deronda cries out in despair, ‘I said I should be forsaken. I am a cruel woman. And I am forsaken’ (Deronda 803). Gwendolen is constantly haunted by ‘distasteful miserable memories which forced themselves on her as something more real and ample than new material out of which she could mould her future’ (797). She will never be free from the twofold effects of her crimes: they have altered her destiny by causing a permanent rift between herself and Daniel, whom she loves, and they have created within her a superego not unlike the inner critic that Theophrastus in Impressions identifies as the ‘God within, holding the mirror and the scourge’ (Impressions 13). Compare Eliot’s idea of the retributive effects of destiny and conscience to Sade’s rhetoric: ‘If misery persecutes virtue and prosperity accompanies crime, those two things being one in Nature’s view, far better to join company with the wicked who flourish, than to be counted among the virtuous who flounder?’ (Seaver and Wainhouse 457).

This Sadiean logic is certainly present in Tito when he chooses the easier route of evil although destiny has intruded: ‘He had simply chosen to make life easy to himself—to carry his human lot, in such a way that it would pinch him nowhere; and the choice had, in various times, landed him in unexpected positions’ (Romola 213). To Sade, the decision to choose evil, as Tito does, is the wisest choice because it is natural; to act against nature, or impulse, is to defy an inherent natural logic. In Romola, however, Eliot deconstructs the notion of intellect or imagination as it relates to the decision to choose evil. Ostensibly, Tito’s choice is one that requires intellect; he must use his imagination to continue to deceive: Eliot refers to these imaginative capacities as ‘the resources of lying’ (213) and allows us to see that Tito perceives these resources as a form of ‘ingenuity’ (212). So we have no doubt that Eliot, even with her firm sense of what is moral, can see the artistic and creative properties innate in deception and other forms of immorality. However, while acknowledging this, Eliot also disparages the artistic quality of immorality by calling the choice to lie ‘easy’ and ‘habitual’ (213). Both these adjectives indicate that Eliot sees Tito’s prepared course of action as not only morally reprehensible, but also intellectually and imaginatively stunting: Tito’s immoral choices reduce him to a mechanistic impulse that follows a pre-scripted destiny to its unfortunate end. The narrator articulates Tito’s best possible recourse: he should seek out Baldassarre again and confess his crimes to Romola (212). Because this choice requires the most imagination, and Tito lacks this capacity, he ‘never (thinks) of that’ (212). Romola’s narrator also suggests that ‘repentance which cuts off all moorings to evil demands something more than selfish fear’ (212) and though this ‘something’ is not overtly stated, we can safely conjecture that the narrator is talking about the kind of intelligence that only arises with moral awareness. In Impressions, Eliot takes a firm stance on this issue when she meditates on the dissolution of morality within popular art: ‘One [absurdity] is, the notion that there is a radical, irreconcilable opposition between intellect and morality’ (134).

If Sade and others like him value the argument that immorality is the highest form of art, we will see the foundation of this kind of philosophy undercut again and again by close examination of Eliot’s texts. The fact that the choice to be altruistic requires the imagination is one that Eliot first explores in The Lifted Veil.Narrated by the socially alienated Latimer, the
purpose of this story is to prove that even if one were able to see into the thoughts and emotions of others, this gift would be worthless without the imagination required to obtain a sense of fellowship. A precursor to the outward malevolence of Grandcourt, Latimer’s thoughts are an exposition of how someone like Grandcourt would perceive the world. Compare Latimer’s view of humanity to Grandcourt’s:

when the rational talk, the graceful attentions, the wittily-turned phrases, and the kindly deeds which used to make the web of their characters, were seen as thrust asunder by a microscopic vision, that showed all the immediate frivolities, all the suppressed egoism, all the struggling chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories and indolent make-shift thoughts, from which human words and deeds emerge like leaflets covering a fermenting heap. (Veil 14)

[Grandcourt’s] mind was much furnished with a sense of what brutes his fellow creatures were, both masculine and feminine, what odious familiarities they had, what smirks, what modes of flourishing their handkerchiefs, what costume, what lavender water, what bulging eyes, and what foolish notions of making themselves agreeable by remarks which were not wanted. (Deronda 671)

While Latimer remains passive in his disdain for humanity, Grandcourt channels this negative energy into a form of creativity that consists of tormenting others. Both above ideologies are Sadiean in their construction. The evolution from the innocuous Latimer to the malicious Grandcourt shows that in her final novel, Eliot is ready to explore the kind of evil that is derived from such a view of humanity. Latimer’s identity is built upon the fact that he fancies himself a poet, but Grandcourt has no identity except his inert role as ‘gentleman’ and this leads to a dangerous kind of boredom.

