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THE TWO FELIXES: NARRATORIAL IRONY AND THE QUESTION OF RADICALISM IN *FELIX HOLT* AND 'ADDRESS TO WORKING MEN, BY FELIX HOLT'

By Helen Kingstone

All people, young or old (that is, all people in those ante-reform times), would have thought her an interesting object [...]. But perhaps no persons then living – certainly none in the neighbourhood of Tipton – would have had a sympathetic understanding for the dreams of a girl whose notions about marriage took their colour entirely from an exalted enthusiasm about the ends of life, an enthusiasm which was lit chiefly by its own fire.¹

In this characterization of Dorothea by the narrator of *Middlemarch* (1871-2), the 'Great Reform Act of 1832 is posited as a dividing line between two phases of history, so distinct as to have separate spheres of interest and judgements of normality. George Eliot flatters her mid-Victorian reader by insinuating that only the 'modern' mind of their shared present could understand the zeal of a humanistic 'exalted enthusiasm' that took its source of energy from within. In this passage, therefore, 'reform' seems to be the key to historical, social and personal change. The issue of reform – of society, of institution and of self – looms equally large in *Felix Holt* (1866), where it is channelled through a double consciousness. Although *Felix Holt* describes and discusses the issues attendant on the Reform Act of 1832, Eliot is conscious of evoking in its readers echoes of its later counterpart, what would become the 1867 Reform Act, which was being debated in Parliament while *Felix Holt* was written and published. The worlds of the novel and of the initial readership are, therefore, bracketed and deeply embedded in a culture of reform.

I argue that Eliot's stance on reform in *Felix Holt*, so often equated with Matthew Arnold's, has been oversimplified due to a questionable elision of the author with her eponymous hero, and of two distinct embodiments of 'Felix Holt' in two different publications. In part because of the profusion of apparently authoritative pearls of wisdom scattered through her texts, it is all too easy to elide 'George Eliot', himself an authorial construct, with the sentiments expressed in his/her novels. I argue that Eliot's extensive use of free indirect discourse, irony, and the double time-frame, makes this a futile and limiting task. In these multiple contexts, *Felix Holt* and its paratext 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt' (1867), which have often been dismissed as narrowly conservative, emerge as notably dynamic and polyphonic texts.

By the time that Reform Acts were passed in 1884, 1918 and 1928, the idea of repeated, continuous reform was widely accepted. The Reform Act of 1832, by contrast, was conceived and perceived as a unique historical event, an overhaul of the hallowed British constitution that would never need to be repeated. Its widespread nomenclature as 'The *Great* Reform Act' makes it a pivot from the past to modernity, rather than a single part of a gradual transformation. In forming his anti-reform argument in the 1860s, Robert Lowe MP pleaded for the invincibility of the 'Great' Reform Act, declaring that 'the 10*l.* franchise, if not the most venerable, is at any rate one of the most respectable institutions that any country ever possessed', and that 'to lower 10*l.* to 7*l.*, or 8*l.*, or 6*l.* seems to me a declaration that any limit is of a temporary nature, and must speedily be swept away'.² Thus, the controversial thing about 1867 was that it seemed to suggest that the singular, never-to-be-repeated event of 1832

was merely the harbinger of a tide of change that would transform the face of Britain unrecognizably.

The text often viewed as epitomizing the concerns of the 1860s over the apparently inexorable nature of reform is Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, compiled from essays published in the *Cornhill* magazine in 1867 and 1868. The similarities between Arnold's writings and Eliot's have been long noted.³ The preoccupation they both manifest with a reform of internal personal morality as well as external national institutions was, however, a commonplace of mid-Victorian intellectual culture. An anonymous article in *The Scottish Review* of July 1862 about the radical millenarian preacher Edward Irving suggested that 'while in 1820, men were beginning to tire of the evils of society and of the Church, and to seek for remedies; now, in 1862, they are beginning to tire of the proposed remedies too.'⁴ This comment suggests a society weary of the reform imperative and eager for an alternative solution. These sentiments are developed into totemic principles in *Culture and Anarchy*, in which Arnold champions the Greek tradition of 'self-transformation [...] towards some measure of sweetness and light' to rebalance the Christian tradition of correct 'obedience and action'.⁵ This shift of focus from external to internal reform can be seen as an attempt to step outside the antithetical totems delineated by Patrick Brantlinger (1977) as the Victorian cults of 'reform' and 'progress'.⁶ In this battle for supremacy between agency and passivity in determining the future, the self-reform championed by Arnold appeared as an alternative axis of possibility. This ameliorative programme called for the exercise of human agency, but through a different medium that, in the words of *Middelmarch*, was 'incalculably diffusive' rather than linear and uni-directional.⁷

