

# No Longer The Same Interpreter: Rereading George Eliot

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## Chapter 1

### I

Toward the end of *Adam Bede*, after Dinah has confessed her love and returned home to wait for the "guiding voice from within," Adam becomes impatient and decides to visit her, traveling the route he had followed when he had gone to Snowfield in search of the missing Hetty. As he retraces his earlier journey, the road seems "to be telling him afresh the story of that painful past which he knew so well by heart" (Ch. 54). But George Eliot says that the road has different meanings for him now, because "no story is the same to us after a lapse of time; or rather, we who read it are no longer the same interpreters."

The truth of this observation has struck me many times as I have reread George Eliot over the years. I have been reading, teaching, and writing about her novels for half-a-century, and I have come to see them quite differently than I did at first. Whereas I initially regarded George Eliot not only as a great novelist but also as a sage whose Religion of Humanity solved the problem of values in a universe without God, I now find that I cannot subscribe to many of her beliefs.

My attitude toward George Eliot's novels as instruments of knowledge has also changed a great deal. In my early work, I adopted the view of her fiction she had set forth in a letter of January of 1876 to Dr. Joseph Frank Payne. "My writing," she said, "is simply a set of experiments in life -- an endeavor to see what our thought and emotion may be capable of ... I become more and more timid -- with less daring to adopt any formula which does not get itself clothed for me in some human figure and individual experience, and perhaps that is a sign that if I help others to see at all it must be through that medium of art (*Letters* VI, 216-17). George Eliot saw her novels as a means of discovering the enduring truths contained in our inheritance from the past, of exploring human possibilities, and of validating and communicating her Religion of Humanity. Because her novels deal with human figures and individual experience, they can arrive at something "more sure than shifting theory" and flash conviction on the world.

I now believe that her experiments in life are flawed in both method and result and that George Eliot was fooling herself. Influenced by her own psychological needs, her experiments are often rigged so as to confirm her own predispositions. They hardly have the objectivity or safeguards we associate with the term "experiments," and what George Eliot is capable of imagining is profoundly affected by her own personality and experience. As I currently see them, her novels do not arrive at "a better after which we may strive" but at a philosophy of living for others, the destructiveness of which is usually obscured by plot and rhetoric.

And yet because they deal with human figures and individual experience, the novels *do* arrive at truths more sure than shifting theory -- that is, at mimetic truths which are embodied in the

concrete portrayal of social and psychological reality. Whatever we may think of George Eliot's values and beliefs, her characters are convincing and continue to live. While plot and rhetoric work in favor of her preferred defensive strategies, her realistic portrayal of human figures allows us to see the inadequacies of the solutions she celebrates.

The problem is that the truths she discovers through her mimesis often do not register on George Eliot. She misinterprets the results of her experiments, making it difficult for her readers to see and judge for themselves. Whereas in my early work I attended primarily to the thematic component of Eliot's fiction, I shall now focus on her depiction of psychological realities, which I previously failed to appreciate, and compare it with the interpretations and judgments conveyed by the rhetoric, with which I now often disagree.

George Eliot's novels have such different meanings for me than they used to because I am no longer the same interpreter. It has become a critical commonplace that interpretations are psychologically motivated, that the ways in which we respond to texts are affected by our own personalities. This phenomenon can be investigated by analyzing the responses of different readers, as Norman Holland has done, for instance, in *Five Readers Reading*; but it can also be approached by analyzing the reactions of the same reader over a period of time, as I shall do here, using myself as an illustration. One of my objectives is to explore the role of individual psychology in reader response by comparing my current reactions to Eliot's novels with my earlier ones and trying to understand why I responded as I did then and why my responses have changed. It is to be understood, of course, that my explanations of my changing responses are psychologically motivated also and are subject to the psychologically motivated interpretation of others.

I first studied George Eliot at Johns Hopkins in 1951, in an undergraduate course on the English novel taught by Earl Wasserman. I wrote a paper on *The Mill on the Floss* that became my first published essay (Paris 1956); and when I entered the Ph.D. program, I knew from the start that I wanted to write my dissertation on George Eliot. What especially fascinated me was her search for a secular ethic, for I, too, was an agnostic, and her questions were my questions also. In my dissertation, which was subsequently published as *Experiments in Life: George Eliot's Quest for Values* (1965), I examined Eliot's ideas in relation to her time and her art in relation to her ideas. In interpreting her novels, I showed how her protagonists arrive, through a varied course of experience, at some version of the Religion of Humanity in which living for others, for something beyond the self, gives meaning and value to their lives.

While I was writing my dissertation, I subscribed to George Eliot's beliefs. I was convinced that she had answered the agnostic's need for a humanistic value system which would replace those that were supernaturally based. When my director, Hillis Miller, posed questions about why George Eliot thought as she did, I felt it was silly of him to ask why someone believed the truth. But a strange thing happened after I completed my dissertation. When I was given the chance to teach George Eliot in a graduate course, I found that my enthusiasm for her ideas had disappeared. I remained convinced that I had understood her correctly, but I was no longer sure of my own attitude toward her philosophy, and my loss of fervor was bewildering.