The creative possibilities of evil are limitless and this is one of the arguments Sade uses to construct a claim that evil is derived from the creative intellect. He builds this argument by displaying the variety of tortures the imagination can invent and justifying these inventions by identifying them as products of nature. Clement in Justine uses promotion of freedom and imagination as a cover for the horrors that will surely come about if man is allowed to follow whatever base invention his mind can conjure up and rationalize it as creative: ‘If we admit that the senses’ joy is always dependent upon the imagination, one must not be amazed by the numerous variations the imagination is apt to suggest’ (qtd. in Seaver and Wainhouse 601).

Clement goes on to talk about ‘tastes’ and pages later, it is revealed that one’s personal taste can certainly include brutality, for how is one to condemn a man for personal taste? According to Clement, the ‘voluptuous egoist’ is ‘persuaded [that] his pleasures will be keen insofar as they are entire’ (606); this need for a sense of fullness within self affords him the right to impose ‘the strongest possible dose of pain upon the employed object.’ The egoist’s existence is confirmed by the sensations, painful or pleasurable, that he produces in another being; since pain creates more of an emotional response and is therefore a more authentic confirmation, it is preferable to the sadist to cause pain. Without this sense of mastery over the beings that reflect back to him his own presence, this kind of egoist has no sense of self to speak of, no
This kind of worldview can be most directly applied to Grandcourt but as mentioned previously, the meditations necessary to form his character germinated in Eliot’s earlier egoists. Latimer’s self-absorption results in shuddering disgust for humankind, a shrinking of the self ever inward. In Romola, the egoist in question, Tito, is more interested in producing pleasurable effects on others than painful ones and to be loved rather than hated; ironically, his desire to obtain the kind of acceptance that will allow his ego to prosper creates his need to deceive others. Though Tito’s intention is to be loved, Eliot does not fail to see the egoism inherent in both the need to create favourable feelings in others and in Grandcourt’s case, to design torments that will allow his will to flourish through its sense of mastery. Both forms of egoism are presented as equally destructive and in both cases, the characters die because of the vengeances they have inspired (though in Grandcourt’s case, it is not made certain whether he was murdered or simply allowed to die, but in either case, he would have lived had Gwendolen not wished his death).

Clement admits that ‘the most extraordinary thing is to find admirers’ (601) but he attempts to decide what should be the recourse of those who ‘know full well they are not loved or not lovable’ (605). To Sade, the solution to this dilemma involves the relinquishment of the need for love and the ability to settle instead for ‘isolated enjoyment’ (604), or enjoyment that is limited solely to the gratification of one’s own ego, disregarding the other’s ego completely in its appetites. Tito most explicitly demonstrates that if the egoist’s wish for adoration is not satisfied through love, he will resort to holding power over another person. It is Tito’s conclusion when confronted with his wife’s loss of love for him that ‘marriage must be a relation either of sympathy or conquest’ (Romola 391). This idea is also explored in Daniel Deronda: ‘In this critical view of mankind there was an affinity between [Grandcourt] and Gwendolen’ (671). This affinity vanishes when her feeling of kinship changes to scorn. It is the perception of Gwendolen’s growing connection to her fellow beings that makes Grandcourt more aware of the freakishness of his own alienated state. We can speculate that Grandcourt’s consciousness is occasionally penetrated by flashes of his difference, and thereby, separation from, the human race. The person that cannot connect in any other way will attempt extremes in order to forge a union: this is Clement’s point when he presents the question: ‘How should the aged or so many deformed or defective persons be able to enjoy themselves; for they know full well they are not loved nor lovable; perfectly certain it is impossible to share their experience’ (qtd. in Seaver and Wainhouse 605). Though this passage is overtly about physical deformity and physical ugliness, it can be and perhaps is intended to be applied to moral deformity as well. Uncharacteristically, at one point, Sade allows Clement to admit that certain tastes are abnormal and perhaps unhealthy when in the past Sade had always defended barbarous impulses by claiming they are natural. Here we see a speck of illumination into his own condition enter into Sade’s consciousness: ‘The man endowed with uncommon tastes is sick; if you prefer, he is like a woman subject to hysterical vapors’ (602). Though most of Sade’s work is geared toward defending his decadence, there is some small part of him that acknowledges that his proclivities are not natural and not even particularly desirable; that it is, in fact, more desirable to live within humanity than on the fringes of it: ‘What living man would not instantly revise his tastes, his affections, his penchants and bring them into harmony with the general scheme, what man rather than continue a freak, would not prefer to be like
everyone else?’ (602).

