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'Indications that I can touch the hearts of my fellow men': Reading Scenes of Clerical Life from a Kleinian Psychoanalytic Perspective

Toni Griffiths

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George Eliot tentatively reflected in her journal that she might be touching the hearts of her fellow men in 'Scenes of Clerical Life'. In this short paper, I explore with the aid of Kleinian psychoanalytical ideas what might be involved in such a touching of the heart and attempt in the process to indicate that, despite their evident flaws, the 'Scenes' are powerful harbingers of the later and mature works.

I have elsewhere detailed my argument that a literary text will evoke a strong emotional response in the reader in those cases where the powerful and contradictory sensations of the unconscious, of early unconscious phantasy, are at some level apprehended through the text by the reader. The text may have both a manifest and a latent level, as in a dream, where the manifest level is the story or narrative of the latent level – the same story read very differently through the agency of what Freud described as ‘dreamwork’. Such a ‘psychoanalytic aesthetic’ is I suggest what distinguishes a creative literary text from a text of fleeting sensation, perhaps the ‘silly novel’ of which George Eliot disapproved. I hope to interest you, therefore, in the idea that the psychoanalytic insights of Melanie Klein (who is relatively neglected in literary theory) are helpful in understanding why what may be thought of as the latent level of a creative literary text has the power to ‘touch the heart’.

I will therefore draw on Klein’s work in looking at a number of elements in 'Scenes of Clerical Life': the depiction of passion and gaze – seeing and being seen – and the meaning of some particular aspects of the form of these narratives, ‘nodal’ textual points and symbolization.

Melanie Klein’s work was a development, not a contradiction, of Freud’s. It showed amongst other things, how unconscious phantasy is present from the earliest stages of life. She observed how the infant experiences from the outset intense feelings of hatred, rage and persecution as well as bliss, love and satisfaction.

Her work is deeply unrelenting and very literal in its picture of the origins of love and hate and of knowledge of life and death and in the theoretical formulations which arise directly from clinical practice. Klein’s understanding of early mental states as ‘positions’ emphasizes the persecutory and defensive feelings of the very young infant in what she termed the ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position where people and events (objects, part-objects) are experienced at extremes, wonderfully ‘good’, ideal, or terribly ‘bad’, hated and frightening. In the ‘depressive’ position, a more balanced if ambivalent relationship prevails, in favourable conditions. Remorse and guilt for harm felt to have been inflicted (in phantasy) on loved ones surface in the depressive position, as does the wish to make reparation. Where the infant experiences containment, that is, where bad feelings do not overwhelm and where the infant is truly ‘seen’, then its loving and sympathetic feelings will have space. There is the suggestion of this in the manifest text of ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’: ‘In the love of a brave and faithful man there is always a strain of
maternal tenderness; he gives out again those beams of protecting fondness which were shed on him as he lay on his mother’s knee.'4 Where such a gaze, such containment, is lacking or ambivalent, confusion and dread – the ‘nameless dread’5 described by the psychoanalyst, Wilfred Bion – are felt.

Klein saw in her clinical work that the emotional states of infancy are fierce and painful – and ubiquitous: we all go through them. She realised that the early ‘depressive position’ is never fully worked through, never finished, that anxieties relating to ambivalence and guilt, as well as situations of loss, which reawaken those depressive experiences, remain throughout life. She described how good ‘external objects’ in adult life symbolize and contain aspects of the primary ‘good object’, internal and external, so that any loss in later life re-awakens the anxiety of losing the good internal object and, with this anxiety, all the anxieties experienced originally in the depressive position when the infant has to cope with intense feelings of hatred and love and the difficulty and pain of managing their co-existence in the self and in the other. In her late paper, ‘On the state of loneliness’, Klein wrote, ‘The feeling that [the mother] is lost is equivalent to the fear of her death’,6 a reflection which recalls the authorial voice in The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton which tells us that, ‘In every parting there is an image of death’7.

