

GEORGE ELIOT: ENGLISH MORAL REALISM

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A clue is to be found in the writings of the theoreticians of the Romantic Revival. Coleridge and Wordsworth were quite explicit. It was their intention to transform the place of poetry in society. Poetry or creative writing was to be given the highest place in human affairs. Shelley, a generation later, called Imagination "reason in her most exalted mood". The poet's purpose was to reconcile man to his surroundings, and his imagination with what it fed on in the external world. The creative imagination was to be one of the bridge between the newly propounded categories of the Objective and the Subjective.

But it is arguable, as John Bayley has suggested, that "the novelists rather than the poets are the real beneficiaries of the great Romantic endowment". Certainly the novel became the dominant literary form of the century in a field from which poetry had virtually vanished - the relationship between the individual imagination and the problems and complications of society. The epithets such as practical, sensible, unifying, all embracing, morally aware could well have been applied to the great Romantic Poets, but, as the nineteenth century goes on, it is prose that qualifies for these attributes, while poetry becomes increasingly private and subjective.

Scott is the first great novelist to make effective use of a perception which is so much part of Shakespeare's world - the conflict between two worlds, two ideas (Richard II-Bolingbroke Hotspur-Prince Hal) towards which Shakespeare

maintained dramatic neutrality. Waverley, again as John Bayley points out, is the first successful Romantic Hero. He enjoys the best of two worlds — the world of Romance with the Scottish Pretender and the prosaic world of King George's Hanoverian England. To both sides Scott brings a kind of intuitive sympathy. Waverley fights in the Pretender's Army, but, in the end, comes safely home to his English estate. In a word, he comes back from the world of illusion and romance to reality. He makes his final balance between subjective and objective. Romance and reality are finally reconciled.

This typically English compromise does not occur in France (apart from Balzac), where the antithesis is between Romantic and Bourgeois, but a conflict between the two of them must irrevocably lead to disaster. In English terms, then, moral realism is an attempt to portray an objective world inhabited by people who take a subjective view of it, and who are prone to illusions about it. The English writer — and particularly George Eliot — wishes to resolve this antithesis (subjective-objective) to create a correct balance between the two, to enable people to live more fully — to enhance the moral perception of the reader.

### Realism.

Realism is a critical term from which most of us would gladly escape, since it is an elusive word and has been used too often too vaguely and too carelessly. It has proved impossible to arrive at a consistently precise definition. We must remember, however, that the word has a relatively short history in English writing, appearing for the first time in the middle of the nineteenth century, and developing on an analogy with French fiction.

Auerbach has shown us that the language of each writer he studies creates a new reality. Gombrich, in "Art and Illusion" maintains that artistic creation and audience perception are controlled by the conventions for the representations of reality within art and society, upon which the artist may build, but which remain implicit.

Realism, like any other literary method, reflects both inherited conventions and a way of looking at the world. It implies certain assumptions about the nature of the real world, which constitute, as it were, a ground of meaning. It has implied that ordinariness is more real — in the sense of more representative — than heroism, that people are morally mixed rather than good or bad, that the firmest realities are objects rather than ideas or imaginings, English Realism tended to assume that the real is meaningful and good, while French Realism has consistently tended away from such moral assumptions to lead more directly to the notion of an indifferent universe, and to that more specialised realism, Naturalism.

George Eliot's Realism is an attempt at balance between scientific devotion to the true record of things as they are, and the ethical evaluation of those events, which arises from subjective consciousness.

"Without objectivity there is no truth — but without subjectivity there is no meaning".

Her concept of the human situation lies somewhere between the total subjectivism of the new born baby, for whom existence is no more than a series of vivid desires, and the total objectivity of the determinist, "which ought to petrify your volition".

"We are all of us born in moral stupidity taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves" the ethical

process leads us out of crude subjectivity, by making us recognize both external necessity and "the equivalent centre of self in others", upon which morality can be based.

Let us see briefly how rigorously she herself evaluates characters on a subjective/objective scale.

Every major character in "Middlemarch" shows egoism or unbalanced subjectivity in some form. Dorothea, in desiring a grand destiny. Lydgate, in assuming that he should naturally have the best of everything. Casaubon, in making his own dignity take precedence over humanity. Bulstrode, in supposing that Providence had singled him out for special favours.