It is the total disconnection from human fellowship which Eliot finds most damning. Grandcourt, like Clement in *Justine*, senses his own deformity (he is no longer able to love or truly care for anyone), and is angered at the recognition of it that is slowly brought about by his wife’s disgust. To Eliot, no one is entirely unconscious of anything: Theophrastus tells us that ‘even what we are averse to, what we vow not to entertain, must have shaped or shadowed itself within us as a possibility before we can think of exorcising it’ (*Impressions* 4). Grandcourt certainly has a general human desire to be admired: in fact, he requires even more recognition than those whose personhood is situated on firmer ground. His dependence on others’ perceptions is proved through his denial of it: ‘Grandcourt went about with the sense that he did not care a languid curse for anyone’s admiration’ (585). Undoubtedly, the phrase ‘went about’ convinces us of the opposite sentiment: in the next line, Eliot demonstrates that Grandcourt’s identity is currently founded on his contempt for mankind: ‘the state of non-caring’ which is the base of his sense of self ‘just as much as desire require[s] its related object’ (585). Furthermore, Grandcourt is painfully conscious of how his every action appears to others: he ‘tenaciously avoid[ed] the possible suggestion to anybody concerned that Deronda’s presence or absence could be of the least importance to him’ and since Gwendolen as his wife is most responsible for preserving his sense of self, her opinion is of prime importance: ‘he made no direct observation to Gwendolen on her behaviour that evening, lest the expression of his disgust should be a little too strong to satisfy his own pride’ (586). Clearly and perhaps sadly, Grandcourt’s current relation to self is wholly based on how he is perceived by other people as well as his maintenance of a feeling of superiority to and disdain for the rest of mankind. His dependent, unstable identity is comparable to Theophrastus’s example of the mollusc that is ‘inwardly objecting to every other grade of solid other than himself’ (41). The mollusc, whose flimsiness resembles an unstable sense of self, looks on at those beings with a fixed identity as a quite contemptible species.

At the start of *Daniel Deronda* Gwendolen is also characterized as having a natural disdain for her fellow beings but, as Eliot demonstrates, only a few strong attachments to other human beings are necessary in order to revise this character trait. Gwendolen’s two attachments are to her mother and later to Deronda. Gwendolen’s initial attachment to her mother is what, in fact, prevents her from succumbing to total egoism. It is noteworthy that Eliot uses an event from Gwendolen’s childhood in which she strangles her sister’s canary (25) in order to bring out her egoism. Gwendolen, at the start of the novel, is surely not able fully to reason, because she has not yet developed her imaginative intellect. She cannot envision her action engendering consequences that will result not only in her sister’s unhappiness and the extinction of the bird’s life, but that she herself will never be free from the repercussions of what she deems an ‘infelonious murder’ (25); just as years later, she will not be able to imagine that her betrayal of Lydias Glasher will have inescapable emotional consequences.
The inability to envision consequences is also an issue explored by Sade; Clement points out that ‘When one wishes to delight in any action whatsoever, there is never a question of consequences’ (qtd. in Seaver and Wainhouse 607). Dolmance in Philosophy in the Bedroom also expounds on this issue: ‘[The rascals are inclined] in accordance with natural impulsions to prefer what they feel to what they do not feel’ (252). These infantile attitudes are very present in Gwendolen’s character, although she is shown to be remorseful once she has seen the negative effects her actions have had on others. Her ability to empathize imaginatively comes, however, out of this egoism; it is the recognition of her own pain that forces her to acknowledge pain in others. In Sade, victimizers are not victimized and these favourable circumstances allow them to maintain a belief in barbarity because it is convenient for them.