George Eliot's stance on these debates has long been a point of contention. Many of the working-class electors newly enfranchised by the Second Reform Act saw her as a friend to their cause. In an 'Address to the Electors of Birmingham' delivered by George Jacob Holyoake in 1868, disdain for the opportunistic Conservative government that had pushed through the Reform Bill is juxtaposed with a devoted admiration for the author of *Felix Holt*. Holyoake praises the 'pride and simplicity [...] indomitableness and energy' of her hero, and even ends the speech with a quotation from the writer he describes as 'the greatest [...] these Midland counties have nurtured, since the days of Shakespeare'.⁸ Eliot's reputation only ossified into that of an earnest, ponderous Victorian after her death. This transformation took place both at the hands of those who sought to eulogize her, such as her widower, John Cross (his biography excised potentially controversial material from her journals and letters) and those in the literary avant-garde who sought to rebel against her.⁹ Even Leavis's attempted recuperation of Eliot as a moralizing monolith in *The Great Tradition* (1948) merely cemented this reputation.¹⁰

Eliot's apparent lack of enthusiasm for reform has been a site of discomfort for many critics, who imply that she has something of the 'short-sighted' quality confessed to by Dorothea.¹¹ Critics have cited *Felix Holt* as her novel which – aided by its later appendage 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt' – most explicitly seems to set out a conservative ideology. While they approach Eliot through different theoretical/ideological lenses, they ultimately view her writing as in some way preserving the status quo.¹² More recently, Evan Horowitz has framed *Felix Holt* as 'an anti-political novel, a novel about the limits of politics'.¹³

Any clear view of the attitudes and views Eliot desires us to espouse, however, is

immediately complicated by her ambiguously ironic narratorial style, and particularly her pervasive use of free indirect discourse. Many statements of belief written in the third person actually arise from a partial and idiosyncratic viewpoint with no necessary tie to Eliot's own. For example, a comment on 'the ridiculous pretensions of a born servant who did not submissively accept the rigid fate which had given her born superiors' seems obviously conservative in bent.¹⁴ However, its position must be noted: it comes hinged on the end of a statement which, we are informed, comprises 'Denner's creed'.¹⁵ The subtlety of Eliot's writing lies in her double vision: here she fleetingly inhabits the mindset of this conservative loyal servant, simultaneously immersed in and transcending the character's time and self. The fundamental problem of trying to read irony conclusively is its sheer flatness on the page: it only classifies as irony because the words can also be taken at face value. It is essentially epistemologically ambiguous, as it looks in two different directions at once, enabling both a deadpan and a subversive reading. Like the retrospective temporal setting of *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*, it is intrinsically Janus-faced. Such a declaration as 'Denner's creed' cannot, therefore, be fully understood in isolation, but rather must be weighed in the balance with all the other partial viewpoints of which Eliot's texts are compiled.

The ultimate sticking-point for any critic who wishes to embrace Eliot as a reformist thinker is the 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt' (1867; published January 1868). She wrote the article at John Blackwood's urging, for publication in his Tory-stalwart magazine in the aftermath of the Second Reform Act, and it appears to posit a strikingly conservative argument. It is in this piece that the parallels between Eliot's work and Matthew Arnold's become most evident.

The dominant current of reforming thought viewed legislative reform as a powerful agent of personal transformation. J. S. Mill declared in an electoral campaign speech of July 1866 that 'To give people an interest in politics and in the management of their own affairs was the grand cultivator of mankind.'¹⁶ This framework posits the opposite order of events to that proposed by Felix: for Mill, reform can itself improve individuals. And Mill was by no means alone in employing this causal framework. In calling for female enfranchisement, Julia Wedgwood insisted that 'we seek to be numbered among citizens quite as much from our need of being awakened to higher duties as from a demand for extended rights. We desire it more for what it would make us than for what it would give us.'¹⁷ George Eliot herself echoes these ideas in a letter to Sara Hennell, in which she congratulates her friend for signing a 1856 petition for amendments to marriage law. She suggests that if the proposed laws were passed, they 'would help to raise the position and character of women', endorsing the notion that an individual's social state impacts upon their moral stature, and that an improved legal position can also elevate the mind. Informing all these statements is a relationship of cause and effect that leads *from* reform to self-improvement.¹⁸ Legislation is credited with a genuinely transformative power.