Rosamund is the unmitigated egoist. She learns nothing from experience because she is shielded from external necessity. She is trapped within egoism by her subjective view of life. She shows "that victorious obstinacy which never wastes its energy in impetuous resistance".

Mary Garth is a good example of balance, "having early had strong reason to believe that things were not likely to be arranged for her particular satisfaction, she wasted no time in astonishment and annoyance at the fact".

The favourable circumstances in her case seem to be a realistic acquaintance with facts and an affectionate family life which predisposes her to sympathise with others outside the family. She is equally far from egoism and from cynicism. Her attitude to others is a sort of extended subjectivity, an imaginative "feeling with" the other person.

Dorothea is less static than Rosamund or Mary. She moves from her illusory ideal of a grand destiny to a realistic appraisal and humane sympathy for her husband and from this to an extended sympathy for humanity at large. Her development depends partly on an increased objectivity of assessment of

her own situation in relation to others, and an increased ability to "put herself in the place" of others, imagining what it feels like to be them.

Of course, all these linear Bildungsroman developments are set in a context of infinitely complex reality. George Eliot sees life as "a vast sum of human conditions". A governing image in "Middlemarch" is that of a web or net connecting every element with every other.

"Middlemarch" is subtitled "A Study of Provincial Life". It is set back forty years in time (the period of the First Reform Bill, 1832). Most of the great Realists distance their subject matter by at least ten years. This seems part of a recognizable compulsion shared by them all towards documentation and archive work. This is more easily accomplished at a distance in time, when records are more easily available and judgements have the benefit of perspective.

The case of Dorothea is at the centre of the novel and the Prelude prepares us for the main theme — the theme of aspiration in an age "where no coherent social faith and order could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul". George Eliot is here investigating a genuine historical phenomenon, observable throughout Europe (treated, for example, by Balzac, Flaubert and Strindberg). The middle-class intelligentsia found the heroic energies which had been appropriate to an age of Romanticism and revolution stranded in an age of Commercialism. Many Realist writers expose their idealist heroes to an inhuman environment and the mechanistic processes of a Commercial Age, and their ideals wither and die.

The more immediate example of this in "Middlemarch" is Lydgate, who is shown in the final analysis as subject to

economic determinism. Lydgate with his lofty ideals and the possibility of an outlet for them in the practice of Medicine. It is he who is made to feel most sharply the "hampering, thread-like pressure of small social conditions and their frustrating complexity". There is no catastrophic failure in his life, which indeed leads to material prosperity, but "He always regarded himself as a failure; he had not done what he once meant to do".

Dorothea and Will Ladislaw, on the other, who start out without defined aims, do not fail. George Eliot wishes to demonstrate the power of individual will as a counterbalance to environmental determinism.

#### The Omniscient Author Convention

Since the James Prefaces often carries with it "Overtones of dispraise" of the omniscient Author convention

F. G. Steiner: "By interfering constantly in the narrative, George Eliot attempts to persuade us of what should be artistically evident".

Dorothy Van Ghent: "What specific damage does the chosen convention do to the fictional illusion?"

Joan Bennett: "It is a pity that George Eliot should accept a method of presentation that was current and that was used by the author she most admired. Her manner of using asides to the reader is also partly the result of distrust in her own creative powers". Let me first of all state that the use of the convention in "Adam Bede" is clumsy compared with her use of it in "Middlemarch". A quick glance at the opening of Chapter 17 in "Adam Bede" may help us, however. The chapter opens describing the reverend Mr Irvine, and opens, indeed,