In Sade, victimizers are not victimized and these favourable circumstances allow them to maintain a belief in barbarity because it is convenient for them. After Justine tells Clement she will never accept his ‘dangerous lubricity’ Clement responds, ‘[You will not accept it] because you are afraid of becoming its object, there you have it: egoism. Let’s exchange the roles and you will fancy it very nicely’ (qtd. in Seaver and Wainhouse 608). This argument is faulty, because it assumes that once one knows what it is like to suffer, one will still remain indifferent to the suffering of others. Eliot’s rhetoric would argue that the experience of prolonged suffering is transformative: it makes a permanent alteration in the egoist’s perception of the self and the others. This is why Eliot’s worst villains tend to be the recipients of good fortune and sometimes come from aristocratic circumstances. The villain in Silas Marner is the son of the village squire; Dempster in Scenes of a Clerical Life only knows what it is like to be a tyrant and not the experience of being bullied; Rosamond in Middlemarch is spoiled by her parents. Tito, too, is pampered, and though his anguished moments are portrayed, they fail to convince; like Rosamond, his times of distress are short-lived. Rosamond and Tito manage, for the most part, to manipulate their circumstances in order to avoid long periods of unhappiness (and in Tito’s case, remorse as well); but Gwendolen cannot escape Lydia Glasher nor can she flee the everyday miseries of living with Grandcourt; she is literally trapped in and thereby made constantly subject to guilt and suffering.

Daniel Deronda’s subtext hints that Grandcourt not only psychologically torments Gwendolen but that his oppression may include subjecting her to perverse or cruel sexual practices. Rignall points out that ‘there is a suggestion of sexual sadism in the repeated images of horses, reins, whips, and bridles used to define Grandcourt’s subjection of Gwendolen’ (Rignall 83). Indeed, it is not farfetched to venture that Grandcourt’s perception of Gwendolen as a woman who is ‘brought to kneel down like a horse under training for the arena’ (320) and his constant emphasis on his role as ‘master’ might possibly extend into the bedroom. References to Gwendolen’s fear of Grandcourt suggest this since the rest of the book makes it clear that Gwendolen is not one who is easily cowed by intimidation. Sexual fright is indicated when Gwendolen reflects on her current situation:

For she did think of the coming years with presentiment: she was frightened at Grandcourt. The poor thing had passed from her girlish sauciness of superiority over this inert specimen of personal distinction into an amazed perception of her former ignorance about the possible mental attitude of a man towards the woman he sought in marriage – of her present ignorance as to what their life with each other might turn into (425).

This passage likely indicates more than moral repulsion; Gwendolen’s emotion toward
Grandcourt has stretched beyond disdain for the man’s character and into the realm of terror at what she perceives lies in store for her as his wife. The use of the adjective ‘inert’ implies that Gwendolen underestimated Grandcourt’s sexual stamina; it is obvious in the descriptions of her musings on what married life would be, that she discounted the sexual; and it is possible that she did so because Grandcourt appeared remote and unenergetic. Gwendolen notices upon meeting him that it is ‘perhaps not possible for a breathing man to look less animated’ (111). There is a lack of visible sexuality in Grandcourt that appeals to Gwendolen: ‘He did not appear to enjoy anything much. That was not necessary: and the less he had of particular tastes and desires, the more freedom his wife would have in following hers’ (137). ‘Particular tastes and desires’ seem definitely to include sexuality, and a few lines later she compares Grandcourt to a lizard and ‘not one of the lively, darting kind’ (137). It is perhaps Gwendolen’s hope that Grandcourt is impotent. This is shown to be anything but the case: ‘the thoughts [Gwendolen’s image] stirred would be imperfectly illustrated by a reference to the amatory poets of all ages’ (319). Might the likes of Baudelaire, Sade, or any other lascivious unnamed French writers that Theophrastus finds fault with more accurately describe Grandcourt’s feelings for Gwendolen?

Grandcourt, like the deviants Sade describes, can only feel alive when he is overriding another’s will or causing pain; otherwise, he is bored to the point of stupification. Grandcourt is not as educated or well-read as he would like to appear to be; instead of developing his intellect: ‘he employed himself (as a philosopher might have done) in sitting meditatively on a sofa and abstaining from literature’ (319). He does this ‘not from love of thought, but from hatred of effort.’ Eliot describes this kind of mental sleep as an ‘inward world’ or a state of mind composed entirely of the ego, where ‘impulse is born and dies in a phantasmal world, pausing in rejection of even a shadowy fulfillment’ (319). This kind of ennui fails to recognize its own dissatisfaction and remains on the periphery of imagination; but because it is barely visible makes it no less dangerous: ‘a lazy stagnation or even a cottony milkiness may be preparing one knows not what biting or explosive material’ (319). If Grandcourt were to ground his intellect firmly in the pursuit of knowledge, this rootless imaginative wandering would not gather destructive momentum. As it stands, Grandcourt’s thoughts concerning Gwendolen ‘were like circlets one sees in a dark pool continually dying out and starting again from some impulse below the surface’ (319). Grandcourt’s consciousness, depicted as not only mindless and animalistic in its nature, is seen as repetitive in its processes. These kinds of obsessive and mechanistic processes are sure to produce only evil; in these short descriptions of Grandcourt’s mental composition, immorality is seen as rooted in ennui: the antidote to which is education and study. Much later, Eliot italicizes the word ‘ennui’ when describing our relation to the ‘beings closest to us whether in love or hate’ and how ‘their trivial sentences, their petty standards, their low suspicions, their loveless ennui, may be making somebody else’s life no better than a promenade through a pantheon of ugly idols’ (672). Lack of concern for humanity, denoted here as the absence of love, is directly linked to boredom/want of purpose in life.