In Scenes and in the later novels, we see that the past is never lost and shapes the present and the future. In his Confessions, St Augustine wrote, ‘when I am recollecting and telling my story, I am looking on its image in present time’. This image belongs to what he calls, ‘the present of things past’.8 In ‘Amos Barton’, we are told that, ‘The past was not expunged’.9 By the same token, where the past is deafeningly obliterated, no emotional life is possible. We see this clearly, of course, in Silas Marner and, as the narrative unfolds, that, ‘As the child’s mind was growing into knowledge, his mind was growing into memory’.10 But we also have the sense of it in ‘Janet’s Repentance’: while, when Janet is desolate, ‘the scenes of her childhood, her youth and her painful womanhood, rushed back upon her consciousness’,11 ‘in her utmost loneliness, she shed no tear: she sat staring fixedly into the darkness, while inwardly she gazed at her own past, almost losing the sense that it was her own, or that she was anything more than a spectator at a strange and dreadful play’.12 This state of ‘utmost loneliness’ contains at latent level the unassuaged terror of abandonment – and this may be unconsciously recognized by the reader as that early fear which may or may not have been borne – or contained. George Eliot’s continuing sense of and need for the past,13 her consciousness of the importance of memory, refer at a latent level to the endurance of the earliest emotional states and their fragility as well as their fierceness.

In these states, ideal love and fierce hate are closely juxtaposed. In favourable conditions, recognition of the co-existence of both develops, with remorse for aggressive acts inflicted in phantasy. But, as Klein saw, these early feelings are capable of being activated – or felt or recalled – throughout life. We are told in ‘Mr Gilfil’ that, ‘The earliest and the longest has still the mastery over us’.14

In Kleinian terms, fear of the loved object derives from phantasized acts of aggression against that same object, something that in favourable conditions is worked through in the depressive position. Fear is also bound up with love in conditions where separation from the loved object
is not, or is only partly, accomplished. Symbolization of this state is ubiquitous in George Eliot, whether it is in the ambiguous development of Gwendolen in Daniel Deronda or in the painful image of Mrs Transome in Felix Holt the Radical - ‘A woman’s love is always freezing into fear’. The large meaning of this enduring image is there also at the beginning, in ‘Mr Gilfil’: ‘a passionate woman’s love is always overshadowed by fear’. Fear of love, often associated with a ‘withered look’, stands as a nodal point in the George Eliot text, suggesting, as in the manifest dream, that complex emotions or unconscious phantasies are clustered in the latent text at this nodal point of the narrative.

I turn now to the question of ‘seeing and being seen’, for the use made of the gaze in the George Eliot text is akin to a form of literary dreamwork, revealing how the manifest text carries its own latent text. At the latent level the feeling of being seen fully for what one is, and accepted and loved as such – a longing for acceptance – is powerful and is associated with the strength of the containment experienced by the baby which helps it to bear the guilt of the depressive position. However, this is a complex process and, where the infant turns to the defence of narcissism and grandiosity, the more he feels in danger of being exposed. John Steiner, a Kleinian psychoanalyst, has written that, ‘an important and probably universal experience is to fear a sudden exposure through which, what we are, is revealed, and what we have claimed to be, turns out to be a sham.’ Such fear may be experienced within a wide spectrum of feelings of shame, humiliation and degradation – better to die than to be seen (the true condition of Bulstrode in Middlemarch). One result in these circumstances may be a preoccupation with the ‘observing object’, something that is later woven densely into the manifest text of Daniel Deronda, for example.