with a gross intrusion of the author's voice, "This Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan", I hear one of my readers exclaim". Here is a lack of tact, the reader feels manipulated, but she then leads on into a disquisition on the nature of art, defending the necessity of a realist position, and rejecting moral simplification — "Let your most faulty characters always be on the wrong side, and your virtuous over on the right "is aesthetic simplification — a simple retreat from "common, coarse people" to the depiction of ideal states. Returning to the novel, she now lets Adam Bede himself comment on Mr Irwine. Thus we have crossed the vague boundary between the fictional microcosm of the characters and the macrocosm of George Eliot and the real world. The process is important. The intrusion of the author has a necessary function in establishing the kind of "reality" of the story being told, the kind of assent we are asked to accord the novel". This kind of fiction is not aiming at a fictional microcosm, exact and autonomous, but rather a world coterminous with the "real" world, with the factual Macrocosm. The author bridges the two worlds. In the same chapter George Eliot speaks of as life as "a mixed entangled affair" — this phrase expresses not only the nature of life within the fictional microcosm but also its relationship to the real world which we inhabit. She is not aiming at the insular and self-sufficiency of a Jamesian novel.

It seems then that we must take a closer look at this convention of the "Omniscient Author". We must judge the use of this convention in relation to the following factors:

1. The quality and successful realization of "the body of particularized life";
2. The relevance of this life to the opinion expressed;
3. The intrinsic quality of this opinion;

4. The frequency and extent of this intrusion;
5. The position in regard to the author-reader relationship.

In "Middlemarch", George Eliot has succeeded in creating a large, complex and imaginatively realized body of life. Her world is a world, not merely the map of a world. This is particularly to be noticed in the dramatic self-revelation of character through speech and action. The characters are not only revealed but also differentiated and placed by the quality of their speech.

George Eliot's analysis is often not of an individual but of a society. The individual is related to a wider social context. Analysis handled by her is a literary mode in no way inferior to full dramatic representation. It produces a sense of intimacy of human reality as profoundly felt and as subtly conveyed as any internal representation.

In the "network of human relationships" which she is contemplating, there is a search for understanding which is shared with the reader. Her characters create their own perspectives — they are partial and limited in their view of each other, but it is the reader who is drawn into the contemplated microcosm to connect and understand. George Eliot, in her authorial voice, challenges the reader to bring this fictional world into the "most inclusive context he is capable of framing" — his own deepest sense of the real world in which he lives.

An analysis of her "intrusive comments" will show that they are neither tendentious nor dogmatic nor based on a debatable metaphysic as is the case in Hardy, for instance. They are unemphatic and mature statement of the great commonplaces of human nature. F. R. Leavis said of Dr Samuel



Johnson "The conditions that enable Johnson to give his moral declamation the weight of lived experience and transform his eighteenth generalities into that extraordinary kind of concreteness". This is finely said — and may be applied to George Eliot. Robert Scholes has the following to say:

"A narrative artist with gifts very different from Flaubert — George Eliot — prefers to solve the problem in the less oblique manner and rest the principal weight of her characterizations directly on narrative analysis, paying the inevitable price in the resulting sluggishness in the flow of narrative, just as Proust pays the same price — as any analytic narrative artist does, however great his genius. Thus "Middlemarch" bristle with passages of analysis, and the story advances to a ruminative rhythm, grinding slowly but exceeding fine, with the narrator moving continually in the analytical passages from specific consideration of the characters to careful and delicate moral generalizations, couched in the first and second persons plural. Much of the strength and beauty of "Middlemarch" lies in such passages as this one:

Nor can I suppose that when Mrs. Casaubon is discovered in a fit of weeping six weeks after her wedding the situation will be regarded as tragic. Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, ha

not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.

How "un-Flaubertian" and yet how fine. Her rhetoric, with its carefully chosen metaphors, perfectly adapted to the astonishing range of her intellect and vigorous enough to keep her compassionate prose well this side of sentimentality, is always controlled, artful, and impressive."

What George Eliot has done is to establish a narrator with such breadth of knowledge and experience, such depth of feeling, and such wisdom, that she is able to set up an objective/subjective balance within the narrator. When the narrator moves with ease over a wide range of history, literature, science, religion and so on, we are more prepared to accept what is said as, not impersonal, but impartial and objective. On the other hand, it is through the emotional reactions of this same narrator that we are invited to share the subjective experiences of the fictional characters, and through her wisdom that we can reconcile the outer and inner views. It is in the person of the narrator that we can find the balanced consciousness which the characters of the novel strive towards.

Here are the closing words of "Middlemarch":

"Certainly these determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amid the conditions of an imperfect social world, in which great feelings will take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs".

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