Eliot portrays Gwendolen’s restlessness and ennui as part of her initially amoral nature. At the very beginning of the novel, Deronda questions whether the power of Gwendolen’s gaze resides in the ‘good or the evil genius dominant in those beams’; and concludes that the ‘evil’ is in fact dominant ‘else why the effect of unrest?’ (7). Though this as much a critique of Deronda’s naive perceptions and the equally naive society which expects women to suppress
rather than develop their intellects, it is also a statement on the correlation between immoral actions and the want of creative or intellectual quests. There is a crucial difference, however, between the way ennui functions in Gwendolen and the manner in which it operates in Grandcourt; in Gwendolen it produces restlessness, but Grandcourt’s response is further to withdraw from life. Lydia Glasher’s letter provides valuable insights into Grandcourt’s psychology: ‘The man you have married has a withered heart. His best young love was mine [. . .]’ (359). Grandcourt’s thought processes show that his intellect too is withered, ‘a condition which comes like whitening hair [. . .] like the main trunk of an exorbitant egoism’ (319). Whitening hair entails the death of pigment in the root of a hair follicle and a consequent loss of colour; and the tree imagery ‘main trunk’ also supports the idea that Eliot believed consciousness to be grounded in something larger than itself. Because Grandcourt’s is only rooted in his own ‘exorbitant egoism’ and nothing larger than itself, his consciousness becomes static. The connection between ‘heart’ or a larger moral nature, and imagination is indefatigable in Eliot. Theophrastus finds an irrefutable connection between these two concepts and emphasizes the importance of ‘ennobling emotions which subdue the tyranny of suffering, and make ambition one with social virtue’ (84). Ambition is always imaginative and it is always wedded to the desire to inspire these values in others. Theophrastus insists that the man whose work is a ‘negation of those moral sensibilities which make half the warp and woof of human history’ cannot ‘be taken, even by his own generation, as a living proof that there can exist such a combination as that of moral stupidity and trivial emphasis on personal indulgence’ (Impressions 136). To George Eliot, there is an irreconcilable gulf between low morale and creative genius; that is why she presents Grandcourt as ghostlike, he is already spiritually and mentally dead so that all that remains of him are ebbs of thought which move in circular patterns. Grandcourt’s sexual impulse then, joined with his fantasies of dominion and humiliation, not only has the effect of diminishing Gwendolen’s sense of self; it reduces him to a mere ebbing impulse, a pulsation.

Simone de Beauvoir’s essay Must We Burn Sade? identifies the same alienation in Sade, whose work can be viewed as a constant effort to reconcile that sense of hopeless estrangement from the rest of humanity with a wish to be somehow connected. De Beauvoir points out that Sade ‘for all his sadism strove to compensate for the one necessary element which he lacked’ (De Beauvoir 32). De Beauvoir compares Sade’s condition to an ‘autism which prevented him from ever forgetting himself or being genuinely aware of the reality of the other person’ (De Beauvoir 33). What De Beauvoir describes is not simply a consequence of egoism but a deficiency in the imagination. Applied to Gwendolen and Grandcourt, it is obvious that Gwendolen begins life as ego-driven but not without the creative intellect requisite in order to imagine and thereby empathize with another’s suffering. Grandcourt fails at putting another’s needs ahead of his own and at even the very act of fully envisaging the effects his cruelties will have on another’s consciousness. Sadism and masochism are both efforts on the part of a diminished consciousness to feel again; in De Beauvoir’s words, ‘If the subject remains confined within the solitude of his consciousness, he escapes this agitation and can rejoin the other only by conscious performance’ (33). The performative aspect of desire, clearly a feature of Sade’s writing, also applies to Grandcourt’s spectator mentality: he likes Lush to watch him mistreat Fetch (125); he likes Gwendolen to wear Lydia Glasher’s diamonds in public (427). Clearly this exhibitionistic aspect of Grandcourt’s sadism is what most gratifies him:
Grandcourt had an intense satisfaction in leading his wife captive after this fashion: it gave their life on a small scale a royal representation and publicity in which everything familiar was gotten rid of, and everybody must do what was expected of them whatever might be their private protest—(the protest kept strictly private) adding to the piquancy of despotism (672)