I began to understand what was happening when, at the suggestion of Theodore Millon, a colleague in psychology, I read Karen Horney's *Our Inner Conflicts* and *Neurosis and Human Growth*. According to Horney, people defend themselves against feeling unsafe, unloved, and unvalued by developing both interpersonal and intrapsychic strategies of defense. The interpersonal strategies involve moving toward, against, or away from other people and adopting a self-effacing, expansive, or resigned solution. Each of these solutions entails a constellation of personality traits, behaviors, and beliefs about human nature, the human condition, and human values. Each also involves a bargain with fate in which obedience to the dictates of that solution is supposed to be rewarded (see Paris 1991a). Self-effacing people try to achieve their objectives through dependency, humility, and self-sacrificing "goodness"; expansive people through the pursuit of mastery and triumph; and resigned people by not wanting much, expecting little, and striving for self-sufficiency. Because people tend to employ all of these defensive strategies, they suffer from inner conflicts. In order to avoid being paralyzed or torn apart, they make that strategy predominant which most accords with their culture, temperament, and circumstances; but the repressed tendencies persist, generating inconsistencies and rising to the surface if the predominant strategy fails.

Horney's description of how our belief systems are often a function of our defensive strategies seemed directly applicable to me and, by extension, to George Eliot. Miller's questions began to make sense. I came to see that my response to George Eliot had been profoundly influenced by a shaky performance on my doctoral oral that had hurt my pride, undermined my confidence, and made me regard my dissertation as the means by which I would vindicate myself. Since the dissertation had to be magnificent, it became almost impossible to write, and there were long periods during which I despaired of ever completing it. My dreams of a glorious academic career were in ruins, and I needed to discover a new meaning for my life.

While I was in this state of mind, I found George Eliot's philosophy of living for others to be absolutely convincing. Even if I did not become a great scholar and critic, I could be a wonderful husband, father, and friend, and I persuaded myself that I was. The stories of Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke appealed to me as celebrations of gifted young people, much like myself, who attained a kind of moral grandeur even though they failed to achieve an epic life. In short, my difficulty in writing my dissertation led me to abandon my expansive dreams of glory, which I now saw no way of fulfilling, and to embrace the self-effacing solution I found so powerfully set forth by George Eliot.

The successful completion of my dissertation and its warm reception changed everything. Finishing the work in which I had articulated my defense against failure did away with my need for that defense. Since my ambitious goals once again seemed within reach, I no longer needed to live for others in order to feel that my life was worthwhile. Hence my lack of enthusiasm when I had the chance to teach George Eliot. I had been looking forward to preaching her Religion of Humanity, but I found myself strangely indifferent to her ideas.

Looking back on my experience, it seems to me that my personal identification with George Eliot produced a combination of blindness and insight. It enabled me to understand her ideas from within and to give them a full and sympathetic exposition. I still believe that I saw her

characters as she meant them to be seen and that I gave their experience the meaning she intended it to have. I was highly responsive to her rhetoric.

That very responsiveness blinded me, however, to a number of things that I think I now see more clearly. Because I was so intent on understanding George Eliot's characters as illustrations of her ideas, I failed to see them as imagined human beings who are fascinating in their own right and who are not always in harmony with their formal and thematic functions. I paid no attention to George Eliot's mimetic achievement and had very little sense of the brilliance of her psychological insights. I did not see the need to distinguish between her *representation* of character, which is usually accurate, complex, and enduring, and her *interpretation*, which is often misleading, over-simple, and confused. I shall have more to say about this.

I also had little sense of the unrealistic elements in George Eliot's fiction. Because of my need to believe in her consistency and the viability of her solutions, I could not see that she frequently celebrated a magic bargain in which one achieves glory by being humble, good, and loving, by sacrificing for others, and, above all, by submitting oneself to a larger power outside of oneself that will provide protection and justice. In order to make this bargain work, she often created a universe that was close to that of her earlier Christian beliefs, a universe in which aggressive qualities are punished and self-effacing ones are rewarded. In *Experiments in Life*, I had argued that George Eliot's fictions were governed by the laws of nature as described by the science of her day. That is not the case.

My most striking blindness, I think, was to the destructiveness of the solutions George Eliot celebrates. She shared with most nineteenth-century novelists the illusion that suffering and frustration can make one into a noble person. She vividly depicts the conditions that thwart her protagonists' development, but she does not see that their frustrations have damaged them psychologically. She *shows* us the destructiveness of the self-effacing solution they adopt in response to deprivation; but since she shares this solution herself, her rhetoric glorifies it as a sign of moral nobility. Since I also shared this solution when I was writing my dissertation, I presented it with a proselytizing zeal that annoyed the members of my committee. In revising the work for publication, I tried to adopt a more dispassionate tone.

As I see it now, one of the most serious deficiencies of George Eliot's philosophy is her emphasis on living for others as the means by which we give value to our lives. Since our life has the meaning that other people give it, we may be driven to try to live up to their values or to satisfy their needs at all costs. There is no way in George Eliot's thinking in which we can discriminate between the legitimate needs of others and their unreasonable claims. Her characters can rarely defend themselves when other people make irrational demands, and she tends to glorify their compulsively self-sacrificial behavior.

