Some Notes on George Eliot

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It will be found true, I think, of the works of every mastermind that there is in them some recurring note, some theme, some refrain, that stamps the author’s personality upon them, and forms a principle of unity throughout them all.\(^1\) It may be simply by some distinctive line of thought, it may be merely by a prevailing mental tone, that nature thus reveals how one-sided are the broadest minds, and proves how narrow, after all, are the best and the greatest of mankind. For a great truth paralyzes as well as inspires. It limits as well as exalts. Minds that have felt its full influence are, as Mr. Lowell would have said, possessed by it; they do not possess it. They are in its power; it is not in theirs. And so it comes to pass that, in many cases, at least, a tendency toward repetition in an author is a token, not of sterility, but of strength. It marks the sincerity, the truth of his convictions; it shows that his writings stand for thoughts that have become imbedded in his being; and thus we can judge him, if not more favorably, at least with a keener sympathy. Thoughts, as Emerson so clearly saw, are rarer possessions than most of us seem to fancy; and only by stress and toil and wear of spirit can one of them be made our own. The rest that receive the name are, in fact, mere outgrowths of these central ideas of our being; and we ought hardly to quarrel with those who have the frankness to show us these ideas, running through all their works, colouring all their conceptions, and yielding them an infallible test of truth and beauty.

If, then, there can be found this uniform current of thought circulating through all the creations of any great mind, animating all with a common purpose, and infusing into all the spirit of their author, it must be, I think, the main function of criticism to trace that current to its source—to reach that principle of unity which, unformulated, it may be, even by its author, still somewhere, we may be sure, exists. And when I have tried to formulate for myself the principle that was the guiding impulse of George Eliot’s philosophy and of her life, I have seemed to hear, faintly at least, through all her thoughts, the echo of her own words: “Our deeds are like children that are born to us; they live and act apart from our own will. Nay, children may be strangled, but deeds, never. They have an indestructible life both in and out of our consciousness.”\(^2\)

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\(^1\) The first sentence of these “Notes” is almost identical to the first sentence of Cardozo’s essay on Matthew Arnold. See BENJAMIN CARDOZO, The Moral Element in Matthew Arnold, in SELECTED WRITINGS (Margaret E. Hall ed., 1947), 61. Richard Polenberg has attributed both to Cardozo’s senior year of college at Columbia. See RICHARD POLENBERG, THE WORLD OF BENJAMIN CARDOZO 35 (1997).

\(^2\) GEORGE ELIOT, ROMOLA 97 (1862). The next several citations are all to Romola.
It is this sense of the interdependence of human lives and destinies; this profound conception of the tremendous meaning and scope of the law of causation and of all that law implies; this vivid appreciation of what we may call the generative power of any, even the smallest act, in its effect both upon the agent himself and upon society at large, that constitute, I think, the determining feature of George Eliot’s philosophy and of her habit and her tone of thought. All that analysis of motive which to many minds constitutes her distinctive excellence, postulates this habit of thought, and by this habit, indeed, is rendered possible. All that spirit of reverence for ethical truth which reveals itself in almost every page of her writing was the legitimate outcome of a theory of conduct in which the “dreadful vitality” of wrongdoing had made itself an uppermost doctrine. That sense, so conspicuous in her works, of the pathos and the beauty that lie hidden behind the humble lives of plain and dull and simple men was but natural to one filled, as was she, with the sense that there was no dignity higher than that which belonged to humanity itself. And that ultimate perfection of the race, the hope of which, in her adherence to the philosophy of Comte, she held before mankind as the stimulus to sacrifice and the solace of their exertions, was after all but a projection, infinitely on into the future, of forces that were working about her, and that it seemed within her power to measure.

