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'Just Proportions'

The Material of George Eliot's Writing

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Herbert Spencer, that uncompromisingly serious thinker, thought it best that novels should be excluded from the collections of the newly founded London Library—'except of course those of George Eliot'.[1] An early mentor of Eliot, he could see more clearly than most that her fiction was deeply rooted in the authoritative articles, essays, and translations that she had produced as a young woman, and he took it for granted that erudition was what distinguished her novels from the popular fiction of the period. Eliot saw things differently. In her seminal essay 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' (October 1856), she describes a more inclusive model for a cultured woman's mind: 'She does not give you information, which is the raw material of culture—she gives you sympathy, which is its subtlest essence.'[2] Eliot maintains that genuine learning leads to a self-effacing reluctance to parade knowledge for its own sake. This is what distinguishes 'a woman of true culture, whose mind had absorbed her knowledge instead of being absorbed by it. A really cultured woman, like a really cultured man, is all the simpler and less obtrusive for her knowledge; it has made her see herself and her opinions in something like just proportions; she does not make it a pedestal from which she flatters herself that she commands a complete view of men and things.'[3] At the age of thirty-seven, with years of discriminating study behind her, Eliot knows herself to be 'a woman of true culture'. But she is equally sure that her culture does not in itself guarantee a 'complete view' of the world. Learning is not a sufficient vehicle to carry the 'moral qualities' that make for the 'literary excellence' that she values, the kind of writing that is grounded in 'patient diligence, a sense of the responsibility involved in publication, and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer's art'.[4] Eliot's sense of a necessary balance between knowledge and sympathetic feeling is what forms her characteristic style, fusing as it does a solidly grounded self-confidence with an equally committed acknowledgement of the limits of the self.

Eliot had not published her first attempt at fiction when 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' appeared in *The Westminster Review*, but she was on the verge of doing so. Ten days after completing the essay, she began to write 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', a story which appeared anonymously in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in January 1857. In spite of her remark on the 'appreciation

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of the sacredness of the writer's art', her decision to try for success in fiction was in part a practical one. Like many writers of her generation, she saw that there was an increasingly lucrative market for domestic novels. She was not oblivious to the attractions of financial independence, a blessing that was not easily won by a single woman with no inherited wealth. The possibility of earning money seemed to her an entirely reasonable motive for writing, as she notes, half-seriously, in 'Silly Novels': 'We had imagined that destitute women turned novelists, as they turned governesses, because they had no other "lady-like" means of getting their bread.'[5] Eliot was not in danger of destitution, and she did not approach the craft of fiction in Trollope's briskly businesslike spirit. Nevertheless, the unconventional partnership she established with George Henry Lewes in 1854 gave her the freedom, and the need, to earn her own living, and to help support Lewes's family. 'There is', she observed, 'something so antiseptic in the mere healthy fact of working for one's bread.'[6] Lewes, an active presence on the London literary scene with an astute sense of Eliot's exceptional ability, was encouraging, and served as an intermediary between 'my clerical friend' (as he described the unnamed author of *Amos Barton*) and John Blackwood, editor of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.[7] Lewes's supportive presence in Eliot's life was the catalyst that enabled her to move from working as a journalist to a career in fiction. The potential rewards were high. Not only did novels offer the prospect of far greater financial return than was available through the periodicals, they also provided the means of reaching a large and varied readership, for the growing prosperity and leisure of the middle classes made them eager consumers of fiction. It was as a novelist that Eliot could disseminate what she thought mattered most in what she had learned, while securing personal prosperity and the respect of her fellow writers and thinkers. Success followed with surprising speed, but it did not come out of the blue. She was a beginner as a novelist, but she was already an accomplished author, and her arduous experiences as an essayist and reviewer formed her approach to the language of fiction. In her fiction, as in her critical prose, Eliot constructs a style in which the exercise of a powerful intelligence is in part directed towards an acknowledgement of the limits of what thinking can achieve.

Eliot's early writing was formed by the buoyant world of Victorian periodicals, whose energetic expansion was closely bound up with the growing popularity of fiction. Varied in subject, political affiliation, tone, and readership, the periodicals had become a dynamic and influential cultural force in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century. Their subscribers, men and women alike,[8] wanted to better themselves, without being baffled or bored. Those who wrote successfully for the periodicals needed to take readers into their confidence, conveying digestible parcels of information on a dizzying variety of philosophical, religious, scientific, political, or literary topics. They also needed to communicate, or to challenge, a range of conventional, fashionable, or factional opinions, for readers were looking for some measure of guidance as to what they should think. Contributors had to be as lively and witty as their capacities allowed, without risking the taint of frivolity, or impropriety. They had to be able to write quickly, fluently, and at length. The discipline was exacting. The task of the journals' editors, competing in

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a crowded marketplace, was hardly less formidable. They were constantly dealing with muddled copy, illegible copy delivered at the very last moment, grumpy or self-indulgent copy, copy that was likely to displease or offend—or, worse still, copy that readers would find tedious. The serial publication of fiction, a mainstay of many periodicals, brought its own problems. Could the characters and plot catch and sustain readers' attention? Public taste was fickle, and it was easy to misjudge what the response to a new story might be. Successful fiction could make the fortunes of a periodical, but an unpopular serial might be its undoing.