There are some striking examples of this in George Eliot's last two novels, on which I shall concentrate here. In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea and Lydgate are presented as contrasting characters, with Dorothea's problems being caused by the deficiencies of her society and Lydgate's by his personal flaws; but they are much more alike than the author suggests. Lydgate is destroyed by his compulsive submission to Rosamond, and Dorothea would have been destroyed by her compulsive submission to Casaubon had she not been saved by his death -- a good example of a

rigged experiment. The story of Mary Garth is also one in which the protagonist is in danger of ruining her life because of her psychological vulnerabilities. George Eliot places Dorothea, Lydgate, and Mary in situations in which they are trapped by the needs of others, by which they are coerced. They all lack the capacity to extricate themselves from these situations, but George Eliot treats their weaknesses very differently and gives them quite different fates.

In *Daniel Deronda*, it is Deronda whose compulsively self-sacrificial behavior is glorified. Daniel sacrifices himself for Hans Myerick when they are students together at Cambridge, and he would be ready to devote his entire life to meeting Gwendolen's needs if he were not otherwise engaged. His mentoring of Gwendolen, which is usually seen as therapeutic, consists of leading her not toward autonomy or self-fulfillment but toward a self-effacing solution similar to his own.

## II

I should observe that the radical change in my response to George Eliot was not produced simply by the successful completion of my dissertation. This led to my loss of enthusiasm for her ideas, but it did not turn me into the critic of them I have since become. That was largely the result of my experience in psychotherapy.

I entered psychotherapy because of the difficulties I had had with writing. I was able to finish my dissertation because I received an ultimatum from my department chairman, who threatened not to renew my contract; and the anxiety of survival overcame the anxiety of perfection. With the Ph.D. in hand, I was able to get a better job, but I knew I would have to publish in order to keep it. I sought help because I was afraid that writing would always be an ordeal, but I soon discovered that this was far from being the only problem on which I needed to work.

In therapy I came to a deeper understanding of the things I had learned from reading Horney, and I gained many other insights as well. I had grown up under great pressure, coming largely from my mother, to "reach the top," to "be number one," an aspiration I embraced not only to please her but also because it helped me to compensate for feelings of physical inferiority and social isolation (see Paris 1994b). I tried to deal with my frustrations and anxieties by developing not only an expansive solution, but also the intrapsychic strategies of defense that Horney describes.

To compensate for feelings of weakness, inadequacy, and low self-esteem, we develop, says Horney, an "idealized image" of ourselves that we seek to actualize by embarking on a "search for glory." The idealized image generates a "pride system," which consists of "neurotic pride," "neurotic claims," and "tyrannical shoulds" or "inner dictates." We take pride in the imaginary attributes of our idealized selves, we demand that the world treat us in accordance with our grandiose conception of ourselves, and we drive ourselves to live up to the dictates of our solution. The pride system tends to intensify the self-hatred against which it is supposed to be a defense, since any failure to live up to our shoulds or of the world to honor our claims leads us to feel like our despised rather than our idealized selves (more on this later).

Because I was a good student, my search for glory took the form of academic achievement; and, with the encouragement of an influential teacher, I decided to pursue a Ph.D. in English. The

atmosphere at Johns Hopkins when I was in graduate school (1952-1956) exactly suited my neurosis. The English Department admitted many more Ph.D. candidates than it expected to graduate, and at the end of the first year most were not invited back. Don Cameron Allen was chair when I entered the program, and he told the eighteen new students assembled at our orientation meeting that the department produced an average of two Ph. D.s per year. He asked us to look at the person on our right and then at the person on our left, predicted that one or both would not be here next year, and said that it was up to us to make sure that they weren't. Journal Club meetings gave us splendid opportunities to attack the work of our fellow students and to display our superior knowledge and insight. Those of us who survived the winnowing process regarded ourselves as the chosen few. I felt at once abysmally inferior to my professors and vastly superior to all the poor souls who were not graduate students at Johns Hopkins. I did not know how they could endure their pointless lives.

Although my need for love (another side of my personality) had led me to marry while still in my teens, I was under such internal and external pressure that I became obsessed with my studies and had no time for my wife and later for my child. I had no qualms about accepting financial help, first from my parents and then from my wife when she began to teach. I had little to give in return but felt that I was providing my family with the opportunity to do something meaningful by enabling me to pursue my important studies. It was my wife's complaint of neglect four days before my doctoral orals that led me to go blank during the examination. I was furious with her; but, as I discovered in therapy, I unconsciously turned my destructive impulses against myself in order to show her what she had done to me.

My poor performance on the orals shattered my idealized image and crushed my pride. Flooded with the feelings of worthlessness against which I had been defending myself, I tried to restore my pride by producing a great dissertation; but the demands I made on myself were so great that nothing seemed good enough; and I became demoralized, unable to write. This led me to switch defensive strategies. With my self-effacing side now dominant, I embraced George Eliot's philosophy of living for others. I became highly critical of my expansive self, condemning the competitiveness at Hopkins, my earlier arrogance, and my callous behavior to my family.

Although completing the dissertation enabled me to resume my ambitious course, I now dreaded writing and was intellectually at sea. During the period of my identification with George Eliot, I knew what I thought about everything; but when my enthusiasm for her ideas disappeared, I had nothing to put in their place. My experience in therapy added to my bewilderment, since I was undergoing constant change, and things looked different to me every day. I decided to revise my dissertation by simply cutting and polishing, without rereading George Eliot or rethinking anything I had said. This turned out to be wise, since what I had written had its own value, and my beliefs did not begin to stabilize until after the revision was complete.