To her mind there was a unity of life as well as a unity of history. The unbroken progression from antecedent to consequent in the affairs of states found, in her view, a parallel in that historic continuity which marks the growth of the individual in his mental and his moral life. No fact in that life, she taught, stands out of relation to any other; no deed but finds its adequate cause in the experience of the past; no passion, however mad, prompting to some act that seems in conflict with ourselves, but in reality illustrates that nature which it may seem to contradict. It is, she writes, “an inexorable law of human souls that we prepare ourselves for sudden deeds by the reiterated choice of good or evil which gradually determines character.” “Our lives make a moral tradition for our individual selves as the life of mankind at large makes a moral tradition for the race.” “Mind presents itself under the same conditions of invariableness of antecedent and consequent as all other phenomena, the only difference being that the true antecedent and consequent are proportionately difficult to discover as the phenomena are more complex.” She had the clearness of vision to perceive that, with men as with nations, the revelations that burst forth in the present have their roots fastened in the past. There are no real paradoxes in life. As in the paradoxes of literature, the want of meaning is only apparent. We may find in them, if we will, a truth and a significance and a beauty that are lacking in less covert allusions. Such at any rate, was the faith in which George Eliot addressed herself to that work for which we know her.
It was but natural that a writer of novels with such views as I have indicated concerning the unity and coherence of life should find an outlet for her theories in the analysis of the motives by which her characters might be swayed. And George Eliot never leaves us in doubt as to what those motives are. Of her it may be said in truth that she takes us into the workshop of the mind; and all the hidden springs of action, all the mental processes and involutions, with the thousand gradations from doubt to decision and from decision back again to doubt, are laid bare before us, and we are left to observe their slow and stern and remorseless workings. Tito, in the story of Romola herself, “young and clever and beautiful, trying to slip away from everything unpleasant and caring for nothing else so much as his own safety,” “denies his father and leaves him to misery, betrays every trust that is reposed in him, comes in short to commit some of the basest deeds—such deeds as make men infamous.” The generative power of conduct, the dreadful vitality of wrongdoing, speak here with human voices and in concrete forms. All the successive events by which Tito is led from weakness to crime and from crime to calamity are set before us with the fatal nexus of cause and effect binding them mercilessly together. All the sophistries with which he seeks to cajole his own mind and smother his rising self respect are traced through their manifold complexities with a pitiless and painful fidelity: “He had convinced himself,” she writes, that he was not bound to go in search of Baldassarre. He had once said that on a fair assurance of his father’s existence and whereabout, he would unhesitatingly go after him. But after all, why was he bound to go? What, looked at closely, was the end of all life, but to extract the utmost sum of pleasure? And was not his own blooming life a promise of incomparably more pleasure, not for himself only, but for others, than the withered wintry life of a man who was past the time of keen enjoyment, and whose ideas had stiffened into barren rigidity. . . . Baldassarre had done his work, had had his draught of life. Tito said it was his turn now . . . And the prospect was so vague . . . After a long voyage, to spend months, perhaps years, in a search for which even now there was no guaranty that it would not be in vain: and to leave behind at starting a life of distinction and love: And to find, if he found anything, the old exacting companionship which was known by rote beforehand. Certainly the gems and therefore the florins were, in a sense, Baldassarre’s, in the narrow sense by which the right of possession is determined in ordinary affairs; but in that large and more radically natural view by which the world belongs to youth and strength, they were rather his who could extract the most pleasure out of them. That, he was conscious, was not the sentiment which the complicated play of human feeling had engendered in society. The men around him would expect that he should immediately apply these florins to his benefactor’s rescue. (But) what was the sentiment of society? — a mere tangle of anomalous traditions and opinions which
no wise man would take as a guide except so far as his own comfort was concerned. . . Any maxims that required a man to fling away the good that was needed to make existence sweet were only the lining of human selfishness turned outward: they were made by men who wanted others to sacrifice themselves for their sake. He would rather that Baldassarre should not suffer: he liked no one to suffer; but could any philosophy prove to him that he was bound to care for another’s suffering more than for his own? To do so, he must have loved Baldassarre devotedly, and he did not love him; was that his own fault? Gratitude! Seen closely it made no valid claim: his father’s life would have been dreary without him: are we convicted of a debt to men for the pleasures they give themselves?

Having once begun to explain away Baldassarre’s claim, Tito’s thought showed itself as active as a virulent acid, eating its rapid way through all the tissues of sentiment. His mind was destitute of that dread which has been erroneously decried as if it were nothing higher than a man’s animal care for his own skin: that awe of the Divine Nemesis which was felt by religious pagans, and, though it took a more positive form under Christianity, is still felt by the mass of mankind simply as a vague fear at anything which is called wrongdoing. (Such terror of the unseen is so far above mere sensual cowardice that it will annihilate that cowardice: it is the initial recognition of a moral law restraining desire, and checks the hard, bold scrutiny of imperfect thought into obligations which can never be proved to have any sanctity in the absence of feeling. ‘It is good,’ sing the Eumenides, in Aeschylus, ‘that fear should sit as the guardian of the soul, forcing it into wisdom,—good that men should carry a threatening shadow in their hearts under the full sunshine, ‘else how should they learn to revere the right?’ That guardianship may become needless; but only when all outward law has become needless,—only when duty and love have united in one stream and made a common force.

This picture of the conflict in Tito’s soul between the warring claims of pleasure and of gratitude may be taken, I think, as typical of George Eliot’s method of analysis. More brilliant instances may, indeed, be found—instances that, coming upon one unawares, compress into detached and epigrammatic sentences the profoundest experiences of our mental life; but of the general method everywhere pursued, the passage that has been quoted will stand as an adequate example. That method of analysis was totally different from any that had preceded it, and widely different from most that had followed it, even in this analytic age. “The new school,” says Mr. Howells, “derives from Hawthorne and George Eliot rather than any others; but it studies human nature much more in its wonted aspects and finds its ethical and dramatic examples in the operation of lighter, but not really less vital, motives. . . . This school,” he continues, “which is so largely of the future as well as the present finds its chief exemplar in Mr. Henry James; it
is he who is shaping and directing American fiction, at least . . . No other novelist, except George Eliot, has dealt so largely in analysis of motive, has so fully explained and commented upon the springs of action in the persons of the drama, both before and after the facts. These novelists are more alike than any others in their processes, but with George Eliot an ethical purpose is dominant, and with Mr. James an artistic purpose.”  

The reality of Mr. Howells’ distinction between the purpose of the intermediate school—as we may call the school of George Eliot—and the new school—as we may call the school of Mr. James—is doubtless not to be denied, but there is, I think, a difference in the process, as well as in the purpose of their analysis. The later method of analysis finds its inspiration doubtless in the works of George Eliot, but it follows a different plan, and busies itself more with external traits and less (directly at least) with purely mental phenomena. Psychologists tell us that the mind of man may be studied in a twofold manner:—directly by introspection of our varying states of consciousness, and indirectly, by observation of the speech and actions of others, and hence, through a process of inference, to the thoughts and emotions they express. The first is the method of the intermediate school: and the second, at any rate more distinctively, is the method of the new. No one, I fancy, has appreciated this fact more fully than Mr. James himself. “There is an old-fashioned distinction,” he writes, “between the novel of character and the novel of incident which must have cost many a smile to the intending fabulist who was keen about his work. (It appears to me as little to the point as the equally celebrated distinction between the novel and the romance—to answer as little to any reality . . . What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? . . . It is an incident, for a woman to stand up, with her hand resting on a table, and look out at you in a certain way; or if it be not an incident, I think it will be hard to say what it is. At the same time it is an expression of character. If you say you don’t see it, this is exactly what the novelist who has reasons of his own for thinking he does see it, undertakes to show you.”  