Eliot knew a good deal about these difficulties and demands, as both contributor and editor. In 1852, she took on the 'secret Editorship' (as she put it) of *The Westminster Review*, a progressive and consciously intellectual quarterly with formidable credentials as the leading reforming publication of its day.[9] Her work was unacknowledged, and she was paid only in the provision of board and lodging (her father had left her a small annuity, which enabled her to cope). The journal's ebullient owner, John Chapman, continued to act as the magazine's public face. This was an injustice, and it was a consequence of her anomalous position as an unknown young woman making her way in the masculine circles of literary London. Eliot was not credited for her labour. Nevertheless, the situation was not without its advantages, from her point of view. It gave her an invaluable opportunity to develop her professional skills, as both editor and writer, without the need to expose herself to the public rough and tumble of literary life. The work was onerous, and she was, she lamented, 'bothered to death with article-reading and scrap-work of all sorts'.[10] But her position gave her real influence, and it meant that she could begin to find her own voice. In the first phase of her work for the *Westminster*, her most useful experience took the form of commissioning and amending articles, and meeting leading figures of the day—including Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, John Stuart Mill, and T. H. Huxley. Little by little, she gained a place in London's bustling literary world. After her partnership with Lewes was established in 1854, she resigned her post as editor, and turned her attention to writing for the journal. Some of her most important pieces, including 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', were published in the *Westminster*. She was also writing copiously for other publications, especially the weekly *Leader*, a literary and political journal founded in 1850 by a group of progressive thinkers that included Lewes. She wrote occasionally for *Fraser's Magazine*, and even for the aggressively conservative *Saturday Review*.

Extending from 1851 until 1857, the central phase of Eliot's career as a journalist was not long-lasting. Most of her important essays date from 1854 to 1857, the years between her first alliance with Lewes and her turn to fiction. But this concentrated period equipped her with something more than a working apprenticeship. The periodicals created an essential framework for her understanding of a public identity, forming her sense of the necessary balance to be maintained between personal commitment and a wider cultural presence, and her persistent recognition of the limits of learning pursued without reference to the moral values that underlie all human experience. The daily pressures of journalism also prompted an acute awareness of the importance of satisfying the demands of readers who might wish to be

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taught, but also wanted to be entertained. As Fionnuala Dillane has remarked in her wide-ranging examination of George Eliot's work for the periodicals, it is a mistake to read Eliot's contributions 'for content only, for passages of criticism that anticipate the later novels, while discounting the broader contexts'.[11]

Eliot's earliest ventures into the world of journalism adopted a style that emphasized her intellectual credentials, masking her position as a young woman with the temerity to pass judgement on the work of established authors. Her first essay for the *Westminster* was a review of R. W. Mackay's *The Progress of the Intellect* (January 1851). Mackay, an eminent forty-eight-year-old philosopher and theologian who had been educated at a public school (Winchester) and Oxford (Brasenose College), represented exactly the kind of intellectual establishment that had no place for Eliot. She needed to assert her authority, and does so in the opening sentence of her review: 'There are many, and those not the least powerful thinkers and efficient workers amongst us, who are prone to underrate critical research into ancient modes of life and forms of thought, alleging that what it behoves us chiefly to ascertain is the truth which comes home to men's business and bosoms in these our days, and not by-gone speculations and beliefs which we can never fully comprehend, and with which we can only yet more imperfectly sympathize.'[12] This is defensively stiff, if not pompous, employing a heavily worked syntax and consciously lofty vocabulary that Eliot was to discard in her later work. Though this ostentatiously magisterial style did not satisfy her for long, the argument of the piece is one that she was to develop throughout both her critical and fictional prose. A full and informed comprehension of the past is the necessary starting point for a deeper understanding of the 'these our days'. Thinking through the manifold implications of this conviction called for the more flexible and direct style that emerged as her expertise as a journalist developed.

Eliot's essay on the eighteenth-century poet Edward Young (1683–1765), the last and in some ways the most revealing of her publications with the *Westminster*, shows how her critical technique had grown in sophistication. She begins with an explicit association between the literary, cultural, and religious analysis she is about to undertake and the working practices of the scientist. Making the flattering supposition that the reader is likely to appreciate the possibility of such a connection, she associates the 'natural history' of the scientist with her own humanistic scrutiny of the 'natural history' of the race. Here too Eliot focuses on an examination of the past: 'The study of men, as they have appeared in different ages, and under various social conditions, may be considered as the natural history of the race. Let us, then, for a moment imagine ourselves as students of this natural history, "dredging" the first half of the eighteenth century in search of specimens. About the year 1730, we have hauled up a remarkable individual of the species *divine*—a surprising name, considering the nature of the animal before us, but we are used to unsuitable names in natural history.'[13] In her first sentence, she frames her quasi-scientific argument, as she did with her earlier essay on *The Progress of the Intellect*, with a sweeping reference to the historical study of humanity. But the language is simpler, and the essay immediately veers into something close to comedy. Before Young is introduced, he is thoroughly cut down to size, as an 'animal' akin to a microscopic

