Narration in Middlemarch Revisited

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In a previously published article entitled ‘The Role of the Narrator in George Eliot’s Novels’, I attempted to defend her narrator (particularly in regard to *Middlemarch*) from a variety of critical attacks. The main points of my argument were: (1) that the narrator should not be identified with Eliot herself as it often is but is a persona with a tone of voice separate from the author and thus both integrated into the fiction and central to its structure; (2) form and realism were reconciled by the fact that the narrator was represented as a historical novelist writing a novel about people and situations that were real for him (or her), the narrator not being gender specific after *Adam Bede*; (3) the narrator’s knowledge of what is going on in the minds of the characters does not indicate Godlike omniscience but is rather a historical novelist’s reconstruction of their inner lives using techniques and devices associated with the novel as a literary genre; (4) the formal organization of the novels, such as parallelism between characters and situations, does not imply that reality in itself has immanent form; (5) the narrator does not disguise the fact that he (or she) has a point of view in relation to ethical, philosophical and political questions and that this shapes his (or her) representation of reality; (6) narration must always be interpretation.

I still broadly agree with these points but there are some issues in regard to narration in Eliot that still need to be addressed, and again I shall focus mainly on *Middlemarch*. The terms ‘reliable’ and ‘unreliable’ are common in the theory of narrative. Is Eliot’s narrator ‘reliable’ in that the reader is expected to accept and trust the narrator’s representation of reality? What if the reader or some readers disagree with the narrator’s judgements, and of course the narrator in *Middlemarch* is exceptionally ‘intrusive’? Does this make the narrator ‘unreliable’ for these readers? Dorothea Barrett in her book *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot’s Heroines* accepts that Eliot intends her narration to be ‘reliable’ but finds the narrator a conservative figure and refuses to accept what she sees as the conservative ideology being promulgated by this narrator. Her solution to the problem is to identify this conservative narrator with ‘Marian Lewes’ but to discern a more radical ideology in the subtext of the novel which she attributes to the artist ‘George Eliot’, who remains in contact at an unconscious level with the radicalism of the earlier self of the author. In effect then the narration becomes ‘unreliable’ even if Eliot as author at a conscious level did not intend it to be: ‘Marian Lewes clearly intends to recommend [submissiveness], but the texts themselves subvert her intention’.

Clearly a problem with ‘reliable’ narration for readers like Barrett is that the reader is expected to be passive before the text, but for her Eliot’s narration can and should be read ‘against the grain’ as ‘unreliable’, which has the advantage of making the reader active rather than passive. But the terms ‘reliable’ and ‘unreliable’ are philosophically problematic as they raise the question, ‘reliable’ or ‘unreliable’ in relation to what? Reality? This of course has been a problem for philosophy since at least Plato, who famously compared the reality we think we perceive by means of the senses with mere shadow-play generated by the effect of light on the walls of a dark cave. Although there have been centuries of philosophical debate on this issue the most influential view is Kant’s that human beings can have no direct access to the ‘real’, the ‘thing in itself’, but only to the apparent world of phenomena. Any representation of the
world that claims to be ‘true’ or ‘real’ is therefore problematic. This may be why Eliot did not employ neutral or unmediated forms of narration in which the narrator is not personalized and the reader is expected to accept the reality of what is being narrated without question. But for Eliot, though narration may not be able to aspire beyond interpretation of the world this does not necessarily mean it is unreliable: the opposition between ‘reliable’ and ‘unreliable’ breaks down if there is no secure ground against which reliability can be judged. Eliot’s narrator does not try to hide the fact that all forms of narration must be mediated by a consciousness that is interpreting the world or that any judgements of, or comments on, the characters on ethical, political, and philosophical grounds by the narrator will reflect a set of principles or beliefs.

Clearly the partiality of the narrator in Eliot’s fiction may present a problem for readers who do not share the narrator’s interpretation of the world or moral judgements or political sympathies. If these readers have fundamental commitments that seem to them irreconcilable with the perspective of Eliot’s narrator, then they may at the extreme reject her fiction. Obvious readers of that type would include those with strong religious convictions, Marxists, hard-line feminists – that is, readers who, unlike Barrett, have been unable to discern a subtext that calls into question the narrator’s contentions and judgements. The tendency to reject Eliot’s fiction by those who reject the ideology they believe governs the narration has been seen in feminist criticism, particularly in the 1970s, exemplified by declarations that Middlemarch can no longer be one of the books of my life, and titles like ‘Why Feminists are Angry with George Eliot’. More recently certain post-colonial influenced critics adopt a similarly negative attitude, especially in regard to Daniel Deronda, the novel’s proto-Zionism being seen as in continuity with an imperialist ideology, a belief in white superiority over dark races, and a certain distaste for the Jews. Barrett can only rescue Eliot’s fiction from such negative critique by claiming that the overt perspective of the narrator – identified with ‘Marian Lewes’ – is subverted unintentionally within the text by ‘George Eliot’ as artist. I will suggest that a different defence of Eliot’s fiction is possible.