It is the peculiar triumph of Mr. James’ genius that he has been able so to group and marshal together trivial and homely incidents as to make clear to his readers what was already clear to himself, that these incidents are so many expressions of character. In the hands of a less skilful artist such minuteness of detail might make descriptions appear as inventories, and cause precision to pass for prolixity. It is only the artist’s touch that can keep sharp the distinction between homeliness and vulgarity, and make the trivialities of daily speech eloquent with a larger meaning. What the writers

3. William Dean Howells, Henry James, Jr., CENTURY XXV (Nov. 1882), 28.  
of the new school have aimed at accomplishing, and what Mr. James, at any rate, has largely accomplished is, I take it, not so much to tell us the motives of their characters, as to make us see these motives for ourselves. I do not mean to say that Mr. James discards altogether the method of analysis that George Eliot pursued. Many instances of its successful application may be found in his works as well. What I do mean is that this method is, in no sense, distinctively his own, and that his most conspicuous triumphs have been achieved after a different pattern.

Now, that the later method of analysis is, theoretically at least, the more correct of the two, can hardly, it seems to me, be open to question. It leaves us to perform for ourselves those inferences from the external to the mental that in life we actually perform. It preserves to the novel the possibility of following the objective method and at the same time of dealing adequately with purely subjective experiences. It guards the author from the peril of making his analysis the vehicle of personal observations, and saves him from the besetting fault of introspective minds, the tendency to preach and to moralize. Doubtless, the one method must always serve, in greater or less degree, to supplement the other, if only for the reason that the later method lends itself with less readiness to the delineation of mental traits. Its successful application rewards, not only the highest artistic power in the author, but also no inconsiderable measure of intelligence in the reader. Mr. Lowell says of Dante that “he has the skill of conveying impressions indirectly. In the gloom of hell, his bodily presence is revealed by his stirring something, on the mount of expiation by casting a shadow.”5 Skill in this direction is as effective as it is rare—rare, because it calls for an unusual subtlety of thought and action, and effective, partly because it gratifies the mind’s sense of personal achievement and partly because it is thus that impressions reach us in reality. In this skill, George Eliot, I cannot but think, was lacking. There was, at times, something artificial, something almost scholastic, in the elaborate mental processes that precede with her characters the decisive moment of action; there was a rigidity and formalism about the mental processes that precede with her characters the decisive moment of action; there was a rigidity and formalism about them that one distinctively feels to be unreal. It is not so, one sees, in life itself. Motives seldom acquire that explicitness which permits their being accurately traced and reproduced, and there are breaks and chasms in the formation of resolutions that can only be bridged vaguely, and by a process, as it were, of unconscious thought. “To hear some preachers,” says Adam Bede, “you’d think a man must be doing nothing all his life but shutting his eyes and looking at what’s going on in the inside of him”; and possibly no more summary criticism was ever passed upon the faults of the introspective method in literature. Few characters in George Eliot’s novels

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stand out more distinctly than the character of Hetty Sorrel in the story of Adam Bede; and this clearness of outline is due, I think, in large measure, to the fact that her character is delineated somewhat less by comment and introspection and more by the simple record of her words and deeds. The fearful scene in the prison where Hetty, in the stillness and darkness of the place, confesses the murder of her child, proves what may seem at times to be doubtful, that George Eliot had within her reach just the genuine power of objective, dramatic description. (Like the baby’s voice, whose cries kept calling Hetty back, the scene brands itself into the memory, and with Hetty we ask ourselves if we shall see it always.) No psychologist’s record of emotions, no analysis by the author as if by some discriminating observer can equal the effect that comes from letting words and deeds tell their own story to the listener.

This truth, I cannot but think, George Eliot failed at times to see. She was too anxious to tell the story rather than to let the story tell itself; and to this characteristic tendency of her mind, most of her faults of style may ultimately be traced. Limitations there are that attach almost of necessity to any attempt at the vital reproduction of purely mental experiences; and to say that George Eliot did not transcend these limitations is not to depreciate the value of the work she has performed. Perhaps, indeed, it would be juster to say that she did transcend them, only not equally, nor everywhere. In the story of Silas Marner, a story almost Grecian in its classic unity and perfection, the interplay of character and circumstance is traced with a master’s touch, full of virile truth and human pathos and clear and simple strength. Brooding under the stigma of a crime he is guiltless of, Silas takes up life anew in the little village of Raveloe, far from his old home, and forsaken, as it seemed to him, by the unseen love that had watched over his childhood and his youth. “His first effort after the shock was to work at his loom. He seemed to weave,” it is said, “like the spider, from pure impulse, without reflection”; and little by little, the love of accumulating the gold that his weaving won him grew into a passion, and his gold became his life. The suspicion and dislike with which the simple folk of Raveloe regarded him, were all indifferent to him. The thread of his life had been broken, and he was bound, it seemed, to remain in loneliness to the end. And then came the loss of the gold, and after that came the child so strangely left at his cottage. The gold had gone, and the child had come in its place. And little by little, the warmth of love thaws the chill in Marner’s heart, and little by little the old suspicion and dislike merge into kindly pity and regard, and little by little life regains its meaning and its purpose and its hopes. Very beautiful is the picture of the first struggling dawn in Marner’s mind of the old forces that had been sleeping there so long. We almost hear the

awakening of the old resurgent memories of the past, as they take their place again in his life, and bring him once more into the fellowship of men. All the author’s powers of analysis, all her sense of the presence and reality of causation as an ever immanent fact, all her wide and generous and human sympathy, are here; but softened and chastened and refined and transfigured by a sense of symmetry and proportion for which we sometimes look in vain.