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specimen that Eliot and Lewes might have dredged out of a pond, in one of their natural history expeditions. Having set his reputation in this witheringly reductive context, Eliot turns her attention to a minute and finally devastating account of Young's venal and self-seeking behaviour as both poet and clergyman. Before describing the undignified compromises of his life in relentless detail, she briefly includes the reader among the targets of her mockery. She is clearly writing on the basis of a body of detailed knowledge that the reader is unlikely to share, a position that is mutually if tacitly understood. Eliot makes this the basis of an extended joke: 'It would be extremely ill-bred in us to suppose that our readers are not acquainted with the facts of Young's life; they are amongst the things that "every one knows"; but we have observed that, with regard to these universally-known matters, the majority of readers like to be treated after the plan suggested my M. Jourdain. When that distinguished bourgeois was asked if he knew Latin, he replied, "Oui, mais faites comme si je ne le savais pas [Yes, but go on as if I didn't know it]".'[14] Eliot is well aware that most of her readers would know little if anything about Young's life, and that they were very likely to share Jourdain's ignorance of Latin. Many would have been equally ignorant of French. Her knowing manoeuvre is disarming, while it establishes a position of genial dominance.

Eliot is in control of the information she is dispensing. She also takes control of the way in which it should be interpreted, and she makes her verdict unmistakably evident. It would be pointless, she argues, to try to identify the originals of the artificial characters of Young's celebrated *Night-Thoughts* (1742–5). 'His muse never stood face to face with a genuine, living human being; she would have been as much startled by such an encounter as a necromancer whose incantations and blue fire had actually conjured up a demon.'[15] Young's characters are empty of meaning because they have no connection with the real world, and are nothing more than expressions of abstract convention. Her scorn for Young's inflated poetic language rests on comparable grounds. His customary diction and images bear no relation to the realities of lived experience:

> No writer whose rhetoric was checked by the slightest truthful intentions, could have said,—
>
> An eye of awe and wonder let me roll,
> And roll for ever.
>
> Abstracting the mere poetical associations with the eye, this is hardly less absurd than if he had wished to stand for ever with his mouth open.[16]

Here too, humour supports reason in Eliot's demolition of Young's claims to greatness. The picture of Young standing with his mouth open is as comic as the image of the astonished necromancer confronted with a real demon. Yet her point is a serious one. Eliot's judgement is defined by her own maturing aesthetic and moral principles, grounded in her commitment to the principles of sympathy and realism that had emerged from her sustained study of history, philosophy, and science. She spells out the case against Young in her emphatic conclusion, pointing to his deficiencies when compared to what she judged to be the more authentic and

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deeply felt work of William Cowper: 'In Young we have the type of that deficient human sympathy, that impiety towards the present and the visible, which flies for its motives, its sanctities, and its religion, to the remote, the vague and the unknown: in Cowper we have the type of that genuine love which cherishes things in proportion to their nearness, and feels its reverence grow in proportion to the intimacy of its knowledge.'[17]

The inadequacies of Edward Young's life, intellect, and poetry are, in Eliot's analysis, intimately connected. They reflect his settled habits of self-interested evasion, which undermine every aspect of his work. This had not always been her opinion. When Eliot was a bookish young woman, and a zealously Evangelical Christian, Young had been among her favourite poets. Her early admiration is only once recalled in her essay for the *Westminster*. A 'vague, but beautiful' passage is quoted—'its music has murmured in our minds for many years'.[18] She allows him 'an occasional flash of genius, a touch of simple grandeur'.[19] In general, however, her contempt is inexorable. Perhaps it was all the more vehement for a feeling that she was not, after all, wholly immune to the flaws she saw and condemned in his life and work. Like many moralists, Eliot was often at her most uncompromisingly severe when she condemned the flaws that she feared in her own nature. She was quite as aware as Young had been of the advantages of a secure and satisfactory income. Still more insidiously, she wanted to be admired, and she was acutely conscious of the moral risks that might accompany the drive for success that dominated her life. As a conscience-haunted girl, she had written to her aunt: 'I feel that my besetting sin is the one of all others most destroying, as it is the fruitful parent of them all, Ambition, a desire insatiable for the esteem of my fellow creatures.'[20] For all her determination to make her mark on the world, she had not quite forgotten that early worry. Her excoriating assault on Young is in part an attempt to mark a complete division between the naïve enthusiasms and anxieties of her girlhood, and her adult understanding. These doubled motivations, both self-directed and a consequence of an attempt to banish the self, mean that the essay maintains a critical energy that is more complex than that of high-spirited invective.