As my original discussion of the narrator argued, the narrator is within the text and therefore central to the structure of Eliot’s fiction. Though the narrator claims to be the author of the novel being narrated, the author is rather the ‘implied author’ who stands between the narrator and George Eliot herself as the person who physically writes the book: ‘As an imaginary entity, [the implied author] is to be distinguished clearly from the real author ... The implied author is also to be distinguished from the narrator, since the implied author stands at a remove from the narrative voice, as the person assumed to be responsible for deciding what kind of narrator will be presented to the reader; in many works this distinction produces an effect of irony at the narrator’s expense.’ By standing ‘at a remove from the narrative voice’, the implied author in Eliot’s novels does not necessarily subvert the narrator but gives the reader the opportunity to recognize that the narrator’s perspective need not be identified with ‘reality’ or the ‘truth’, and to recognize that other perspectives are possible. As the narrator of Middlemarch freely admits: ‘interpretations are illimitable’. This entails that the reader – at least a reader not fundamentally committed to an ideology irreconcilable with that of the narrator – is entitled to take a different view from that of the narrator without necessarily undermining either the novel’s discourse or the credibility of the narrator’s principles and judgements.

What Barrett sees as ‘the subconscious subversive in George Eliot’ which unintentionally
undermines the narrative voice is, I would argue, potentially included in the novel since Eliot’s
texts are dialogical in nature. This does not mean that Eliot as an author does not write from a
particular set of philosophical, ethical, or political principles, but different or opposed sets of
principles also circulate in the text and are given their own discursive space. When Barrett
asserts in a discussion of the ‘subconscious fecundity’ produced in *The Mill on the Floss* by
Maggie’s elopement – ‘Whether or not Marian Lewes intended this [that the elopement arises
out of an unconscious desire to avenge herself against Tom for replacing her in her father’s
affections], George Eliot has sown evidence for it throughout the text’ – I would contend that
the ‘sown evidence’ in the text is a sign of narrative control and intentionality on the part of the
implied author. Another doubtful example Barrett cites as an unintended divergence between
‘Marian Lewes’ and ‘George Eliot’ as conscious and unconscious authors concerns Ladislaw
in *Middlemarch* who, for Barrett, is constantly idealized in the narration, for example by being
associated with sun imagery. She points out that Max Müller had seen all myths as allegories
of the sun, but that the scene which unites Dorothea and Ladislaw takes place in a
thunderstorm. She goes on to claim that there is an allusion here to Adalbert Kuhn’s rival
theory to Müller’s, that all myths are allegories of thunderstorms: ‘the thunderstorm is
introduced to put Will as sun god, that is Will as solution, into question once more’.
I tend to agree with Barrett that there is interplay between Müller and Kuhn but how could such
allusions to these writers and their implications be a sign of the conscious author’s loss of
control in regard to the idealization of Ladislaw? On the contrary, it is surely an indication of
the implied author suggesting that more than one view of the Dorothea-Ladislaw relationship
is possible.

Both the negative Eliot critics mentioned above and Barrett read the narration of the novels
monologically, believing it enforces a single perspective which blanks out alternative
perspectives, compelling the reader either to reject the narrator’s perspective on the world on
ideological grounds or attribute complexities in the text to the author’s subconscious rather
than to the implied author’s artistry and intellectual subtlety. It may be that certain readers of
Eliot will always respond to the narration monologically and nothing much can be done to
change their minds. But how should readers who are less monologically inclined and
unconvinced by Barrett’s claim that the narration is unconsciously subverted relate to the
interventions and judgements of her narrator? Although as I have mentioned above the implied
author is not to be identified with the narrator, this does not, I would argue, call the narrator’s
interventions and judgements into question in a radical way or ironize them. The narrator
almost invariably deserves the respect of readers who are not committed to a fixed set of beliefs
or principles though this does not mean the reader needs to agree passively with everything the
narrator says. For example, the description of Dorothea at the beginning of Chapter 1 of
*Middlemarch*, relating her plain dress and the form of her hand and wrist to representations of
the Virgin Mary by Italian painters, creates an image which has interpretive overtones,
implying that unconsciously she is playing a role for religious effect which indirectly questions
her identification with the ideal of selflessness. Most readers are likely to see the narrator’s
reference to Dorothea’s ‘poor dress’ as a neutral fact and the comparison between her and
paintings of the Virgin Mary as going beyond shared fact to a particular interpretation of the
character. One should point out, however, that even the mention of Dorothea’s ‘poor dress’ is
not objective fact, but implicated in interpretation since it is selected by the narrator from a
multitude of other features about Dorothea that could have been chosen. The character presented to the reader is an interpreted figure, and though the reader can potentially question the narrator’s interpretation, there is no access to the ‘real’ Dorothea. Any description will be an interpretation but what is different about Eliot’s narration from more conventional narration is that there is no attempt to disguise this. It would be legitimate for a Christian reader to be critical of the narrator’s description on the grounds that it exhibits anti-Christian prejudice, as it appears to take a sceptical view of a sincere Christian’s aspiration to selflessness. But it is clear from the very first chapter that the narrator is presented to the reader as an interpreter of the world, not a neutral observer of it whose description and commentary assume access to an objective reality the reader is expected to accept without demur.