That sense of symmetry and proportion was lacking, for example, in Middlemarch—the work that George Eliot herself conceived to be her masterpiece. The book, as it has frequently been observed, is wanting in unity of structure; and one meets, every little space, with some sort of moralizing excursus that might with readiness be detached from its setting, and made to do duty as a homily upon life and life’s vicissitudes. In Middlemarch, too, more conspicuously perhaps than elsewhere, we find a tendency akin not a little to what Mr Howells has called the “confidential attitude” of Thackeray—the habit of addressing little side remarks to the reader and of reminding him, as it were, that one is only making believe. Nothing to my mind is more fatal to our sense of the reality of a work of fiction than this habit (particularly noticeable in Thackeray) of perpetually calling the reader’s attention to the fact that one is simply telling an imaginary story. Where the novelist does not seem to be in earnest about his own work, he can hardly hope that the work will be taken by his readers more seriously than it has been taken by himself.

It is in Middlemarch, however, perhaps more clearly than in any other of George Eliot’s novels, that her skill in the delineation of character makes itself apparent, and here too we find perhaps the clearest expression of the mental attitude from which she surveyed the conduct and the feelings of mankind. “Suppose,” she writes, “we turn from outside estimates of a man to wonder with keener interest what is the report of his own consciousness about his doings or capacity: with what hindrances he is carrying on his daily labors, what fading of hopes or what deeper fixity of self-delusion the years are marking off for him; and with what spirit he wrestles against universal pressure, which will one day be too heavy for him and bring his heart to its final pause.”

These reports of consciousness, the inner rather than the outer life was the life that absorbed her interest; and she seems to have viewed and valued our actions chiefly as [“a reflex” crossed out] the [exhuments] of our thoughts. If it be true that aspiration is a higher test of character than

8. George Eliot, Middlemarch (1898) 112.

* [Ed. Note: This starred note is inserted on a separate page around this point in the text] Yet it is Middlemarch perhaps more clearly than any other of George Eliot’s novels that furnishes a practical illustration of her theory of the novel—a theory that made it the primary purpose of fiction to register the reports of our own consciousness about our [doings or capacity].
achievement, and purity of motives outweighs happiness of results, it must surely be a narrow picture of life that would confine itself to the outward and visible and factual estimate of things. And so it is that in the prominent figures of Middlemarch, in Dorothea and Lydgate and Casaubon, the interest centers in the secret mental struggles of men and women whose lives, in outward semblance, had little of tragedy or of comedy about them. I have heard it said that Middlemarch would have been a great novel had it only contained a tragedy. To my mind it is a narrow criticism that refuses to see in it a tragedy already. The vain strivings of a high spiritual nature, the slow fading of hopes, the death of the ambitions of a life work, are, it seems to me, the most tragic of all facts that the life of man reveals. Such, at all events, was George Eliot’s conviction; and such is the spirit in which Dorothea and Lydgate and Casaubon were drawn, and in which they should be judged. The critics, I have noticed, devote most of their attention to the characters of Lydgate and Dorothea, but the character of Casaubon has, I think, been represented by its author with equal fidelity and strength. I have always felt sorry for Casaubon, and, in spite of his odious habit of blinking his eyes, have secretly thought that his readers are wont to do him but little justice. (To be born with a dull, conventional nature, incapable alike of deep passion or of lofty feelings with no higher ambition than the writing of a key to all the mythologies of the world, which proves in the end to be nothing at all, and still to do one’s duty in a plodding, methodical, and unimpeachable way, presents, I think, a combination of very sparse favors from nature with a very creditable employment of such as have chanced to be bestowed.) As George Eliot truly says: “It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self, never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardor of a passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted.” Perhaps it is no wonder that in the contemplation of such a character, the author’s reflective powers sometimes ran away with her, and made her eager to point out to the readers the lessons that she feared they could not fathom for themselves. Such a tendency, as I have tried to indicate, was the natural outcome of her method of analysis.

And yet even in those novels in which the limitations of her method show themselves most clearly, with her tendency to obtrude herself upon her works, and preach and moralize, as occasion may befit, even here, we could not wish, I think, that the method had been other than it is. I have sometimes thought that the objections to be urged against it were rather academic than practical, that they spring, not so much from a feeling of actual incongruity as from a lurking sense of theoretical unfitness. One is half-inclined to say
that with others, indeed, the attempt would be perilous, but that in this case
the result is the vindication of the method. After all, as a true critic has said,
"the final judgment of the world is intuitive and is based, not on proof that
a work possesses some of the qualities of another whose greatness is
acknowledged, but on the immediate feeling that it carries to a high point
of perfection certain qualities proper to itself." Before that primary feeling
criticism must yield as before a law of selection more vital than its own.