When I started to reread George Eliot, I had been in therapy for close to four years, had studied a great deal of psychoanalytic theory, and had begun to develop the psychological approach to fiction that I presented in my second book (Paris 1974). The first novel I reread was *The Mill on the Floss*, to which I did not respond at all as I had done before. Going back to the copy I had marked while working on my dissertation, I found that I had underlined passages of rhetorical and thematic significance and had left unmarked the pages that depicted the inner life of Maggie

Tulliver and her interactions with other people. Now the novel's portrayal of Maggie's character and conflicts seemed remarkably perceptive to me. I began to admire George Eliot and to be excited by her work in an entirely new way. I wanted to recover her psychological intuitions and do justice to her genius in mimetic characterization. Although I gained new respect for her as a great psychological novelist, I was resistant to her rhetoric and found myself arguing with her interpretations and judgments. I was no longer simply less interested in her ideas but had become actively opposed to some of them.

There were psychological reasons for my revised view of George Eliot, of course, just as there had been for my earlier one. In criticizing George Eliot, I was trying to exorcize my self-effacing trends and to prove that I was not susceptible to them any more. I *was* susceptible, of course, or I would not have reacted against her rhetoric as intensely as I did. The expansive side of me was embarrassed, no doubt, by my earlier enthusiasm for self-effacing values; and my detached side took pleasure in seeing through all kinds of defenses--I had great pride in my psychological insight. For these, and probably for other reasons as well, it gave me considerable satisfaction to expose the weaknesses of George Eliot's philosophy; and I wrote an essay on *The Mill on the Floss* (Paris 1969) that became a chapter in *A Psychological Approach to Fiction* (1974).

But there was more, I think, than a rearrangement of defensive strategies behind my altered response. When I first read Horney, I recognized myself in almost everything she said and was amazed at how well she knew me. There was one thing, however, to which I did not respond, and that was her concept of the "real self." I realized that this concept was fundamental to her thinking, for she taught that health consists in the actualization of the real self and neurosis in alienation from it. Yet her idea of a real self seemed vague, mystical, and elusive, something I could not grasp. It did not make sense until I made contact with what I felt to be my real self after a number of years of therapy. When I then reread Horney, I realized that she had anticipated this sequence of events. The real self will seem like "a phantom," she wrote, unless we are "acquainted with the later stages of analysis" (1950, 175). It is a "possible self," what we would have been if we had developed in a nurturing environment, or what we can become if we are "freed of the crippling shackles of neurosis" (158).

For Horney, the real self is not a fixed entity but a set of "intrinsic potentialities" (1950, 17) -- including temperament, talents, capacities, and predispositions -- that are part of our genetic makeup and need a favorable environment in which to unfold. It is a self-in-the-world that may evolve differently in different surroundings. Horney gave much attention to culture, but she regarded the family as the most important influence on the child's development. When their own neuroses prevent parents from loving the child or even conceiving "of him as the particular individual he is," the child develops a feeling of basic anxiety that prevents him "from relating himself to others with the spontaneity of his real feelings, and forces him to find ways to cope with them" (18). The child's emotions and behaviors are no longer expressions of his or her genuine self but are dictated by defensive strategies.

According to Horney, a poor fit between child and environment sets in motion a process of self-alienated development in which an idealized image replaces the real self as the primary source of motivation. We now have two selves in Horney's theory: the real self, which requires a great deal of nurturing in a healthy family and culture, and the idealized self, which is impossible to

actualize because it transcends human possibilities and is full of contradictions. Self-idealization gives rise to yet a third self, the "despised self," which is what we feel ourselves to be when we fail to live up to our inner dictates or when the world does not honor our claims. Horney also posits an "actual self," which is who we really are at any given time. The actual self is a mixture of the strengths and weakness, defensive strategies and strivings for health that have been produced by the interaction between our given nature and our environment. When there has been a good fit, there will be little disparity between the real and actual selves, and we will have a clear sense of who we are. When the fit has been poor, the disparity will be great, and we will be confused about our identity.

All this felt right to me after I had reached a certain point in therapy, even though I felt that I still had a long way to go. My understanding of the real self and the process of healthy growth was further influenced by the writings of Abraham Maslow and other Third Force (or humanistic) psychologists, whose theories are complementary to Horney's (see Paris 1986). Like Horney, Maslow argued that we have an intrinsic nature which it is our object in life to fulfill. In addition to tension reduction and conditioning, we are motivated by a third force, an inherent striving for growth, that urges us to realize our given potentialities.

I found Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs to be a particularly useful concept. According to Maslow, all people have needs for physiological satisfaction, for safety, for love and belonging, for esteem, and for self-actualization. The needs are arranged hierarchically in order of their strength. Our motivational system tends to be organized at any given time around the lowest unmet need. We are motivated by higher needs as the lower ones are met, until, ideally, we are free to pursue self-actualization, the intrinsically satisfying use of our inherent potentialities. Maslow also posited basic needs for beauty and for knowledge and understanding that he did not incorporate into his hierarchy.

Frustration of the basic needs produces pathology. It arrests our development, alienates us from our real selves, and leads us to devise strategies for making up our deficiencies. The basic needs are inherently healthy and are capable of being gratified, but they turn into insatiable neurotic needs when they are insufficiently gratified. Reading Horney from a Maslovian perspective, I could see that she was mainly concerned with the strategies we develop to deal with the frustration of our *neurotic* needs for safety, love and belonging, and esteem.