In contrast, the conservative organicism favoured by Matthew Arnold prioritized self-reform over legislative reform. His insistence on the insufficiency of any legislative solution to society's problems represents an approach that can be traced back to the first self-styled Victorian sage, Thomas Carlyle. In *Past and Present* (1843), Carlyle denounces quick-fix solutions by association with the cure-all 'Morrison's Pill, which they have only to swallow once, and all will be well'.¹⁹ This is a trope that Hilda Hollis has seen as taken up in Felix's rejection of his father's 'pills',²⁰ while Kathleen McCormack has traced a myriad of references

to drug-taking in Eliot's work. Although McCormack does not specifically view the 'drug' trope as a metaphor for reform,²¹ the two are persistently associated in *Felix Holt*. We are told that 'the prospect of reform had even served the voters instead of drink' and Felix himself describes the 'rash humour' of his passionate zeal as 'drunkenness without wine' (pp. 271, 238). These writers disparage legislative reform by comparing it to drug-taking, to suggest that both means of intoxication create the *illusion* of transformative power. According to the 'Address', placing one's faith for social amelioration in franchise reform equates to a belief in 'magic' or 'hocus-pocus'.²² This stance is epitomized in Felix's image of trying to pour milk into a 'can without a bottom'.²³ In the opposite logic of causation to that espoused by Mill and Wedgwood, therefore, Felix argues that reform should come second to personal transformation.

Most recent critics have viewed the 'Address' as bolstering the testimony of the novel, and as tantamount to proof of Eliot's reactionary political position. Sally Shuttleworth states:

The political message of Felix is spelt out in all its crudeness in Eliot's essay, the 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt' [...] specifically designed as a political tract. While it obviously lacks, therefore, the complexity of *Felix Holt*, it does help reveal, through the repetition of similar images and arguments, the values which underlie Felix's political stance in the novel.²⁴

Rosemarie Bodenheimer similarly reads *Felix Holt* as a statement of Eliot's own beliefs, writing that 'Felix tells a workers' crowd that they cannot yet use the lesser power of the vote. In *his and Eliot's* view, the conditions for choice lie in a disinterested moral region somewhere above and beyond the pulls of need or class.'²⁵ However, Hilda Hollis has given valuable impetus to a critique of Felix Holt that refuses to view him as a mouthpiece for George Eliot's own beliefs. Seeking to end the elision between character and writer, she views the Address as 'satire', a surreptitious means of disseminating a subversive message within Blackwood's conservative publication.²⁶ Hollis declares that 'To read Felix's address without seeing its doubleness is difficult; at the very least, we must admit that Eliot recognizes that Felix's words may be seen as hypocritical' (p. 162). What Hollis does not take into account in her reading are the divergences between the two Felixes of the novel and the address.

The 'Address' is full of vitriolic statements about the evils of the uneducated working class for which there are no direct analogues in the novel. It characterizes 'working men' in terms that elide them with animals. They have only 'low and brutal' ideas of morality, and struggle to contain their inner 'savage beast'.²⁷ Questioning the value of electoral reform, Felix reminds his audience,

we could groan and hiss before we had the franchise: if we had groaned and hissed in the right place, if we had discerned better between good and evil [...] we should have made an audience that would have shamed the other classes out of their share in the national vices. (pp. 1-2)

This 'hiss' and 'groan' is unindividuated, inchoate and inarticulate. It offers the working class voice a role that cannot itself create ideas, but merely express a basic instinctive response for or against already existing opinions. The power that this 'Address' ascribes to the workers relies on an assumption that the other classes are listening. And more: not only listening, but using it as a model to change their own behaviour. This cross-class reciprocal relationship is undermined by the didactic and insistent tone of the text itself. As Geoffrey Hill has protested,

'The falsity of the pamphlet lies in its rhythmic gerrymandering and not in its basic code of beliefs. George Eliot has denied us [...] cross-rhythms and counterpointings [...]. In short, she has excluded the antiphonal voice of the heckler.'²⁸ Eliot allows no space for what Hill calls 'the drama of reason'²⁹ to allow for the development or modification of Felix's argument. It bludgeons rather than persuades its reader.