It would be a mistake, however, to ascribe to George Eliot’s
psychological method her habit of adding her own voice to enforce the
ethical truths that might be drawn from her tales. The habit sprang rather
from that reverence for the teachings of morality which was part and parcel
of her being. It sprang from that dominant ethical purpose which Mr.
Howells, we have seen, had noted as distinctive of her works. The novel
was to her, as Mr. James himself has said, “a moralised fable, the last word
of a philosophy endeavoring to teach by example.” And so it is that by her
didactic goal, she sometimes marred the artistic excellent of her works. I for
my part, am not one of those, who believe that fiction has no place within
the pulpit. I cannot sympathize with the criticism that denies the critic’s
right to dwell upon the larger meaning that lies hidden within the creation
of art, and commands him to rest contented with the immediate feeling of
pleasure or of pain. Conscious didacticism, it is true, defeats its own aims;
but those unconscious lessons that lurk beneath the words of genius are the
very air and blood that give vitality to the moral sense. Fiction may not,
indeed, enter within the pulpit clothed in the preacher’s raiment and
chanting the liturgy of creeds, but its business is to make pulpits of the
waysides and liturgies of the language of life. “The primary object of a
tragedy,” says Mr. Lowell, and his words are true of every form of fiction
as well, “the primary object of a tragedy is not to inculcate a formal moral.
Representing life, it teaches, like life, by indirection, by those nods and
winks that are thrown away on us blind horses in such profusion. . . . Praise
art as we will,” he continues, “that which the artists did not mean to put into
his work, but which found itself there by some generous process of nature,
of which he was as unaware as the blue river is of its rhyme with the blue
sky, has somewhat in it that snatches us into sympathy with higher things
than those which come by plot and observation.” I cannot believe that it is
a foolish or a worthless labor that criticism takes upon itself when it seeks
to give to these vague hints and intimations of clerical truths a form and
substance that will enforce them and drive them home upon our minds. The
clever essay by Miss Agnes Replier that satirizes this tendency of criticism

10 Henry James, “The Life of George Eliot” (review of John Walter Cross’s George
Eliot’s Life), in Partial Portraits (1899), 37, 50.
11 Lowell, supra note 9, at 88-90.
as it exists today, does scant justice to the benefits that flow from bringing into explicitness and prominence truths that otherwise would be lost, at least to the average mind.

I do not quarrel, therefore, with the ethical tone that marks the writings of George Eliot, or even with the efforts of her commentators to evolve from her works a philosophy of conduct. Her fault, it seems to me, was that at times her didacticism was too direct and conscious—that there was too much premeditation and too little spontaneity about it. Her Deronda has been characterized as a prig and a pedant and it is to be feared he was not a little of them both. The moralizing tendency grew upon her with years, and there is more of it in Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda than there is in Adam Bede or in the Scenes of Clerical Life. That spirit which in her early years led her so strenuously to condemn the reading and writing of fiction as pernicious and demoralizing and tending to withdraw our thoughts from God survived with her to the end in a dominant love and reverence for spiritual aims.

Much has been written about the philosophy and especially about the ethics of George Eliot; and yet I question whether either her philosophy or her ethics presents so consistent and definite a body of doctrine as seems to be commonly supposed. That, in general, she looked upon the life both of humankind and of the individual alike as an organic and corporate entity, that she recognized no immortality except an immortality of usefulness or of fame, that she taught and felt the duty of sympathy to her fellow men to be the first and last lesson of morality,—so much of her doctrine lies upon the very surface of her works, and it is questionable, to me at least, whether anything more definite than that she ever represented to herself.

Some warrant for this belief may be found in her own words. In a letter to Charles Bray whose Philosophy of Necessity seems to have been the inspiration of her own philosophical views, we find her writing: “The fact that in the scheme of things we see a constant and tremendous sacrifice of individuals is, it seems to me, only one of the many proofs that urge upon us our total inability to find in our own natures a key to the Divine mystery. . . . But I don’t feel at all wise in these matters. I have a few strong impressions which serve me for my own support and guidance, but do not in the least qualify me to speak as a theorist.” 12 These few strong impressions were deeply fixed in her mind, and they coloured all her writings and influenced all her thoughts. But I find in her work no attempt to coördinate or classify them—no attempt to reconcile their inconsistencies or even to explain their origin. The dominant note in her morality is the obligation of sympathy. Sympathy is the ever recurring term that seems to sum up to her mind the full measure of human duty—sympathy and love

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alike for those who are with us now and for those who are to follow and whose lives it is given us to shape. No effort is made to explain the grounds of obligation; the gap between the what and the why of morality, she makes, so far as I can find, no endeavor in any way to bridge. A simple direct appeal is made to the altruistic impulses of the race, and her system of morality stands or falls according as that appeal finds a responsive throb in “the great heart of mankind.”

Traces of the pantheism of Spinoza, of the materialism of Feuerbach, of the positivism of Comte may be detected in her works; but her philosophy was the philosophy neither of Spinoza, nor of Feuerbach, nor of Comte. To Comte, it is true, she bears the closest relation; and through her marriage with Mr. Lewes, she became more deeply than ever imbued with the principles of positivism. The truth that our thoughts and deeds live in their effects, and are thus in fact immortal, was, as I have tried to indicate, a doctrine that lay at the very basis of her being. This doctrine she carried to its uttermost conclusion; and the immortality of thought and deed—the only immortality she knew—became to her the stimulus and the sanction that mankind instinctively demand. Basing itself, as it did, upon the intuitive and primary sympathy of man for man, her philosophy resolutely denied the need for the existence of heaven as a condition precedent to the existence of morality. “I am just and honest,” she writes, “not because I expect to live in another world, but because having felt the pain of injustice and dishonesty toward myself, I have a fellow feeling with other men who would suffer the same pain if I were unjust or dishonest toward them. Why should I give my neighbor short weight in this world, because there is not another world in which I should have nothing to weigh out to him? . . . To us it is conceivable that in some minds the deep pathos lying in the thought of human mortality—that we are here for a little while and then vanish away, that this earthly life is all that is given to our loved ones and our many suffering fellow men—lies nearer the fountain of moral emotion than the conception of extended existence.”