I found in Horney, Maslow, and other Third Force psychologists a humanistic value system that, after my experience in therapy, I much preferred to George Eliot's. Values are generated by human needs, with undistorted basic needs generating healthy values and neurotic needs unhealthy ones. What was missing in George Eliot was the ability to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy needs and values. (For a fuller discussion of the ideas summarized here, see Horney 1945 and 1950, Maslow 1970, and Paris 1986, 1991c, and 1994a.)

Through a combination of reading and psychotherapy, I was able to arrive at a sense of meaning, purpose, and value such as I had once found in George Eliot. Horney described the real self as "the alive, unique, personal center of ourselves" (1950, 155), the actualization of which is the meaning of life and alienation from which may be called a "psychic death" (1945, 183). She quoted John Macmurray to the effect that life has no other "significance ... than to be ourselves



fully and completely" (1945, 183). For Horney, the wish to develop oneself "belongs among those strivings that defy further analysis" (23). The real self is her first cause, her prime mover, a source of intrinsically satisfying activity that requires nothing else to justify or explain it. I felt comfortable with this.

Alienation from the real self leaves us without a clear sense of purpose, and we are governed instead by the conflicting demands of our defensive strategies. Although we make one of our strategies predominant, the others continue to be components of our idealized image, which reflects the "basic conflict" between our tendencies to move toward, against, or away from others. Each of these moves generates its own set of beliefs, values, behaviors, and inner dictates; and we are often caught in what Horney calls a "crossfire of conflicting shoulds" that leads us to oscillate back and forth between our solutions, much as Raskolnikov does in *Crime and Punishment* (see Paris 1978b, 1991, 1994b). Since obeying one set of inner dictates leads us to violate others, we are bound to hate ourselves whatever we do and to try to find ways to escape that self-hate..

Rereading George Eliot from my new perspective, I recognized the characters she celebrates as frustrated, self-alienated individuals, beset by inner conflicts, whose living for others is often a defense against despair, as mine had been when I was having so much difficulty writing my dissertation. I now felt that the highest good was not living for others but self-actualization. This was a better after which we may strive that George Eliot was unable to envision and hence could not discover through her experiments in life.

Although I have been discussing the shift in my response to George Eliot that occurred in the years between the completion of my dissertation and the writing of *A Psychological Approach to Fiction*, much of what I have been saying applies to my current readings of her novels as well. I have begun work on this book several times over the past twenty-five years but have put it aside because I found dwelling on my state of mind when I was writing my dissertation to be too painful. The book is different now, of course, than it would have been had I written it at any of those earlier times; for my understanding has continued to evolve as I have pondered George Eliot's novels, engaged with my students' reactions, and read the work of other critics. Although certain of my core beliefs have remained the same, I am no longer quite the same interpreter that I was even a few years ago.

In discussing George Eliot's novels, I shall have occasion to juxtapose my present responses with those in *Experiments in Life*. As I do so, the role of personal psychology in reader response will be evident; for I have already provided some explanation of why I am now so troubled by precisely those things in George Eliot to which I was most attracted before. Because my earlier study was more sympathetic to George Eliot, it offers a better account of her perspective; but I think that my current more critical stance allows me to see many things I had missed before. As George Eliot observes of Dorothea's faith in Casaubon, "what believer sees a disturbing omission or infelicity?" (Ch. 5). No longer a believer, I now see much that disturbs me. But, as I have indicated, I still admire George Eliot greatly, although for different reasons, and one of my major objectives will be to do justice to the genius in mimetic characterization I previously failed to recognize. George Eliot's greatest psychological novels are *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch*,

and *Daniel Deronda*. Since I still agree with most of what I said about *The Mill on the Floss* in *A Psychological Approach to Fiction*, I shall concentrate on the last two novels here.

### III

I have so far discussed some of the reasons for the change in my response to George Eliot: the successful completion of my dissertation, which did away with my need of the living-for-others defense, and my experience in psychotherapy, which made me aware of the destructiveness of the solutions George Eliot celebrates. Accompanying these developments, there was a change in the way I approached fiction.

The theories of Karen Horney had helped me to understand my loss of enthusiasm for George Eliot's Religion of Humanity and my subsequent resistance to her philosophy, but I did not employ them in the study of literature until one day in 1964 when I was explaining the thematic contradictions of *Vanity Fair* to a graduate class. It suddenly occurred to me that the novel's inconsistencies made sense if I viewed them as part of a structure of inner conflicts such as Horney describes; and my next realization was that the major characters of the novel--Becky, Dobbin, and Amelia--are portrayed in such rich psychological detail that they can be understood in motivational terms, independently of Thackeray's commentary, which is often unreliable and confused (see Paris 1974).

It soon became clear that the other novels I was teaching in my Victorian and Comparative Fiction courses also contained highly developed characters whose behavior was inwardly intelligible. I had been taught to view literary characters almost exclusively in terms of their formal and thematic functions; but in the great realistic novels, numerous details have been called forth by the author's desire to make the protagonists lifelike, complex, and inwardly intelligible; and these will go unnoticed if we interpret the characters only in functional terms. Although round or mimetic characters are part of the fictional world in which they exist, they are also autonomous beings with an inner logic of their own. In E. M. Forster's phrase, they are "creations inside a creation" (1927, 64) who tend to go their own way as the author becomes absorbed in imagining human beings, motivating their behavior, and supplying their reactions to the situations in which they have been placed. Since mimetic characters have a life independent of their creator's conscious intentions, we cannot identify an author's conceptions of such characters with the characters that have actually been created.