This is still more true of 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming', the *Westminster Review* essay, published in October 1855, which marks Eliot's conclusive rejection of the Evangelicalism of her youth. There is no reason to suppose that the hapless Dr John Cumming, who was the highly regarded minister of the Scottish National Church in London's Covent Garden, was any more dim-witted or hypocritical than most Evangelical clergymen of his generation. He had founded ragged schools in Scotland, and worked hard for the poor of his parish. Unfortunately for his reputation, Eliot singles him out as an eloquent representative of the narrow intolerance that she had come to see as characteristic of the complacencies of Evangelicalism at its worst.

Cumming is seen to possess no shred of intellectual or spiritual value in Eliot's ruthless dissection. She claims that the work of an Evangelical preacher makes it 'possible to reconcile small ability with great ambition, superficial knowledge with the prestige of erudition, a middling morale with a high reputation for sanctity'.[21]

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Cumming is just such a preacher. His sermons are protected from public failure, for his standing as the sanctioned mouthpiece of God's word means that he can 'riot in gratuitous assertions, confident that no man will contradict him; he may exercise perfect free-will in logic, and invent illustrative experience; he may give an evangelical edition of history with the inconvenient facts omitted:—all this he may do with impunity, certain that those of his hearers who are not sympathizing are not listening'.[22] The effect of these relentlessly accumulated clauses is demeaning enough. Still more cutting is Eliot's account of Cumming's lack of charity, the central Christian virtue. Cumming directs vituperative hatred towards those of his fellow Christians who are not of the Evangelical persuasion, and this animosity outweighs his mechanical professions of love. This, in Eliot's eyes, is his essential failure, as man and minister. 'Dr Cumming's religion may demand a tribute of love, but it gives a charter to hatred; it may enjoin charity, but it fosters all uncharitableness. If I believe that God tells me to love my enemies, but at the same time hates His own enemies and requires me to have one will with Him, which has the larger scope, love or hatred? And we refer to those pages of Dr Cumming's in which he opposes Roman Catholics, Puseyites, and infidels—pages which form the larger part of what he has published—for proof that the idea of God which both the logic and spirit of his discourses keep present to his hearers, is that of a God who hates his enemies, a God who teaches love by fierce denunciations of wrath.'[23] Eliot's attack is all the more powerful for its solemnly rhythmical language, which borrows some of its power from the rhetoric of the Evangelical sermons she disdains. Moral energy, as she has come to identify it, is expressed in a capacity for imaginative sympathy that is wholly absent from Dr Cumming's mind, made up as it is of 'egoistic passions and dogmatic beliefs'.[24] He is incapable of allowing any motive other than desire for the 'glory of God' for the practical exercise of goodness, claiming that 'the sweet charities of domestic life—the ready hand and the soothing word in sickness, the forbearance towards frailties, the prompt helpfulness in all efforts and sympathy in all joys are simply evil if they result from a "constitutional tendency", or from dispositions disciplined by the experience of suffering and the perception of moral loveliness'.[25]

Here, the relation between Eliot's emerging approach to fiction and her repudiation of her own early beliefs is explicit. Cumming, like Young, becomes a particular focus for attack because he seems to embody the cloudy fervours of her girlhood. The essay ends by offering a positive alternative, just as Cowper's sincere humanity offers an alternative to Young's vapidities. Scrupulously avoiding a profession of faith, Eliot speaks of the helpfulness of a more humanistic concept of divinity. It is the idea of God, rather than God himself, that represents the reality of salvation:

> The idea of God is really moral in its influence—it really cherishes all that is best and loveliest in man—only when God is contemplated as sympathizing with the pure elements of human feeling, as possessing infinitely all those attributes which we recognize to be moral in humanity. In this light, the idea of God and the sense of His presence intensify all noble feeling, and encourage all noble effort, on the same principle that human sympathy is found a source of strength: the brave man feels braver when he knows that another stout heart is beating time with his; the devoted woman who is wearing out

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her years in patient effort to alleviate suffering or save vice from the last stages of degradation, finds aid in the pressure of a friendly hand which tells her that there is one who understands her deeds, and in her place would do the like.[26]

This has the tone of a secular sermon. Beginning with reference to abstract concepts (morality, influence, purity, feeling), it moves into suggestions of narrative specificity that Eliot's fiction will translate into character and plot. Here too an assumption of intellectual authority, as Eliot confidently dissects the influence of the 'idea of God', allows for the more emotive language of human connection, in the reference to the stout heart that keeps a common rhythm with the heartbeat of the 'brave man', or the 'pressure of a friendly hand' offering sympathetic companionship to the 'devoted woman'. The diction is formal rather than intimate, but the vocabulary is not obscure. The terms of Eliot's argument would have been accessible to any averagely well-informed reader. The essay on Cumming clarifies her motives in choosing clergymen as the central characters in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), of which 'The Sad Fortunes of Amos Barton' formed the first part. Perhaps her conscience pricked her a little with regard to her merciless attack on the Evangelical faith which had formed and inspired so much of her early life, for of the three clergymen who are the central characters in the series, the self-sacrificing Edgar Tryan is seen to be the most heroic, and the most effective. He is an Evangelical preacher.

