Review of George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Psychology: Exploring the Unmapped Country

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Michael Davis packs a dense yet deft discussion of George Eliot’s relationship with the scientific theories of mind of her contemporaries into this short book. Revisiting the novels and essays, and to a lesser extent the letters, he adds to our understanding of her place as a thinking novelist by his careful negotiation of intellectual positions, his weaving of the discussion among such Eliot contemporaries as Darwin, Spencer, Lewes, Huxley, Alexander Bain, W. B. Carpenter, and E. S. Dallas, and his engagement with recent studies in the field by Gillian Beer, Sally Shuttleworth, K. K. Collins, Tess Cosslett, David Carroll, and Rick Rylance, and others.

Beginning in his Introduction with the famous passage in chapter 16 of *Middlemarch* describing Lydgate’s ambitions as a scientist – his desire to ‘pierce the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy, those invisible thoroughfares which are the first lurking-places of anguish, mania, and crime, that delicate poise and transition which determine the growth of happy or unhappy consciousness’ – Davis sets out to show not just how Eliot wishes to observe and analyse human motivations, but also how even as she claims this as the novelist’s duty and art she is subtly aware of the irreducibility of any particular mind to formulaic analysis and full understanding. Of the *Middlemarch* passage Davis writes:

As much as it celebrates the mind’s potential… Eliot’s description also conveys a sense of its complexity, a complexity which threatens to defeat any attempt, by scientist, novelist or ethicist, to understand it comprehensively. (p. 2)

Moreover:

While constantly drawing on the rich conceptual and discursive resources of the science of mind… Eliot also approaches psychological issues with the same fascinated but continually questioning attitude as that of her scientific contemporaries. Her sense of the mind’s sheer resistance to any one mode of comprehension, a sense which adds to her emphasis on its relative isolation, leads her to utilize psychological terms, but also to offer revisions and criticisms, whether implicit or explicit, of aspects of contemporary psychological writing. (p. 5)

What follows is a compelling account of how Eliot’s novels embody certain themes current in nineteenth-century psychological writings: mind and body; instinct and heredity; emotion and reason; will, consciousness, and the unconscious; and the paradoxical notion of the science of ‘spirit’ (as discussed by Spencer, Lewes, and William James). Through discussion of certain terms used semi-metaphorically in Eliot’s works – current, flash, muscle, scorching, bruise, for example – Davis shows how she adapts the analytical language of Spencer, Carpenter, and others to show – through character in action – how difficult it is to separate the physical from the psychological. Adam Bede’s painful realization of Hetty’s affair with Arthur, felt as a bruise, Rosamond’s mind experiencing the ‘lash’ of Ladislaw’s angry words and their ‘burning’ and ‘biting’ into her consciousness, and Fred Vincy’s scarcely conscious movements towards gambling, described in terms of the poisoning of ‘healthy chyle-fed blood’, are among the detailed examples given here of Eliot’s characteristic way of suggesting both how observable
human motivation is and yet how resistant to systematic understanding.

Not only do her characters fail always to control their desires and passions (Spinoza is rightly invoked here), but she raises the unsettling notion that such control might not be possible even in characters, like Dorothea, who have, or have learnt, sympathy with others. Though deeds have inexorable consequences in her works, she retains a paradoxically strong sense that the self is potentially open to what Davis calls ‘unpredictable, sometimes radical, transformation’ (p. 85). He invokes the case of Daniel Deronda, who is brought by the realization of his Jewishness into ‘conflict with his own history’ and must transcend his exclusively English upbringing to move forward. Sometimes, conversely, as in the case of Maggie Tulliver, the relationship between individual, home, and family is what matters most and conflict with the past to be regretted.

In chapter 5, on the mind and religious experience, Davis writes persuasively about the paradoxicality of Eliot’s version of the Victorian idea of progress. She views history, he writes,

as broadly progressive but at the same time emphasizes the importance of engaging with the past, and she herself aims at such an engagement through her wide-ranging intellectual concerns. Her life-long interest in Christianity reflects this ambivalent attitude. (p. 161)

The idea that she retained a sympathetic understanding of religious belief in others after having rejected it for herself is, of course, not new in Eliot studies, but is embedded here in a tight discussion of how she uses theological language to describe ‘not God but the possibilities of the mind’ (p. 163). Rationalist though she is, she refuses, unlike Herbert Spencer, to privilege the conscious and rational over the unconscious and emotional, showing rather ‘how inextricably connected reason and consciousness are to bodily, emotional and unconscious areas of the self’ and how the different aspects of the mind ‘operate in a fluid and complex relationship’ with one another and with the world (p. 193).

Davis adds to our understanding of how Eliot can seem both deterministic in her predictions and proofs of causality (most obviously perhaps in the substitution of Eppie for gold and childlessness for the denial of Godfrey’s child in Silas Marner) and yet also unusually aware of the often frightening unpredictability of things, as in Gwendolen’s desire to kill Grandcourt, the circumstances of his drowning, and the narrator’s refusal to blame Gwendolen. This book will be of interest to any reader of her novels who is also interested in the theories of mind with which she engaged and in following her exploitation of scientific ideas and vocabulary through her works.

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