When I began looking at the great realistic characters as creations inside a creation, I came to see that they almost always subvert their formal and thematic functions (see Paris 1991b for a full discussion of character as a subversive force). As Forster observes, round characters "arrive when evoked, but full of the spirit of mutiny. For they have these numerous parallels with people like ourselves, they try to live their own lives and are consequently often engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book" (1927, 64). That seems exactly right to me. As wholes in themselves, mimetic characters can be understood in motivational terms, and when they are so understood, they often appear to be inharmonious toward the larger whole of which they are a part. They are frequently in conflict with their aesthetic and illustrative roles.

When I first became aware of the incongruities between form and theme on the one hand and mimesis on the other, I felt that they were failures of art; but I have found them to be almost inescapable in realistic literature and have come to regard them as a concomitant of great characterization. As Forster observes, realistic writers face a dilemma. If their characters "are given complete freedom, they kick the book to pieces, and if they are kept too sternly in check, they revenge themselves by dying and destroy it by intestinal decay" (1927, 64). The artists' character-creating impulses work against their efforts to shape and interpret experience; and they must either allow the characters to come alive and disrupt the book or subordinate them to the main scheme of the work, which damages it in a different, more serious way. In the great realists, fidelity to their psychological intuitions triumphs over the demands of theme and form, usually without the author's conscious knowledge.

Mimetic characters are almost bound to subvert a work's formal structure because literary form and realistic characterization involve incompatible canons of decorum and universes of discourse. Realistic characterization aims at verisimilitude; it follows the logic of motivation, of probability, of cause and effect. But, as Northrop Frye observed, when judged by the canons of probability, "every inherited convention of plot in literature is more or less mad" (1963, 36). Form and mimesis arouse different sets of expectations in the reader. Mimetic characters create an appetite for a consistently realistic world. We want their behavior to make sense and their fates to be commensurate with the laws of probability. Realism does not round out a shape, however, and mimetic characters are often set into manipulated plots that arrive at rather arbitrary conclusions. One of our cravings, either for realism or closure, tends to be frustrated at the end.

In many realistic works, the formal pattern is closed, despite the improbabilities this creates, and the characters remain true to life, subverting that closure. In Jane Austen's novels, for example, the happy endings demanded by the comic structure seem much less satisfactory when we become aware of her protagonists' unresolved psychological problems and the deficiencies in their relationships (see Paris 1978a). One of the most common formal patterns in fiction is the education plot, based on the archetype of the fortunate fall, in which protagonists err because of their flaws, suffer because of their errors, and achieve wisdom and maturity because of their suffering. Another frequent plot involves a vindication pattern, based on the Cinderella archetype, in which a virtuous but scorned or persecuted protagonist finally achieves the status and approval he or she deserves. Both of these patterns are undermined by the mimesis, which shows the "educated" characters to have switched from one destructive solution to another and the vindicated characters to be less deserving of approval than the author would have us believe. When we become sensitive to the mimetic portrayal of character, the resolutions of these plots seem out of keeping with the characterization. In the novels I shall be discussing, the most striking examples of these patterns are the vindication of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* and the education of Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda*.

It is important to distinguish between the mimetic portrait of a character and the rhetoric by which the character is surrounded. By rhetoric I mean what we normally think of as theme and a good deal more besides. The rhetoric consists of all the devices an author employs to influence readers' moral and intellectual responses to a character, their sympathy and antipathy, their emotional closeness or distance. Rhetoric may involve not only authorial commentary but titles,

chapter headings, epigraphs, characters' observations about one another, the use of foils and juxtapositions, and a wide variety of stylistic and tonal devices. When we understand mimetic characters in motivational terms, we usually find ourselves responding in ways that are different from those that the rhetoric seeks to induce and taking issue with the author's interpretations and judgments.

Great psychological realists like George Eliot have the capacity to see far more than they can conceptualize. Their grasp of inner dynamics and of interpersonal relations is so subtle and profound that concrete representation is the only mode of discourse that can do it justice. When they comment on what they have represented or assign their characters illustrative roles, they are limited by the inadequacy of abstractions generally and of the conceptual systems available to them. They are also limited by their own psychological needs and blind spots. Writers tend to validate characters whose defensive strategies are similar to their own and to satirize those who employ solutions they have repressed. As a result of these factors, their interpretations of their characters are often wrong and almost always oversimple, in contrast to their intuitive grasp of the characters' psychology, which can be amazingly profound.

The more we recover their intuitions and do justice to their mimetic achievement, the more disparities we perceive between their representation of human behavior and their interpretation of it. Insofar as characters are mimetically portrayed, we are given an opportunity to understand them in our own terms and to form our own judgments. When we arrive at interpretations and judgments that are different from those of the author, the spell of the rhetoric is broken and the characters are seen to rebel against the main scheme of the book. In *Experiments in Life*, I tried to show how George Eliot's most fully developed characters illustrate -- indeed, validate -- her Religion of Humanity. Here I shall be examining the ways in which they subvert the formal and thematic patterns they inhabit.