All this is very noble and very beautiful and possibly very true, but no student of ethics needs to be reminded that much of it is very unphilosophical. A system that makes our inborn dislike of inflicting pain the motive for right conduct may do very well when preached to those in whom the dislike is already bred and who therefore have no need of the preaching, but it becomes painfully inefficient when preached to those whose instincts are in the opposite direction, though these are the only persons that have need of the preaching at all. The truth is that George Eliot was not a philosopher. She was simply a woman who had become impressed with some of the leading notions of modern scientific thought,

and who turned those notions to good service in her narratives of human life. Her books are precious to the moralist, not for any coherent and consistent doctrine they present, but simply from that high generous and exalted spirit which they themselves breathe and which they cannot fail to stimulate in others. A due recognition of this fact is, it seems to me, in no wise inconsistent with a recognition of George Eliot’s efficacy and power as one of the great moral teachers of these latter days. Her voice was always on the side of truth and of purity; and her ideal was at least the sound ideal though she could perhaps give no sufficient reason for pursuing [illegible insertion]. No one, I think, can finish the reading of her work without a conviction, unreasoned it may be, but still a conviction, of the truth of Romola’s words: “It is only a poor sort of happiness that could ever come by caring very much about our own narrow pleasures. We can only have the highest happiness, such as goes along with being a great man, by having wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of world as well as ourselves; and this sort of happiness often brings so much pain with it that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything else, because our souls see that it is good.”

To this habit of dwelling upon the ethical side of life may be traced, I think, the sympathy with which George Eliot entered into the lives and thoughts and emotions of plain and humble men—of men who had thought no great thoughts and felt no great passions and suffered no great wrongs. (She says of the poet Young: “He sees virtue sitting on a mount serene, far above the mists and storms of earth; he sees religion coming down from the skies, with this world in her left hand and the other in her right; but we never find him dwelling on virtue or religion as it really exists, in the emotions of man dressed in an ordinary coat, and seated by his fireside of an evening, with his hand resting on the head of his little daughter, in courageous effort for unselfish ends, in the internal triumph of justice and pity over personal resentment, in all the sublime self-renunciation and sweet charities which are found in the details of ordinary life.”) These were the themes on which she herself was never tired of dwelling:) and it is curious to note throughout her works the recurring traces of this love for the plain and dull and homely scenes of everyday humdrum existence. “The Reverend Amos Barton,” she writes, “whose sad fortunes I have undertaken to relate, was, you perceive, in no respect an ideal or exceptional character; and perhaps I am doing a bold thing to bespeak your sympathy on behalf of a man who was so very far from remarkable—a man whose virtues were not heroic, and who had no undetected crime within his breast; who had not the slightest mystery hanging about him, but was palpably and unmistakably commonplace; who was not even in love, but had had that complaint favourably many years

14. ESSAYS, supra note 13, at 242.
ago. ‘An utterly uninteresting character!’ I think I hear a lady reader exclaim.—Mrs. Farthingale, for example, who prefers the ideal in fiction, to whom tragedy means ermine tippets, adultery, and murder; and comedy, the adventures of some person who is quite a ‘character.’

But, my dear madam, it is so very large a majority of your fellow countrymen that are of this insignificant stamp. At least eighty out of a hundred of your adult male fellow Britons returned in the last census, are neither extraordinarily silly, nor extraordinarily wicked, nor extraordinarily wise. Their eyes are neither deep and liquid with sentiment nor sparkling with suppressed witticisms; they have probably had no hairbreadth escapes or thrilling adventures; their brains are certainly not pregnant with genius, and their passions have not manifested themselves at all after the fashion of a volcano. They are simply men of complexions more or less muddy, whose conversations are more or less bold and disjointed.) Yet these commonplace people—many of them—bear a conscience, and have felt the sublime prompting to do the painful right; they have their unspoken sorrows and their sacred joys; their hearts have perhaps gone out towards their first-born, and they have mourned over the irreclaimable dead. Nay, is there not a pathos in their very insignificance—in our comparison of their dim and narrow existence with the glorious possibilities of that human nature which they share. Depend upon it, you would gain unspeakably if you would learn with me to see some of the poetry and the pathos, the tragedy and the comedy, lying in the experience of a human soul that looks out through dull gray eyes, and that speaks in a voice of quite ordinary tones.¹⁵

It was of men and women of this stamp that George Eliot loved to treat, and she told their simple stories with a sweetness and a significance that were all her own. It has been truly said that few things in literature can surpass in pathos the picture of the death of Amos Barton’s wife. The plain man, “whose very faults were middling,” who was not even “very ungrammatical,” who was not “superlative in anything, unless indeed he was superlatively middling, the quintessential extract of mediocrity,” stands transfigured by his grief, and we recognize in him that common humanity which is the heritage that the humblest share with the greatest of their brothers. There are few of us that after a man’s death do not have some faint sense of that beauty and pathos in life which we may never have felt before. Homely lives, when they are ended, are all the more pathetic and beautiful for their homeliness, and plain men are to a measure sanctified and ennobled as they leave us. But the reverence that many of us reserve for the dead, George Eliot accorded to the living. “It is a sad weakness in us,” she writes, “that the thought of a man’s death hallows him anew to us; as if life were

¹⁵. GEORGE ELIOT, SCENES OF CLERICAL LIFE, in NOVELS OF GEORGE ELIOT 27 (1870).
not sacred too—as if it were comparatively a light thing to fail in love and reverence to the brother who has to climb the whole toilsome steep with us, and all our tears and tenderness were due to the one who is spared that hard journey.”¹⁶ There was a touch of cynicism sometimes in the development of this notion, which her rejection of the belief in immortality helped no doubt to foster. She says . . . of Capponi, the popular hero, in the story of Romola: “His fellow citizens gave him a great funeral two years later, when he had died in fight; there were torches carried by all the magistracy, and torches again, and trains of banners. But it is not known that he felt any joy in the oration that was delivered in his praise as the banners waved over his bier. Let us be glad that he got some thanks and praise while he lived.”