The density of specular imagery and allusion in Scenes, which is also a feature of the mature work, suggests that these processes may be a dreamwork product of the latent text. Caterina in ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’ is the object of a multiple gaze which transforms the object. It suggests at a latent level the failure of early containment in which the tiny infant self, overwhelmed with extremities of both love and hate, is not seen nor understood for itself but is in fact rendered something else altogether. Looking past the person of Caterina in the manifest text of ‘Mr Gilfil’, there comes into view instead the little black-eyed monkey. As Sir Christopher Cheverel comes to learn, ‘God help me! I thought I saw everything and was stone-blind all the while.’ The textual insistence on this mis-seeing is densely interwoven. The references to Tina as black-eyed monkey are everywhere in the text but are accompanied by others of a similar sort: the marmoset, little southern bird, little minx, little yellow bantling, Blenheim spaniel, a little, unobtrusive singing bird, a poor wounded leveret, the little grasshopper, mouse-like. Caterina is given the attributes of an infant: a tiny little thing, more child than woman, a little girl to be petted, a simple little thing, a little simpleton, a poor little dependent thing, a fierce little thing. Any baby she might one day have would be a kitten – or a new little black-eyed monkey. Thus the narrative, the manifest text.

Read as latent text, the reader may sense the presence of the angry baby who is not seen, cannot be seen for what he or she is, and whose fierce and overwhelming instincts and wishes cannot be ‘held’, contained and helped through. Note that I am suggesting here that the interest lies not in the supposed psychological past of Caterina as character but in the emotional force of the internal world which the manifest text suggests in its image making – literary dreamwork,
if you prefer. This I suggest is what is at some level recognized by the reader and what ‘touches the heart’.

The infant who is not seen or not contained well enough fears death, annihilation. It is in this sense that we may consider the unseeing eye as a recurrent image and nodal point in the George Eliot text. In *Scenes*, looking, seeing, being seen, not being seen (to take no notice), the experience of being observed and of being on show, the ‘blindness of the seeing eye’ (the strange state of mind in which one knows and does not know a thing at the same time) constitute a series of ‘nodal points’ in the manifest text, in the way that becomes deeply characteristic of *Daniel Deronda* years later. In ‘Janet’s Repentance’, ‘Mr Dempster was never caught in the act of looking at anything in particular’ – and at the end Janet ‘was yearning and watching for a moment in which her husband’s eyes would rest consciously upon her’. The ‘human soul that looks out through dull grey eyes’, with ‘no particular expression’, signifies a gaze that comprehends neither self nor others in ‘Amos Barton’: death comes in the wake of a sympathy which is not ‘quick and watchful enough’ and in the wake of a love which is in fact full of poverty and selfishness. The large dark eyes of the Countess Czerlaski are not eyes that see; in fact, she throws ‘her eyth about when she comth into Church’ we are told in one of George Eliot’s determinedly quaint renderings. Janet’s wide open black eyes have nevertheless ‘a strangely fixed, sightless gaze’ in ‘Janet’s Repentance’. Great dark eyes which see unseeingly recur throughout the *Scenes* and are a luminous representation in the manifest text of the latent dread of loneliness, abandonment, annihilation. Other eyes which do not see are ‘indolent’, Captain Wybrow watches from ‘under his indolent eyelids’ as Grandcourt in *Daniel Deronda* will later do. However, it is with ‘solemn eyes’ that Caterina tells Gilfil that she wished ‘to kill him’, to kill Wybrow. More nuanced is the image at the end of ‘Janet’s Repentance’ which foreshadows that of Gwendolen: ‘far, far out of her reach, as if she were standing helpless on the shore, while he was sinking in the black storm-waves’. The powerful reality of the wish, which is expressed with greater complexity later on in *Daniel Deronda*, is from a latent text in which unconscious phantasy the loved object may also be hated and destroyed — and may then be felt to inflict unendurable guilt (Tina feels that, ‘she was too wicked ever to be pardoned’) afterwards and Janet’s imagination ‘could not keep hold of a condition in which that great dread was absent’. She wakes, ‘shaking with terror’.

There are key moments in *Scenes* which, in their latent, dream-like resonance can be seen as nodal points which concentrate meaning. An example may be taken from ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love Story’: ‘when [Caterina] was five years old she had revenged herself for an unpleasant prohibition by pouring the ink into Mrs Sharp’s work-basket’.

The tone is the same as that in which we are told in *Daniel Deronda* of that:

> disagreeable silent remembrance of [Gwendolen’s] having strangled her sister’s canary-bird in a final fit of exasperation at its shrill singing which had again and again jarringly interrupted her own.