For all the rigorous logic and learning that defined Eliot's position as a thinker, her writing consistently reflects the contradictions and tensions that had formed her development. She neither thinks nor writes with a single mind, and as her work develops she creates a literary language that is capable of acknowledging both the need for precision and the limits of the precise. The 'vagueness' that seems to her to enfeeble Young's religious poetry is always a target for censure, and she repeatedly applauds the merits of particularity in language. Nevertheless, she concedes, in both theoretical and fictional terms, the continuing need to accept some measure of vagueness, for the 'idea of God' cannot be exactly defined. David Wright makes the point in his searching analysis of the terms of Eliot's moral discourse: 'The vagueness of language, for Eliot, cannot be pushed aside and must not be merely repressed. We must visit the vagueness, inhabit its blurred forms, and use its difficulty as an ethical exercise, with the hope that we might return, in the end, to clarity, although perhaps clarity of a different kind than we initially imagined: a clarity that is ordinary rather than ideal.'[27] Some important elements of the difficulties presented by vagueness are rooted in the historical development of language, for language, like all forms of life, has been subject to evolutionary change. Discussing the work of Wilhelm von Riehl in 'The Natural History of German Life' (July 1856), Eliot speaks of the unbreakable bond between history and the growth of the language in which history is remembered and recorded. Her metaphor is drawn from the neurological science that she had encountered through the researches of Lewes: 'The sensory and motor nerves that run in the same sheath, are scarcely bound together by a more necessary and delicate union than that which binds men's affection, imagination, wit and humour, with the subtle ramifications of historical language. Language must be

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left to grow in clearness, completeness and unity, as minds grow in clearness, comprehensiveness and sympathy.'[28]

The association between the development of language and the evolution of human history is one of the reasons for her inclination to write about historical change. This is not simply a scholarly project. In the opening paragraphs of 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', Eliot explicitly denies any claim to a superior intellectual authority. 'Mine, I fear, is not a well-regulated mind. It has an occasional tenderness for old abuses.'[29] This is disingenuous, for Eliot's mind was exceptionally well-regulated, as she knew very well. But her open and personal appeal to readers who would share her nostalgic taste for the remembered eccentricities of her girlhood experiences makes it characteristic of her early style, in which the impulses of thinking and feeling are inseparable. The parish affairs of Shepperton, where Amos Barton once served as impoverished curate, are now conducted on reformed principles, Eliot tells her readers, but she describes in affectionate detail the picturesque details of a less orderly age. Her emphasis on a vividly realized connection with the past is characteristic of her approach: 'I recall with a fond sadness Shepperton Church as it was in the old days, with its outer coat of rough stucco, its red-tiled roof, its heterogeneous windows patched with desultory bits of painted glass, and its little flight of steps with their wooden rail running up the outer wall, and leading to the school-children's gallery.'[30]

The remembered histories of individuals, families, communities, and nations are woven into common textures of mutually shared moral growth. 'If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie?' as Maggie Tulliver cries at the pivotal moment of moral choice in her own painful history.[31] Maggie and her brother Tom are seen to achieve a final clarity in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), but it is evoked in language that draws back from precision, implying a level of communication beyond the expressive power of words:

> It was not till Tom had pushed off and they were on the wide water,—he face to face with Maggie,—that the full meaning of what had happened rushed upon his mind. It came with so overpowering a force,—it was such a new revelation to his spirit, of the depths in life that had lain beyond his vision, which he had fancied so keen and clear,—that he was unable to ask a question. They sat mutely gazing at each other,—Maggie with eyes of intense life looking out from a weary, beaten face; Tom pale, with a certain awe and humiliation. Thought was busy though the lips were silent; and though he could ask no question, he guessed a story of almost miraculous, divinely protected effort.[32]

The power of the moment described here transcends what the language of particularity, or indeed any other kind of language, is able to achieve. Maggie and Tom are mute. The expanding 'clearness' and 'unity' that Eliot advocates must always be in process, and never complete. Language reaches for exactitude, but the human limitations that define its development mean that it must continually fall short. As Wright concludes, Eliot tries to show us 'what we might gain by sinking into and possibly emerging out of vagueness, and what stands to be lost by sharpness'.[33]

This is not necessarily a constraint that Eliot regrets, and at moments of intensity in her fiction she will often choose a shared language of experience which,