Closely allied, as it commonly is, to this sense of all that is pathetic in life, there was with George Eliot a no less vivid sense of all that is humorous. (There is, as it has often been observed, a pathos that merges with humor, and a humor that melts into pathos.) Poor Tulliver in the Mill on the Floss, with “his divinely lighted soul vexed by the powerful riddle of the world,”—there is a humor even in those pictures of him that one feels to be the saddest. And yet I think it was habitually the pathetic rather than the humorous side that was, in George Eliot’s writings, most sharply accentuated. Touches were in her power here on which it is almost painful, one feels, to dwell. It would be difficult to call up in a simple sentence more images than those aroused by the picture of the death of Tom and Maggie Tulliver, where brother and sister “live through again in one supreme moment the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together.”¹⁷

The secret of this emotional power is to be found in George Eliot’s generous love for humanity and her generous sympathy with all that concerned mankind. “The only effect,” she writes in a letter to Mr. Charles Bray, “the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring human creatures.” None felt more keenly than she the truth that Mr. Daniel Greenleaf Thompson has pointed out so well in his Philosophy of Fiction—the truth that the human interest is the supreme interest for man. Arnold’s profound dogma that literature should be in substance, a criticism of life, is, after all, but one phase of the world-wide truth that unless we relate our knowledge and our thoughts to the needs and the hopes of humanity, humanity will not prize the knowledge and will not ponder the thoughts.

This truth George Eliot had ever before her mind, and it won her success

¹⁶ Eliot, supra note 15, at 176.
where others might have failed, and makes her works precious beyond their merely formal excellence. An artist in one sense, to my mind she certainly was not. That perfect sureness of touch which marks the artist’s work, that unfailing precision in the choice of the fittest term, that balance and rhythm of sentence which belong to the highest masters in the use of words, were hers only at times—often, indeed, but still neither on all occasions nor in equal degrees. But instead of this there was a native strength, a sort of impassioned warmth that makes us feel that her sentences have been written off at white heat, with the fire of inspiration still burning in her veins. In one of her early letters she writes to her friend, Miss Lewis: “You must be acquainted with the idiosyncracy of my authorship, which is that my effusions once committed to paper are like the laws of the Medes and Persians, that alter not;” and this idiosyncracy of authorship abided with her, I fancy, to the last.

That in the works of an author whose literary method was of such a character, passages of comparative weakness and brilliancy should alternate was perhaps inevitable. The conception of some ideally perfect form to which the simplest thought is capable of being cast, and to which our first blundering and stammerings phrase may be the crudest approximation, is fundamental to the writer in whom the sense of style resides in all its keenness. “Whatever be the thing,” writes Flaubert in a passage quoted by Mr. Thompson, “Whatever be the thing one wishes to say, there is only one noun to express it, only one verb to give it life, only one adjective to qualify it. Search, then, till that noun, that very, that adjective be discovered.” The patience required for this laborious quest, or, it may have been, the inclination to pursue the quest at all, George Eliot seems never to have possessed, and it may be doubted whether the supremely perfect way of saying a thing can come to one consistently and uniformly by happy and sudden inspiration. And so it is that though we find in George Eliot’s works many passages where her thoughts are supremely well said, many sudden flashes of epigrammatic strength, still no one, I think, would call her average style the supremely classic style, though a strong and clear and racy style it unquestionably is. It shows to its best advantage in the chapters of dialogue in her works, for there perfect finish and balance are felt to be unnecessary and, indeed, unsuited. To appreciate the defect I have in mind, one has only to compare her essays in the Westminster Review with the essays of such writers as Mr. Lowell or Mr. Stevenson or Mr. James. There is vigor and clearness and lucidity of thought, but that perfect felicity of phrase, that high, serene assurance of manner and of touch, the style that, as Mr. Motley puts it, embalms for posterity—, I think, are lacking, as a permanent element at least.

18 DANIEL GREENLEAF THOMPSON, PHILOSOPHY OF FICTION 216 (1890).
No where do her vigor and clearness and lucidity of thought more notably display themselves than in her happy faculty of giving outward expression to the vague and impalpable emotions of man’s spiritual life. “The most powerful movement of feeling with a liturgy,” she writes, “is the prayer which seeks for nothing special, but is a yearning to escape from the limitations of our own weakness and an invocation of all good to enter and abide with us: or else a self-oblivious lifting up of gladness, a Gloria in excelsis that such good exists, both the yearning and the exultation gathering their utmost force from the sense of communion in a form which has expressed them both for long generations of struggling fellow men.”

The essence of the devotional spirit in man, the spirit that has reared altars and built churches, has, I have always felt, never been rendered into words more faithfully than here. One is constantly stumbling upon sentences in George Eliot’s works that make one forgetful of everything feeling but the feeling of reverent admiration; and the effect of her writings as a totality even more than the effect of single sentences is to impress upon one a conviction of the enduring power of her works. No writer more strikingly illustrates the futility of purely academic criticism. The objection has been raised to Daniel Deronda that it breaks into two distinct episodes; and the objection is, no doubt, well founded. It has been urged against the story of Romola that there is in it a surfeit of learning and reflection; and few, I think, will question the justice of the charge. But what a residue of beauty and of power is left when the last subtraction has been made! Because genius refuses to be forced within a mould, we must not deny to it the homage that is due. The greatness of men, as George Eliot herself has said, is not to be measured by their tendency to credit the superstitions of their age, and to this she might have added, by any fixed or formal test. Her own Savonarola heard the divine voice summoning him to his work of purification, and mistook the inward promptings of his own great soul for the call to duty and to battle from some supernal power. Bodin, a mastermind in the history of jurisprudence and political science, the first of medieval thinkers, as Sir Frederick Pollock has said, to recognize the true meaning of sovereignty of states, fiercely combatted the growing disbelief in witches, and advocated in his published treatises their continued persecution. “Men have lived,” as Mr. Woodberry put it, “to see Carlyle reverenced as a vitalizing power in literature, despite his mad rebellion against the proprieties.” There is a higher test for preachers than their credulity, a higher test for jurists than their superstitions, a higher test for the artists of literature than their adherence to precedent or to dogma or to rule. It is the test of that final intuitive judgment of the world which declares that men are not quickened and absorbed and inspired unless there be some