This uninterrupted Felix of the 'Address', however, is not synonymous with that of the novel. In the novel, Felix Holt finds his beliefs challenged and tested by the dissenting preacher, Rufus Lyon. He emerges from these interactions as a notably reformist figure. Both men are devotees, in their different ways, of the reform cause, but diverge in their beliefs about the end and purpose of history. Lyon explains to Felix his faith that 'our powers are being trained not only for the transmission of an improved heritage, as I have heard you insist, but also for our own entrance into a higher initiation in the divine scheme' (pp. 341-42). This places side-by-side two different conceptions of historical purpose: Mr Lyon's has a three-way movement, not only backward in time to receive its heritage, and forward to 'transmit' its improved form, but also upward to a different plane of experience outside the temporal dimension entirely. By contrast, Felix's is uni-directional, looking forward to future generations. As Rufus Lyon admits, he always has one eye on the divine plane of existence, limiting his capabilities to enact change on this plane in comparison to those of our hero. While Mr Lyon attempts to transcend his time and self, Felix Holt remains doggedly immersed in his own historical context.

The Felix of the novel is fundamentally a reformer, albeit one who prioritizes small changes close at hand over those imposed by external forces. The Felix of the 'Address', by contrast, is a sanctimonious figure who reminds the working men of 'the supreme unalterable nature of things', and pleads for 'patience on our part with many institutions and *facts of various kinds*', whose woolly non-specific nature encourages passivity on the part of those whose education he is nominally encouraging.³⁰ In the novel, this pious self-righteousness about the 'nature of things' is voiced not by Felix but by his antithesis, a stolid brewer at the Tory inn 'the Marquis', Mr Wace, who muses that 'there's a right in things – that's what I've always said – there's a right in things. The heavy end will get downmost' (pp. 301-2). In contrast, Felix himself declares that 'any man is at liberty to call me a fool, and say that mankind are benefited by the push and the scramble in the long-run. But I care for the people who live now and will not be living when the long-run comes' (p. 362). In the 'Address', our speaker implores his listeners not to 'stop too suddenly any of the sources by which [the ruling classes'] leisure and ease are furnished' (p. 8). Within the novel, by contrast, in the speech he gives at his manslaughter trial, Felix declares that 'I hold it blasphemy to say that a man ought not to fight against authority' (p. 565). Such outright contradictions are irreconcilable, and it might be wiser to take them on their own terms, in their own disparate contexts, rather than trying to force them into a single mould.

In fact, there are multiple levels of disingenuousness at play in the production and reading of this text. The readership of *Blackwood's Magazine* was conservative and primarily middle-class: in this sense, the 'Address' is not written for the eyes of 'Working Men' at all. This misfit between the nominally ideal and the real audience is evident in its tone, which shifts from mutuality to distance even within individual sentences. The text opens: 'Fellow-Workmen, – I am not going to take up your time by complimenting you', where the opening compound word situates the speaker as part of the group (p. 1). However, this conceit is short-

lived: soon Felix is refusing to 'take up *your* time by complimenting *you*' (my italics), distancing himself from this morally deficient group. All the subsequent 'us' and 'ourselves' of later paragraphs cannot erase this division. The relational chain between writer and reader makes this text in no real sense an address *from* Felix Holt *to* working men; rather, it is an address by Marian Evans, in the authorial persona of George Eliot, in the transposed voice of fictional character Felix Holt, writing to be read by the readers of *Blackwood's* magazine, a conservative middle-class group quite distinct from the 'working men' it claims to address.³¹ The chain of oblique relationships I have traced between author, text and audience makes it all the more imperative not to elide Eliot with her fictional creation.

Eliot's attitude towards the question of reform in these texts is equivocal and evanescent. To distil the two disparate 'Felix' texts to a univocal authorial message would be reductive, and thus counterproductive. The character of Felix Holt appears to modern eyes to be fundamentally conservative, and John Blackwood evidently shared this belief sufficiently to ask Eliot to write in the persona for his Tory magazine. However, others, including the reformist agitator Holyoake, saw Holt as an inspirational radical, as indeed do modern critics such as Hobson. Any decisive interpretation of *Felix Holt* and his 'Address' is unsettled further by Hilda Hollis' enticing reading of these texts as subtly satirical on Eliot's part. Although I query whether Eliot would have accepted the commission from her friend John Blackwood merely to sabotage his conservative publication, Hollis's reading is important in foregrounding, rather than sidelining, our instinctive discomfort with the two-dimensional and dogmatic nature of Felix's character.