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without taking reference in the general, distances itself from the specific. In 'Janet's Repentance', the story in which Evangelical piety is allowed to show its human face, the colourful particularities of life in the provincial town of Milby are vividly evoked. There is a companionable expectation that the worldly reader will be amused by its old-fashioned eccentricities. 'There was Miss Phipps, with a crimson bonnet, very much tilted up behind, and a cockade of stiff feathers on the summit.'[34] However, the brutal treatment that Janet Dempster receives at the hands of her husband, and her consequent drinking, are not laughing matters. John Blackwood was so alarmed by the frank treatment of domestic violence and alcoholism in 'Janet's Repentance' that Eliot offered to withdraw the story. Janet's bitter suffering, and the redemption brought about by the power of the Evangelical minister Edgar Tryan's sympathy, are evoked with a solemnity which is far removed from the mild comedy of the story's opening pages. The final words of the story describe Janet's patient life after Tryan's death in the familiar language of hymns, sermons, and religious tracts. 'Janet Dempster, rescued from self-despair, strengthened with divine hopes, and now looking back on years of purity and helpful labour. The man who has left such a memorial behind him, must have been one whose heart beat with true compassion, and whose lips were moved by fervent faith.'[35] 'Self-despair', 'divine', 'purity', 'labour', 'faith'—in this conclusion, as in the closing words of her essay on Young, Eliot affirms her position in the traditionally sanctioned language that her Christian readers would recognize and revere. In that essay, she had argued that 'Emotion links itself with particulars, and only in a faint and secondary way with abstraction.'[36] The historical context of Janet's provincial life is realized in engagingly specific terms, but Eliot is content that the final interpretation of its meaning should be communicated in a familiar language of abstraction.

Eliot's thinking about the fluid relations between clarity and vagueness engages with broader contemporary debates about the nature of realism in art. The controversial experiments of the pioneering photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, whose prints often dissolve into a deliberately hazy focus, provides a telling example. When critics objected to a lack of precision in her photographs, Cameron responded with an assertion of artistic autonomy that is echoed in Eliot's equally distinctive work: 'What is focus and who has the right to say what focus is the legitimate focus?'[37] Like Cameron, Eliot wanted to create an art that would succeed by 'combining the real & Ideal & sacrificing nothing of truth'.[38] Eliot claims the right to move her writing in and out of a sharp focus, according to the shifting requirements of her arguments. Style may function as a feature of language, but it may also, more radically, express a dynamic process of thought, or of identity itself. Eliot's approach to style, in both linguistic and social matters, is not fixed. To be possessed of an identifiable style of any kind might be seen, in her conceptual framework of sympathy and duty, as an assertion of self, and for that reason mildly suspect. Yet no individual can live wholly without style, just as no approach to literary language can function without adopting a characteristic style, no matter how strenuous its claims to analytical detachment.

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The opening lines of *Middlemarch* (1871–2) affirm Dorothea's value by emphasizing that her beauty owes nothing to the transience of style in the sense of fashionable self-presentation:

> Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible,—or from one of our elder poets,—in a paragraph of to-day's newspaper. She was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with the addition that her sister Celia had more common-sense. Nevertheless, Celia wore scarcely more trimmings; and it was only to close observers that her dress differed from her sister's, and had a shade of coquetry in its arrangements; for Miss Brooke's plain dressing was due to mixed conditions, in most of which her sister shared.[39]

Dorothea's idiosyncratic independence from contemporary style reflects her character, suggesting a timeless allegiance to more enduring values than those of 'provincial fashion'. Her beauty evokes the historically weighted sacredness of the Blessed Virgin or a biblical quotation, or the loftiness of an 'elder poet'. The paradox here is that the dignified image evoked by Eliot's description, which could have served as a description of one of Cameron's many photographic representations of the Madonna, is far more stylish than the tawdry transience of 'today's newspaper'.

Those who are immune to the appeal of changing fashions might find it easier to achieve the unconscious development of an effective style of their own. As Kent Puckett notes, 'style's absence always turns out to be just another style'.[40] Yet Eliot immediately goes on to suggest that Dorothea's style is not entirely an expression of her singular nature, whatever grace she might seem to gain from her 'plain garments'. Celia shares in Dorothea's austere style of dressing, with barely discernible differences, for both sisters are subject to the 'mixed conditions' that have defined their experiences and personalities. Individuals, no matter how determined, or in Dorothea's case occasionally obstinate, cannot entirely remove themselves from the destinies imposed on them by the social circumstances and random chances of their lives. Thinking of Maggie's unhappy fate in *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot reminds her readers that 'the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. ' "Character," says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms,—"character is destiny." But not the whole of our destiny.'[41] In this sense, Eliot's fiction necessarily develops a style that differs from that of her non-fictional prose, for the complex evolution of 'character', the product of influences that are not always to be contained within individual processes of thought, can only be expressed in the language of narrative, which must always be to some extent dramatic. The business of fiction is to tell stories, and stories are shaped by events (ill-judged marriages, births, deaths, unexpected encounters in the Vatican) rather than logical trains of thought. 'There's an oddity in things, now', as the incoherent Mr Brooke remarks at the beginning of the novel's second chapter, in one of his few moments of sense.