While this aspect of the narration as description overlaid with interpretation may not present much difficulty to the relatively open minded reader, the same might not be true in relation to the narrator’s numerous ‘intrusive’ comments of a more philosophical nature, such as the following from Chapter 21 of *Middlemarch:* ‘We are all of us born into moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves’ (p. 208). This appears to be a constative statement – one which can be characterised as either true or false – which demands that the reader respond to it in such terms. At the very least the reader may want question its absoluteness: ‘We are all of us’, no exceptions being acknowledged. Nor is there any supporting argument; it is merely asserted. Many readers of Eliot’s fiction in the past have felt that this kind of discourse is both moralistic and artless. But is it really a constative statement? As Roman Jakobson essentially argued in his essay ‘Linguistics and Poetics’, the constative function of language in a literary context interacts with the poetic function and creates an interplay between the two which prevents the constative any longer having priority over the poetic. As Jakobson famously, if somewhat obscurely, puts it: ‘The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination’, which, if not restricted to poetry in the narrow sense, can be taken to mean that in poetic or, more broadly, literary contexts words do not relate to each other linearly or syntagmatically as in constative discourse – which would make them open to paraphrase and application to practical situations – but paradigmatically in that they relate to each other non-linearly or in the same temporal frame and thus are resistant to paraphrase or contextualization outside of the literary discourse within which they exist.

One consequence of this in relation to the narrator’s comment on egoism is that it does not stand alone as constative statement but interacts with both the dramatic and descriptive aspects of the novel as a literary text so that its effect is integrative. One can illustrate this by showing how the narrator’s philosophical comment is congruent with the narrator’s description and implied interpretation of Dorothea in the first chapter. Even someone with a strong Christian faith who aspires to transcendence of self and is determined to serve the needs of others, cannot transcend the egoism that human beings are born into, though the narrator goes on to hold out the prospect that at least some emergence from it may eventually be possible, and if that is the case with Dorothea it must apply to all the characters in the novel. Another way in which the narrator’s comment cannot be reduced to the constative lies in the expressive and poetic power of its language in which figural linguistic elements such as metaphor combine with sound effects, rhythm and cadence to prevent the constative breaking free from or dominating the poetic. This makes it immune from or at least resistant to conventional analysis or critique. It
would be wrong to say that the constative has no force but it can be argued that it is not legitimately read as if it were a normal piece of philosophical discourse. It can thus give pleasure to the reader of literature independently of the reader’s particular beliefs and opinions. However, if a reader disagrees with the constative element sufficiently strongly the poetic function can be ignored so that the statement then becomes open to paraphrase and abstract discussion like standard philosophical discourse, but I would suggest that if the philosophical comments by the narrator in *Middlemarch* are treated in such a manner the novel would be at risk of being taken out of literary discourse and thus seriously deprived of its literary power.