#### IV

I have been contrasting my current approach to George Eliot, and indeed to fiction in general, to the one I employed in *Experiments in Life*. It may help to clarify my past and present positions if I place them in the context of a recurring controversy in George Eliot criticism. From the beginning, there has been a division between critics who have been disturbed by the moral, philosophical, and analytical components of Eliot's work and those who have welcomed them. In her own time, George Eliot was regarded as a sage. Edward Dowden reflected a strong current in the Victorian response when he spoke of her as "our great imaginative teacher" (Haight 1965, 115), a description that accords with George Eliot's own sense of her role as a novelist and with my view of her in *Experiments in Life*. There were frequent complaints, however, about her moral and intellectual preoccupations, which were often felt to be intrusive and inartistic. Among her contemporaries, there was often a preference for the early, less cerebral novels.

Perhaps the best known and most sophisticated contemporary response to George Eliot was that of Henry James. In his review of Cross's *Life*, James identified George Eliot's chief fault as an "excess of reflection," which he attributed to her irregular union with George Henry Lewes. Her "compensatory earnestness," "her refined conscience, her exalted sense of responsibility, were colored by her peculiar position" (Carroll 1971, 495). Especially in her later novels, she lacked

spontaneity, an ability to take pleasure "in the fact of representation for itself" (499). In the early works "perception and reflection ... divided George Eliot's great talent between them"; but, as time went on "the latter develop[ed] itself at the expense of the former" (498). The novel for her was "not primarily a picture of life, capable of deriving high value from its form, but a moralized fable, the last word of a philosophy endeavoring to teach by example" (497). Her "figures and situations are evolved from her moral consciousness"; "the philosophic door is always open, on her stage, and we are aware that the somewhat cooling draught of ethical purpose draws across it" (498).

Despite his reservations, James greatly admired George Eliot, finding hers to be "one of the noblest, most beautiful minds of our time" (503)--"vigorous, luminous, and eminently sane" (501). Many reacted negatively, however, to the publication of Cross's *Life*, which had a devastating effect on George Eliot's popularity. Its emphasis on her serious, sage-like, pontifical side reinforced the feeling, already widespread, that she was more of a moralist and philosopher than a novelist. In 1919, Virginia Woolf praised George Eliot's "tolerant and wholesome understanding" (Haight 1965, 186) and described *Middlemarch* as "the magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people" (186-87). This praise had little effect.

In 1935, Lord David Cecil observed that George Eliot's "reputation has sustained a more catastrophic slump than that of any of her contemporaries. It is not just that she is not read, that her books stand on the shelves unopened. If people do read her they do not enjoy her. It certainly is odd" (Haight 1965, 205). Much like Henry James, Cecil felt that George Eliot sacrificed spontaneity and the representation of life for its own sake to her moral and intellectual concerns: she "could not let her imagination have its head. Her intellect was always at its side, tugging at the reins, diverting it from its course, weighing it down with a great load of analytic comment" (209). Nonetheless, she was a great writer: "a massive caryatid, heavy of countenance, uneasy of attitude; but noble, monumental, profoundly impressive" (210).

George Eliot's reputation began to ascend as rapidly as it fell with the publication of F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* in 1948 and Gordon Haight's edition of *The George Eliot Letters* in the mid-1950s. By the time I published *Experiments in Life* in 1965, Leavis's study had been followed by a number of others, most notably those of Barbara Hardy and W. J. Harvey; and I was able to write that the case has been made for George Eliot's greatness, that the time has come "when she no longer needs to be defended as an important artist" but "can be studied as an acknowledged master" (ix). The past thirty-five years has seen an explosion of scholarship and criticism devoted to George Eliot; she is taken more seriously today than ever. It is her late novels rather than her early ones that are now held in highest esteem, with *Middlemarch* being regarded as not only her best work but perhaps the finest novel in English.

Although George Eliot's "intellectual weight and moral earnestness" had struck "some critics as her handicap," for F. R. Leavis they were her strengths (1948, 9). The "charm" of her early works is overrated when it is preferred to "the supremely mature mind of *Middlemarch*" (39), in which her "great intellectual powers" play a "necessary part" (61). George Eliot's weaknesses lay not in her moral earnestness and propensity toward reflection but in her emotional intrusions into her

work, particularly in her treatment of protagonists like Maggie Tulliver, Dorothea Brooke, and Daniel Deronda.

I quarreled with Leavis in *Experiments in Life*, especially about George Eliot's weaknesses, which I was reluctant to recognize; but in retrospect I realize that George Eliot appealed to me for much the same reason she impressed him. We both applauded her high seriousness, her concern with the big questions--with human nature, the human condition, the meaning of life. I used to teach courses in the novel that focused on how each writer addressed the question of Ecclesiastes: "What is it good for the sons of men that they should do under the heaven all the days of their life?" My great tradition consisted of writers whose answers I liked.

Between the 1960s and today, new issues have arisen in George Eliot criticism, as her novels have been approached from a variety of perspectives--archetypal, psychoanalytic, Marxist, structuralist, feminist, deconstructive, cultural, and so forth. But there has been a persistent interest in George Eliot's moral and intellectual qualities, and critics still argue about the aesthetic effects of her reflectiveness, her intrusiveness, and her ethical preoccupations. The discomfort with George Eliot's moral and intellectual seriousness that was so pronounced in some earlier critics seem largely, though not entirely, to have disappeared, and the Leavis view has won out.