Part of what makes *Felix Holt* and the 'Address' unexpected reading experiences, and defies our expectations of their interpretations of reform, is that although set in the 'Age of Reform', 'a time of hope',³² the times in which they were written were ones in which reform, although still very much on the political agenda, had lost its omnipotent aura. The novel was written during a year in which, in the controversy over the Second Reform Bill, the threatening capabilities of reform to build a legislative 'nation' that outran the state of the existing nation seemed to many all too real. Thus the presentation of reform in George Eliot's writing is neither consistent nor homogeneous. In a vitriolic memoir of 1899, Eliza Lynn Linton dismissed Eliot as fraudulent in her attempt to be 'at once conventional and insurgent', but perhaps we can take the characterization without the critical implication.³³ As George Eliot so powerfully reminds us in her novels, this dialectical desire at once to rebel and to belong, to reform and to retain, is a pairing common to much of Victorian culture.

Notes

George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, ed. by W. J. Harvey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 50.

- 2 Robert Lowe, *Speeches and Letters on Reform* (London: Robert John Bush, 1867), pp. 51, 13.
- 3 See Michael Wolff, 'The Uses of Context: Aspects of the 1860s', *Victorian Studies*, 9 (1965), 47–63; Peter Coveney, 'Introduction', in *Felix Holt, the Radical* (Aylesbury: Penguin, 1971); Jim Reilly, *Shadowtime: History and Representation in Hardy, Conrad and George Eliot* (London: Routledge, 1995); Hao Li, *Memory and History in George*

Eliot: Transfiguring the Past (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

- 4 'Edward Irving', *Scottish Review*, July 1862, p. 194.
- 5 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. by John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), pp. 99, 156.
- 6 Patrick Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform: British Literature and Politics, 1832-1867* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. x.
- 7 Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, p. 896.
- 8 George Jacob Holyoake, *Working-class Representation: Its Conditions and Consequences. An Address to the Electors of Birmingham, Delivered at the Town Hall, 16th October 1868*, 1868, pp. 14, 16.
- 9 John Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Journals and Letters* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1885).
- 10 F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948).
- 11 Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 53.
- 12 See Daniel Cottom, *Social Figures: George Eliot, Social History and Literary Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987); Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Cottom's approach is an explicitly Marxist one, while David critiques Eliot on feminist grounds and Gallagher on aesthetic ones.
- 13 Evan Horowitz, 'George Eliot: The Conservative', *Victorian Studies*, 49 (2006), 7–32 (p. 14).
- 14 George Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical*, ed. by Peter Coveney (Aylesbury: Penguin, 1971), p. 102.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 J. S. Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. by J. M. Robson and Bruce Kinzer, 33 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 39.
- 17 Julia Wedgwood, 'Female Suffrage in Its Influence on Married Life', *The Contemporary Review*, 20 (1872), 360–370 (p. 370).
- 18 George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters 1836-1880*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), II, p. 227.
- 19 Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. by Richard Daniel Altick (New York: NYU

- Press, 1977), p. 226.
- 20 Hilda Hollis, 'Felix Holt: Independent Spokesman or Eliot's Mouthpiece', *ELH*, 68 (2001), 155–177 (p. 164).
- 21 Kathleen McCormack, *George Eliot and Intoxication: Dangerous Drugs for the Condition of England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000). Most of McCormack's examples concern intoxication as an analogy for illicit love or moral degeneracy.
- 22 George Eliot, 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 103 (1868), 1–11 (p. 5).
- 23 Eliot, *Felix Holt*, p. 400.
- 24 Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 117.
- 25 Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 99. My italics.
- 26 Hollis, p. 158.
- 27 Eliot, 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt', p. 6.
- 28 Geoffrey Hill, *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (London: André Deutsch, 1984), p. 90.
- 29 A phrase he borrows from S. T. Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), III, p. 282.
- 30 Eliot, 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt', p. 8, 10 (my italics).
- 31 See Nancy Henry, 'George Eliot and Politics', in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. by George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 138–58.
- 32 Eliot, *Felix Holt*, p. 271.
- 33 Eliza Lynn Linton, *My Literary Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899), p. 97.