This is in *Daniel Deronda* a nodal point in which the literary dreamwork veils the dream thought, the latent text, where in unconscious phantasy the parental couple is denied or attacked and the third one, the baby, triumphs omnipotently and in phantasy feels neither excluded nor cast out nor forsaken. It is thus the ‘shrill singing’ of parental union which is in phantasy
destroyed or killed. The unconscious phantasy of the latent text, the ‘wincing’ dream thought, is to have murdered the ‘other’ parent. The thought of murder is akin to the act and produces overwhelming guilt and paralysing fear of retribution, providing in the manifest text the force of Gwendolen’s fear of the dead which returns malevolently.

The force is not dissimilar in ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love Story’ for damaging the ‘work-basket’ – in phantasy the place where babies are made – as revenge for the ‘unpleasant prohibition’ of exclusion from the phantasized bliss of parental union is again a vengeful, murderous thought – ‘too wicked to be pardoned’. The fierceness with which Caterina is endowed is consistent with this and the powerful image which creates a nodal point of the text is here an early sign of the strength of George Eliot’s later writing.

The image-making of the Scenes texts is powerful and its latent resonance runs through George Eliot’s work. We are told in ‘Mr Gilfil’ that, ‘with the poisoned garment upon him, the victim writhes under the torture – he has no thought of the coming death’.36 This prefigures not only Tito’s secret armour in Romola37 but the theme of poison in Daniel Deronda where words ‘nestle’ their ‘venomous life’38 within Gwendolen, where an adder lies on the words of the fateful letter – or in Middlemarch where the humiliated Bulstrode, returning to his ‘quiet home’ finds that, ‘on all the pleasant surroundings of his life a dangerous reptile had left his slimy traces.’39 In the latent text, dread of the other takes root in and against the self. The image-making of the manifest text contains this dread and becomes ever more complex and subtle as George Eliot’s work matures. Suffice it here to say that the inner-world struggle with dread, associated with the sense that the symbol becomes the symbolized object,40 is apparent from the outset in George Eliot’s creative work.

The Madonna of the Scenes – whether Milly (the ‘large, fair, gentle Madonna’41) or Mrs Heron (with ‘soft blue eyes’42) or apostrophized in ‘mighty is the force of motherhood!43 prefigures Raphael’s Madonna di San Sisto at the sight of which George Eliot and George Henry Lewes were, in Dresden in 1858, to be overcome. George Eliot’s letters contain many references to ‘guardian angels’ and the Madonna figure is present in the novels where she stands as a contradictory dream image in the manifest text – for in the latent text there is no perfect mother, no angel in the house, a troubled idea of ‘home’.44 In fact, there are numerous signs in the manifest text which indicate a latent text of anger and revenge – and loneliness. The open and somewhat severe endings45 are harbingers of the endings of the later work and it is significant that in her last work, Theophrastus Such, George Eliot is perceptibly in an ‘uncomfortably dislocated world’.46 This is a very striking example of one of the characteristics of dreamwork identified by Freud, that of contradiction. It is acknowledged, indeed, that George Eliot’s manifest, authorial ethic, her religion of humanity and her positivist sympathies, were often contradicted by the experience of her characters.

The Scenes are early works and they are, as has been widely noted, flawed. ‘My hand was not well in’,47 wrote George Eliot to the Brays. There is sentimentality, despite her belief that sentimentality was the negation of literary truth,48 in what Barbara Hardy describes as her ‘overdone sympathy for her poor creatures’.49 Derek and Sybil Oldfield’s terse comment that the sentimental children of Scenes are ‘awful’50 is as true now as when it was made nearly 40 years ago. The overwriting, the over-familiar, sometimes arch, narrative tone, the lapses into
sensational style, all so deplored in Silly Novels, are there. At the same time, George Eliot was clearly aware of the difficulties in the way of knowing: in her next novel, she was to write that, 'The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused.' Through all this and despite all this, the Scenes move us, they do 'touch the heart'. My conclusion as to why this is so is that, despite their faults, the Scenes suggest a psychoanalytic aesthetic, that through a form of literary dreamwork they contain both manifest text and latent text, thereby touching the inner world and suggesting and recalling the earliest emotional configurations of everyman, our earliest love, most desperate fear.