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Brooke's comically vague ramblings bear no resemblance to his creator's incisive analyses, but his generosity means that he has a positive part to play in the novel's complex moral drama. The fact that his style falls far short of any conceivable ideal of clarity or intellectual discipline does not imply that he is without value.

'Mixed conditions' have shaped the flexible literary language that Eliot has developed at this point in her career. It retains much of the formal and authoritative manner that characterized her journalism. Less overtly educational than her essays and reviews, it still rests on the assumption of a broad base of information and ageless understanding to which readers are allowed access. In this sense it is a deliberately plain style, like Dorothea's unadorned style of dress, a language that chooses to remove itself from any association with the trivial vagaries of passing fashion. Dorothea is understood to be worth more than the elegant Rosamond Vincy, because her mind is absorbed by more serious matters than the fashionable clothes that Rosamond wears so fetchingly. Rosamond's 'pale-blue dress' is of a 'fit and fashion so perfect that no dressmaker could look at it without emotion', and her 'large embroidered collar' is displayed in the hope that 'all beholders would know the price'.[42] This is not a neutral description. The touches of narrative direction are light, but Eliot wants us to understand that Rosamond's influence serves to degrade emotion, and that she is overly concerned with display, and the money that buys display. Rosamond's style is not simply a matter of her skilfully chosen clothes, for its moral implications are also expressed in her physical form. Eliot describes Rosamond as having a 'fair long neck', always 'turning about' in a sinuously snake-like fashion.[43] The alert reader will understand this as an oblique indication of her destructive nature as a beautiful serpent. Style, in George Eliot's fiction, is a product of both a repudiation of style, and an ever-present alertness to its meaning in the complex social world of *Middlemarch*. Kent Puckett puts the point succinctly: 'We find in Eliot a narrator whose voice emerges from a certain tension between the social and the formal: on the one hand, that voice's moral authority keeps it clear of a merely social correctness; on the other, that voice *needs* merely social correctness in order negatively to produce its authority as timelessly and truly right.'[44]

Dorothea's principled seriousness invites the reader's approval, while we are warned about Rosamond's predatory shallowness. But the dignified Dorothea doesn't have it all her own way. Celia, who is much more interested in the requirements of social correctness than her sister, often shows a better understanding of her own emotions than Dorothea. When the sisters divide their mother's jewels, Dorothea's self-deceiving efforts to persuade herself that her delight in their beauty is spiritual invites the reader's amusement. Humour continues to be an important feature of Eliot's style, and it is still based on a recognition, quietly shared with the reader, of the absurdity of most human attempts to think more highly of ourselves:

> 'It is strange how deeply colors seem to penetrate one, like scent. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St. John. They look like fragments of heaven. I think that emerald is more beautiful than any of them.'
>
> 'And there is a bracelet to match it,' said Celia. 'We did not notice this at first.'

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> 'They are lovely,' said Dorothea, slipping the ring and bracelet on her finely turned finger and wrist, and holding them towards the window on a level with her eyes. All the while her thought was trying to justify her delight in the colors by merging them in her mystic religious joy.[45]

The 'knowing and worldly-wise'[46] Celia is much more realistic. ' "I am sure—at least, I trust," thought Celia, "that the wearing of a necklace will not interfere with my prayers. And I do not see that I should be bound by Dorothea's opinions now we are going into society, though of course she herself ought to be bound by them. But Dorothea is not always consistent." '[47]

Celia is right about Dorothea's inconsistency, and about much else. Her immediate response to Casaubon, before Dorothea forms her disastrous attachment to what she believes the desiccated scholar to represent, focuses on his physical shortcomings—his sallowness, and 'those two white moles with hairs on them'.[48] Celia's response is certainly not sympathetic, and Dorothea is outraged. But again, Celia's instincts are seen to be correct. Her understanding of the claims of the body is not precisely articulated, but it is sharper than Dorothea's foggy sense of what Casaubon has to offer a young woman in marriage. 'The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it.'[49] This, too, is intended to strike the reader as at least partly comic. Dorothea's grasp of the real is evidently far from secure. But the comedy here is deepened with compassion. Dorothea's high-minded oblivion to her own interests is funny, but it is also distressing. Placing Casaubon's culture, rather than her own, on a pedestal, she has not understood the limitations of the view he commands.

Style, as Eliot came to conceive it in her fiction, binds language and thought into a broader understanding of the 'responsibility involved in publication'. It reflects the necessary balance between a commitment to the unchanging moral values that matter most in our individual identities, and a generous openness to the lives and needs of others. A disciplined study of history, art, literature, and science can extend the range of our experience beyond our own immediate concerns, or those of our families and communities. This conviction informs Eliot's non-fiction, but it also becomes the basis of her approach to the composition of fiction. The intellectual enlargement that knowledge brings is futile without an acknowledgement of the networks of human connection that both constrain and nourish our lives, as the sterility of Casaubon's self-enclosed scholarship shows. Casaubon's failure is pathetic rather than tragic, as the inevitable reflection of a narrow mean-mindedness that turns to spite.