Grandcourt has changed from a younger man who might have loved Lydia Glasher (in her perception, he had loved her so this question is effectively posed) to a man who lives solely for the pleasures of 'representation' and the thrilling contrast between what is public and what remains veiled.

There is an unmistakable similitude between Grandcourt and Lapidoth, who had 'travelled a long way' from his 'young self', and to whom emotion is now like 'the ocular perception of touch to one who has lost the sense of touch, or like morsels on an untasting palette, having shape and grain, but no flavour' (Deronda 742). The narrator refers to masochism as a preferable and even welcome alternative to this condition: the loss of emotion and human sympathy is likened to a 'slow death' where one 'longs to feel laceration rather than be conscious of a widening margin where consciousness once was' (742). Baldassarre, too, has reached this reduced state: the only way he retains his identity is through his identification with his hatred. This loathing becomes his only source of human contact and so he declares 'I am not alone in the world; I shall never be alone, for my revenge is with me' (Romola 256). Sentiments of sadism and masochism are married in Baldassarre's fantasy of 'an eternity of vengeance, where he, an undying hate, might clutch forever an undying traitor' (257-258).

There is no happiness in this condition, but there is a sharing of misery which appeals to Baldassarre; and it is notable that Eliot's language reduces Baldassarre to only an emotion, he is 'undying hate' rather than simply the custodian to such animosity. Eliot without doubt looks upon the passion of hatred more favourably than she does the impartial and cold emotions of Lapidoth and Grandcourt. Grandcourt, Lapidoth, and Baldassarre are varying forms of a devolutionary process: Baldassarre is still linked to humanity by his passionately realized hate; Lapidoth is numbed but not prone to cruelty, only egoism; Grandcourt is insensate to the point of having entirely lost his soul to some phantom form of consciousness.

To be sure, Eliot meant these characters to serve as a warning that the more one detaches from the collective consciousness, the greater the chance one takes that one's own consciousness will be erased. That could have happened to Gwendolen but her love for Deronda prevents it. She starts with the Sadiean belief that 'whatever surrounded her was somehow specially for her' (Daniel Deronda 804) but the imaginative intellect she possesses innately grows more powerful the more her consciousness is thrust into being by extreme suffering. She comes into the recognition of suffering as a 'collective risk' by her own frightful introduction to it and attempts to accept her 'amazed anguish that I and not Thou, He or She, should be just the smitten one' (289). By the end of the novel, Gwendolen has completely transcended her previous incarnation of self and like Romola, experiences 'the peaceful melancholy which comes from the renunciation of the demands of self' and takes comfort from the 'more starlike out-glowing of some pure fellow-feeling, some generous impulse breaking our inner darkness' (795). This seeming diminishment of Gwendolen's former liveliness is seen as preferable to her previous rowdy egoism; I believe Eliot intends Gwendolen's melancholy to be seen as a latent
period, a rest after all her agonies that will allow her to meet her full creative and human potential later.

Eliot's philosophy comes closest to the surface during a telling conversation between Mirah and Mordecai over the emotions of a Jewish maiden in a tale Mordecai cites from the Midrash. It is likely Eliot favoured Mordecai's claim that the maiden's sacrifice of her self illustrated 'surpassing love that loses self in the object of love' over Mirah's counter-argument that the maiden 'had wanted the king to know what she had done and to feel that she was better than the other', that 'it was her strong self, wanting to conquer, that made her die' (735). Mordecai chides his sister, 'Thou hast read too many plays, where the writers delight in showing the human passions as indwelling demons, unmixed with the relenting and devout elements of the soul' (735).

It is obvious that Eliot herself, unlike the unidentified French writers in Impressions, was keenly interested in showing both 'the indwelling demons' and the 'the relenting and devout elements of the human soul'; but that her life's work was geared toward advocating the latter.

Works Cited