Notes


3 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', Westminster Review, 66 (1856).


7 Scenes, p. 65.


9 Scenes, p. 57.

10 Noted also by Ignes Sodré in: 'Where the Lights and Shadows Fall: on not being able to remember and not being able to forget', in Wood and Byatt, op. cit.

11 Scenes, p. 261.


13 As she was soon to write in Adam Bede, 'The secret of our emotions never lies in the bare object, but in its subtle relations to our own past': Adam Bede, ed. Stephen Gill (London: Penguin, 1985), Ch 18, pp. 199-200.
14 *Scenes*, pp. 151-2.


16 *Scenes*, p. 105.


18 John Steiner, ‘Gaze, Dominance and Humiliation in the Schreber Case’ (Paper given at the Centre for the Advancement of Psychoanalytic Studies, Institute of Psychoanalysis, London, 14 March 2003).

19 *Scenes*, p. 159. In another *Scene*, Janet marries Dempster ‘blindly’ (p. 254).

20 cf ‘her father’s family was so high as to take no notice of her mamma, who nevertheless preserved with much pride the miniature of a Lady Molly in that connection’, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Terence Cave (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 24: cf ‘She gazed at the picture without thinking of it, and the fair blonde dame seemed to look down on her with that benignant unconcern, that mild wonder, with which happy self-possessed women are apt to look down on their agitated and weaker sisters’ (*Scenes*, p. 134).


23 Ibid, p. 298.


27 Ibid, p. 32.

28 Ibid, p. 211.

29 Ibid, p. 83.

30 Ibid, p. 112.

31 Ibid, p. 166.


34 Ibid, p. 102.

35 *Daniel Deronda*, Bk I, Ch 3, p. 25.

'The words had nestled their venomous life within her, and stirred continually the vision of the scene at the Whispering Stones. That scene was now like an accusing apparition': *Daniel Deronda*, Bk V, Ch. 35, p. 424.


Hanna Segal, in 'Notes on Symbol Formation', *Melanie Klein Today. vol 1. Mainly Theory*, ed. Elizabeth B. Spillius (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 168-169, illuminated the distinction between the psychotic and non-psychotic relation to symbolic objects and described the vicissitudes of symbolic development in psychotic modes of thought. She demonstrated that, in these modes of thought, where we would expect to find symbols, there would instead be *symbolic equations*. The symbolic equation, unlike the true symbol, is taken to be the original object transformed. In a mental state, therefore, in which symbolic equations proliferate, symbolic thoughts are treated, not as thoughts but as *things*, giving rise to idolatry rather than idealism. She wrote, 'In the symbolic equation, the symbol-substitute is felt to be the original object ... [it] is used to deny the absence of the ideal object ... The symbol proper ... is felt to *represent* the object ... It arises when depressive feelings predominate over the paranoid-schizoid ones, when separation from the object, ambivalence, guilt, and loss can be experienced and tolerated. The symbol is used not to deny but to overcome loss.'


Ibid, p. 69.


Josephine McDonagh, *George Eliot: Writers and their Work* (Northcote House, 1997), has pointed out that in the novels as a whole most of the important central female characters are not mothers, that the biological mother is strangely absent, and also that there are variously flawed father figures (pp. 18, 45, 51).


McDonagh, p. 94.

'My hand was not well in – I did not know so well how to manipulate my materials': *Letters*, III, 99.


Ibid, p. 18.
50 Oldfield, p. 11. But note Derek and Sybil Oldfield's comment (pp. 10-11) that there is greater realism in *Scenes* than in *John Halifax Gentleman* or *The Heir of Redclyffe*.

51 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists'.

52 *Adam Bede*, Ch. 17, p. 177.