The destruction of Tertius Lydgate, brought low by his fatal underestimation of Rosamond's cold venom, is the central tragedy of the novel. Lydgate is reduced to Rosamond's tool by his inability to identify what is 'common', or 'vulgar', in his own social prejudices—'spots of commonness', which 'in spite of noble intention and sympathy, were half of them such as are found in ordinary men of the world: that distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour, did not penetrate his feeling and judgment about furniture, or women, or the desirability of its being known (without his telling) that he was better born than other country

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surgeons. He did not mean to think of furniture at present; but whenever he did so it was to be feared that neither biology nor schemes of reform would lift him above the vulgarity of feeling that there would be an incompatibility in his furniture not being of the best.'[50] Satire is qualified by a deepening seriousness of tone as Eliot describes the young doctor's fall. Lydgate becomes nothing more than an ordinary physician, attending the rich in order to maintain Rosamond and their children. His potential remains unfulfilled, because he does not understand how much of his thought remains ordinary, held in common with those he feels entitled to despise. Like Casaubon, though with more pitiful consequences, he had come to believe that the exceptional distinction of his mind has set him apart from his fellow human beings.

Eliot earned a reputation as 'the most learned woman the world has ever seen';[51] largely because she saw no reason not to enrich her fiction with an extraordinary range of cultural reference, built on years of ambitious reading. Scholarship and science underpin her writing, and she pays her readers the compliment of assuming that they will value the opportunity to benefit from what she has learned. Yet the central purpose of her fiction is not to convey knowledge. Her journalism, produced within the constraints of a more directly pedagogic genre, had communicated a body of learning while cautioning readers about the necessary limits of learning; her fiction expresses these convictions within a more freely imagined context of feeling. Despite her repudiation of her evangelical girlhood, where Young's grandiosity had seemed to her a pinnacle of poetic achievement, she did not entirely abandon her early sense of 'the sacredness of the writer's art'. Finally, the function of the increasingly confident and flexible style that links her work as journalist with her later development as a novelist is not to persuade readers to defer to her wisdom and learning, but to teach them to recognize the claims of a common humanity.

NOTES

1. The anecdote comes from Edmund Gosse, who served with Herbert Spencer on the Committee of the London Library in 1883. See Evan Charteris, *The Life and Letters of Sir Edmund Gosse* (London: Heinemann, 1931), 497–8.
2. George Eliot, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 317 (hereafter *Essays*).
3. *Essays*, 317.
4. *Essays*, 323.
5. *Essays*, 303.
6. *Essays*, 323.
7. Letter from George Henry Lewes to John Blackwood, 15 November 1856, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–74), ii. 273 (hereafter *Letters*).
8. The influential role that periodicals played in the expansion of women's authorship and reading is comprehensively mapped in *Gender and the Victorian Periodical*, by Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
9. *Letters*, viii. 23.
10. *Letters*, ii. 88.

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11. Fionnuala Dillane, *Before George Eliot: Marian Evans and the Periodical Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9.
12. *Essays*, 27.
13. *Essays*, 336.
14. *Essays*, 338.
15. *Essays*, 348.
16. *Essays*, 368.
17. *Essays*, 385.
18. *Essays*, 369.
19. *Essays*, 360.
20. *Letters*, i. 19. Quoted in Rosemarie Bodenheimer, 'Ambition and its Audiences: George Eliot's Performing Figures', *Victorian Studies* 34.1 (1990), 7–34; 8.
21. *Essays*, 160.
22. *Essays*, 161.
23. *Essays*, 180.
24. *Essays*, 186.
25. *Essays*, 186.
26. *Essays*, 188.
27. David Wright, 'George Eliot's Vagueness', *Victorian Studies* (Summer 2014), 625–49.
28. *Essays*, 288.
29. George Eliot, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. Thomas A. Noble and Josie Billington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3–4.
30. *Scenes of Clerical Life*, 4.
31. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight and Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 475.
32. *The Mill on the Floss*, 520.
33. Wright, 'George Eliot's Vagueness', 646.
34. George Eliot, 'Janet's Repentance', in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, 190.
35. *Scenes of Clerical Life*, 332.
36. *Essays*, 371.
37. Julia Margaret Cameron, letter to John Herschel, 31. December 1864, Heinz Archive and Library, National Portrait Gallery, London.
38. *Ibid*.
39. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 7.
40. Kent Puckett, 'Looking Good: Style and its Absence in George Eliot', in *Bad Form: Social Mistakes and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 88.
41. *The Mill on the Floss*, 401.
42. *Middlemarch*, 406.
43. *Middlemarch*, 282.
44. Puckett, 'Looking Good', 84.
45. *Middlemarch*, 13.
46. *Middlemarch*, 9.
47. *Middlemarch*, 14.
48. *Middlemarch*, 19.
49. *Middlemarch*, 10.
50. *Middlemarch*, 141.
51. Charles Gardner, *The Inner Life of George Eliot* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1912), 221.

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