Virtually all of the philosophical or intellectually reflective passages in *Middlemarch* can be viewed in a similar manner but perhaps discussion of another philosophical statement is required to support further that critical position. In Chapter 10 the narrator writes in regard to Casaubon’s expectations in relation to marriage ‘that his long studious bachelorhood had stored up for him a compound interest of enjoyment’, which leads the narrator to reflect: ‘for we all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them’ (p. 83). Again this is an absolute statement which claims universal application and no supporting evidence is provided. As with the reflection on egoism, however, the constative element interacts with the poetic function and it would be easy to demonstrate how this statement is integrative in its effect since it can be applied to the thinking of virtually every character in the novel, not just to Casaubon on marriage but to his life work, his search for the ‘key’ to all mythologies. Metaphor is also evident in Dorothea’s thinking. She is unable at first to view Casaubon critically as ‘he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor twopenny mirror’, and which leads her to see ‘his whole experience’ as ‘a lake compared with my little pool!’ (p. 24). Those characters who are disgusted by the marriage resort to metaphors that associate Casaubon with death or sterility, with Sir James Chettam claiming he is ‘no better than a mummy’ (p. 56) and Mrs Cadwallader seeing marriage to Casaubon as ‘as good as going to a nunnery’ (p. 57). Even scientists are subject to metaphorical thinking, Lydgate’s scientific research being driven by the search for the ‘primitive tissue’ (p. 147). Naive critics of *Middlemarch* might find contradiction in the fact that metaphorical thinking seems to be viewed negatively as one can get ‘entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them’, yet metaphor is a notable feature of the narrator’s own discourse, most obviously the use of ‘web’ as a metaphor which A. S. Byatt has called one of the most complicated and brilliantly worked metaphors anywhere in fiction.11 But the ‘implied author’ if not the narrator is well aware that there can be no metaphor-free language and therefore it will inevitably permeate human thought. Allowing metaphors to be unthinkingly projected onto reality may be a danger but the novel implies that they can ultimately serve the human good as they are a means of imaginatively changing human perceptions of the nature of reality. The narrator’s use of the web metaphor encourages the reader to notice the myriad links that connect individuals with each other and with the social medium which is the product of historical and cultural forces that seemingly have little to do with the self. The double aspect of the metaphor has been much commented on by critics since the experience of connection can potentially lead to a sense of liberation from narrow egoism, but if that fails the converse is entrapment by the forces of otherness.

It might seem legitimate to criticize the comment on metaphor for asserting that everyone acts ‘fatally on the strength of them’, as such a claim would appear to be at the very least
exaggerated. But such a criticism would be based on reading it in constative terms only. Hyperbole is a common device used for rhetorical emphasis, and one needs to remember that the constative interacts with the figural. Indeed this is one of the most artistically self-conscious of the philosophical reflections in Middlemarch, since the narrator apparently attacks the use of metaphors by means of metaphor – ‘entangled in metaphors’ – so that the apparent meaning and its subversion are enacted at the same time through being entangled, yet there is also the implied alternative meaning that metaphor is unavoidable, which the novel as a whole demonstrates.

As Middlemarch is, as I have argued, a novel that subverts the opposition between ‘reliable’ and ‘unreliable’ narration, it does the same with the opposition between the ‘passive’ and the ‘active’ reader, even if readers have generally failed to notice this. What this means is that in reading Middlemarch without such an opposition being in place the reader will oscillate continually from being relatively passive in relation to the narration, to being relatively active and at times questioning the narrator’s judgements or reflections. Given the assumption that the world can only be interpreted, it would be illogical to expect the narrator’s interpretation and judgement of the characters and their situations to elicit complete agreement on the part of the reader. The narrator even at one point expresses doubts about whether one can make a secure judgement about a character. After a speech that Casaubon makes to Dorothea when they meet after she has accepted his proposal, the narrator comments: ‘No speech could have been more thoroughly honest in its intention: the frigid rhetoric at the end was as sincere as the bark of a dog, or the cawing of an amorous rook. Would it not be rash to conclude that there was no passion behind those sonnets to Delia which strike us as the thin music of a mandolin?’ (p. 49). The narrator cannot quite decide whether the deadness of Casaubon’s language necessarily reflects absence of passion. This leaves the reader not quite sure what to think. If the reader unlike the narrator admires Samuel Daniel’s sonnets to Delia then there is clearly the potential to take a different view of Casaubon’s speech from that of the narrator. But even if the reader may disagree at times with the narrator’s judgement, one cannot say categorically that the narrator is wrong and one can respect the narrator’s judgements and opinion even if one disagrees with or has qualifications in regard to them. The novel acknowledges differences in point of view and engaging with the narrator is one of the pleasures of reading Middlemarch.

One might argue that what is important is not necessarily sharing the narrator’s viewpoint or judgement but dialogic interaction between narrator and reader. And even if the reader may take a different point of view from the narrator, the literary power of the narration is pleasurable for its own sake. If the reader may be less eager than the narrator to dismiss Casaubon’s language as ‘frigid rhetoric’, the description of it as ‘as sincere as the bark of a dog, or the cawing of an amorous rook’ has an appeal at the literary level that is relatively independent of agreement or disagreement with the judgement expressed. Although Middlemarch is concerned with major themes of an ethical and philosophical type which continue to provoke discussion, the power of the novel’s literary discourse is what makes one continue to read it and reflect on it at both the human level of character and situation and at the ethical and philosophical level.
Notes

1. ‘The Role of the Narrator in George Eliot’s Novels’, *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 3 (1973), 97-107.