19. GEORGE ELIOT, DANIEL DERONDA 274 (1884).
vital power in him that can work such results.

One is ready to say of George Eliot as she herself has said in speaking of George Sand: “I don’t care whether I agree with her about marriage or not,—whether I think the design of her plot correct or that she had no precise design at all, but began to write as the spirit moved her, and trusted to Providence for the catastrophe, which I think the more probable case. It is sufficient for me as a reason for bowing before her in eternal gratitude to that ‘great power of God manifested in her’ that I cannot read six pages of her without feeling that it is given to her to delineate human passion and its results—and the moral instincts and their tendencies, with such truthfulness, such nicety of discrimination, such tragic power, and, withal, such loving gentle humor, that one might live a century with nothing but one’s own dull faculties, and not know so much as those six pages will reveal [inserted “suggest”].”

There is a deal of cant about the art of novel writing that, I cannot but think, it is of some importance to see dispelled. Men talk of the proper aim of fiction as being, not to instruct and to exalt, but to interest and amuse, as if intellectual interest and elevation were not itself a source, and perhaps the highest source, of amusement of and interest. From declaring that the novelist must not simply seek to instruct, they have almost reached the conclusion that he must not instruct at all. It should not be forgotten that the one theme that has never staled, the theme that has begotten [ ] and songs and essays and dramas and novels all alike, is the theme of the antagonism between right and wrong in human conduct; and if it be true, as an earnest thinker has said, that the element of conduct is three fourths of all that goes to make up life and civilization, it can surely be no error in the novelist to recognize the preponderance, and to make conduct, with all its varying phases, the burden and motif of his works. So long as his writings, to use George Eliot’s own distinction, remain not a diagram, but a picture, he need not heed fear the lessons they may incidentally convey. To have stimulated life aspirations, to have awakened profound reflections, is, it seems to me, an achievement neither unworthy of the artist nor in conflict with his art; and the credit that belongs to such achievement George Eliot, I think, may fairly claim. We ought all to admire and to honor her for her sincerity, for her earnestness, for her scorn of low ideals, for her love of a life in the spirit.


* And so we come back to the secret—the unfailing secret of George Eliot’s influence and power, not her style, not her formal teachings, not even, I believe, her power of analysis, but rather her wide and open and free humanity. The truth is we are sadly in need of a larger vision of the reach and the scope of what we call a man’s philosophy. There is a deal of cant about the art of novel writing that, I cannot but think, it is of some importance to see dispelled. We speak with a touch of derision [inserted “about”] the novel of philosophy, as if ever a life had been lived, but carried its own philosophy; [ ] though unheeded.
In the stress and hurry of our business life, I can fancy no more ennobling and inspiring image than she has held before us. All the petty animosities, all the mean struggles, all the shams and affectations and vanities of life, all these, with kindly sympathy, she ridiculed and scorned; but a concord of mind and body, a happy coordination of all the elements of our nature, a perfection that may be transmitted on to the coming generations, such are the ends—the all-absorbing ends—for which alone the wise man is to labor, to contend, and to achieve.

Not all her positivism of thought, not all the skepticism in whose atmosphere she lived, could rob her of her abiding faith in the elemental fact that there is a distinction between right and wrong, and that the right must be sought and the wrong must be avoided. That elemental fact, asserting itself in the consciousness of man, makes systems of philosophy illogical, and theories of conduct sublimely inconsistent. It perversely spoils the symmetry of scientific creeds and is obstinately repellant of doctrines with which it is sought to be united. It made Comte when he had finished his history, and passed from the theological and the metaphysical on to the positive era, build himself a fantastic Religion of Humanity, and fall down & worship before it any denizen of the age of theologians. It led George Eliot and Harriet Martineau and Frederick Harrison and the other adherents of that school to make the dignity of humanity a sort of divine symbol and the ultimate perfection of the race a sort of altruistic immortality.

And yet though it be true that her ideal was visionary and her faith in mankind was childlike, there is, in George Eliot’s writings, a residuum of quickening power that her adherence to specific dogmas cannot measure, and her rejection of great truths cannot impair. When others saw the dull and homely facts of this workaday world, she saw the latent pathos and poetry of life. On the one hand, the contemplation of the present trials and pleasures of the . . . artist; and it was the effort and the triumph of [] embrace and, in large degree, to reconcile [] was a world of meaning in Wordsworth’s prophecy of the [] union between the philosopher and the poet. Let a man [] speak truly of the lives of his fellows, and deal adequately with their daily thoughts and emotions, he will find himself a great novelist and a great teacher as well, for the logic of life is [] rigid as the logic of the syllogism, and men will listen to the warning of the one, when they will not heed the conclusions of the other.

* No writer more strikingly illustrates the futility of purely academic criticism.

21. The final page of the essay is torn, removing some of the words. There may also be a page missing before the final page begins with the word “artist.”