There is a notable treatment of such issues in *The Western Canon*, in which George Eliot is one of the highly select group of twenty-six writers Harold Bloom identifies as being "authoritative in our culture" (1994, 1). Like Leavis, Bloom is wholly appreciative of George Eliot's moral and intellectual seriousness. "If there is an exemplary fusion of aesthetic and moral power in the canonical novel," he writes, "then George Eliot is its best representative, and *Middlemarch* is her subtlest analysis of the moral imagination, possibly the subtlest ever achieved in prose fiction" (320). Bloom says that he rarely agrees with George Eliot's "frequent interventions" in *Middlemarch*, but he finds them "as welcome as everything else in the book" (324). He can think of "no other major novelist, before or since, whose overt moralizings constitute an aesthetic virtue rather than a disaster" (324).

When I was writing *Experiments in Life*, I would have agreed with Bloom, but I do not do so now. I regarded George Eliot's overt moralizings as an aesthetic virtue partly because, unlike Bloom, I usually assented to what she had to say. I did not object to her frequent interventions or feel that she was too reflective or that her novels were weighed down with analytic comment. I welcomed her comments as guides to the understanding and judgment of her characters, to the way one should live, to the meaning of life. Bloom says that "a canonical novel is not supposed to be wisdom literature" but that perhaps *Middlemarch*, and "only *Middlemarch*," is. Since I embraced George Eliot's beliefs, her novels were certainly wisdom literature to me. Like Leavis, I felt that her intellectual weight and moral earnestness were her great strengths; and, like Bloom, I felt that she had succeeded in "harmonizing ... morals and aesthetics" (324). I did not agree with James that she proceeded "from the abstract to the concrete," that "her figures and situations" were evolved "from her moral consciousness" (Carroll 1971, 498). I saw her novels not as moralized fables seeking to teach by example, but as experiments in life in which she was putting ideas to the test of experience. She was able to harmonize moral concerns and aesthetics because her ideas were not separate from her art but embodied in and verified by it.

As I have indicated, I no longer feel that George Eliot's ideas are embodied in and verified by her novels. If we regard mimetic characterization as an aesthetic feature, the aesthetic and moral dimensions of her novels are not fused, as Bloom contends, but are often in conflict with each other. It is not that reflection develops at the expense of perception, as Henry James suggests. With the possible exception of *The Mill on the Floss*, the later novels are actually richer in perception, mimetically conveyed, than the earlier ones; and this perception often subverts the narrator's reflections by making us aware of her mistakes, misjudgments, and insufficiencies. Lord David Cecil felt that George Eliot sacrificed the representation of life for its own sake to her moral and intellectual concerns, that she "could not let her imagination have its head." But she does let her imagination have its head in her portrayal of characters and relationships, and this is one of the main reasons why her attempts to order life into "tidy little compartments of right and wrong" leave us dissatisfied (Haight 1965, 205).

From the beginning, there are, in effect, two George Eliots, the moralist and the realist, who exist side by side and are in conflict with each other (the subtitle of my dissertation was "George Eliot's Reconciliation of Realism and Moralism"). The later novels are both more moralistic and more realistic than the earlier ones, and hence in them the conflict is intensified. Cecil recognized George Eliot's "grip on psychological essentials" (202) but felt that her characters "are envisaged exclusively in their moral aspect" and therefore lack the fullness and complexity that give life to the great figures of fiction (200-201). It is my contention that her greatest characters have such fullness and complexity and that this is why they tend to subvert the formal and thematic structures of her works.

George Eliot conceived of her novels as experiments in life in which she would test her ideas by clothing them in human figures and individual experience. She hoped to arrive in this way at something more sure than shifting theory, something that would not only satisfy her own need for greater certainty but would, by its truth to life, flash conviction on the world. Her experiments were flawed in that they were full of contradictions between what she thought she was showing us and her concrete portrayals of social and psychological realities. Insofar as she gave us enduring mimetic truths, her experiments were successful; but these truths are obscured by her rhetoric, which, from my point of view, is full of faulty interpretations and judgments. What George Eliot did not see was that clothing her ideas in human figures and individual experience did not validate them but called them into question. In *Experiments in Life*, I did not see that either.

It is in the nature of mimetic truths that each age and individual will interpret them differently. Although the great literary characters are certainly embedded in their societies and certain aspects of their experience may be unrecoverable, they have a well-nigh universal appeal and are recognizably human to readers from a wide variety of periods and cultures. While the vitality of the characters is unaffected by changes of mores, values, and explanatory systems, interpretations are local, culture-bound, and profoundly affected by the psychology of readers and the conventions of reading they employ. My quarrel with George Eliot is not, as a rule, about her characters, which I feel to be wonderful creations. It is about how we are to interpret them, about the meaning of their experience and the results of her experiments. I feel that George Eliot's interpretations are flawed, creating problems in her novels, and that mine do more justice to the mimetic truths that it is her genius to portray but which she herself fails to understand. Of

course, my interpretations are just as local, culture-bound, and psychologically conditioned as hers, and other readers will no doubt disagree with them, just as I do now with those set forth in *Experiments in Life*. Should I undergo another psychological transformation and become yet a different interpreter, I might disagree with them myself



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