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**Totality and Autonomy:  
George Eliot  
and the  
Power of Narrative**

**by**

**Andrew Bertrand Lynn**

**Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of English Literature  
University of Glasgow  
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## Abstract

This study aims to explore George Eliot's early fiction in terms of her response to the two competing philosophical traditions of Spinoza and Kant. The dispute between these two traditions begins from differing claims regarding the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, and this of course will have important consequences for both ethics and aesthetics. I argue that Eliot, through her fiction, contributed powerfully to this debate, and my central concern will be her choice of the novel genre as a medium for these ethical and philosophical interventions.

The first part of this study sets out the terms of this historical debate, and considers Eliot's distinctive philosophical, ethical and literary programme, which I describe as a 'religion of immanence'. I offer readings of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* in relation to various philosophical issues such as Spinoza's three kinds of knowledge, Kantian ethics and aesthetics, hermeneutics and biblical criticism, and the literary theory of the early Romantics.

The second part of this study draws together these various historical strands, and in a sustained reading of *The Mill on the Floss* attempts to place Eliot within a post-Romantic paradigm, which is seen as a way of unifying the two traditions with which Eliot engages. I show how Eliot's fiction interacts with the literary theory of the Jena Romantics, and most importantly their conception of music as a paradigm for a non-representational approach to language and literature. I also discuss Eliot's use of the *Bildungsroman* model, which throws up surprising connections between hermeneutics and that other intense search for origins, Darwinism. I argue that George Eliot's negotiation of these philosophical issues is played out through narrative, which is at the heart of a distinctive ethical and literary project that draws upon the rich resources of the Aristotelian tradition.

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## Preface

This study aims to explore George Eliot's early fiction in terms of her response to the two competing philosophical traditions of Spinoza and Kant. I need to say at the outset that this is not primarily an influence study, although it will have to identify and explicate the elements of the thought of these two major philosophical figures with which Eliot engages. Indeed, it is precisely as an *engagement* with the philosophical and ethical questions raised by these two thinkers that I would prefer to characterise the present work, although I do not pretend that any conclusions I draw will be definitive from a philosophical point of view. I will be considering these philosophers in relation to Eliot's work, and will therefore be working with standard interpretations of Kant and Spinoza, rather than offering original interpretations. I have the more modest aim of demonstrating that Eliot, far from being the enthusiastic amateur philosopher of the biographies—incorporating philosophical 'ideas' into her fiction which nonetheless did not contribute materially to her art—was on the contrary eminently qualified philosophically for the task that she set herself, and that her ethical and aesthetic concerns (and towering achievements) are meaningless unless considered against the background of her philosophical position. I will argue that a forceful and coherent philosophical and ethical position underpins her entire narrative quest, and my central concern will be her choice of the novel genre as a vehicle for these philosophical and ethical interventions.

For reasons of clarity, I have divided this study into two distinct but related parts. Broadly speaking, the first part sets the philosophical framework for the whole study, while the second part picks up major themes introduced in the first part, and tries to locate Eliot within a post-Romantic paradigm. In using the term post-Romantic I am referring to Eliot's critique of Romantic individualism, as well as to her debt to Romanticism's critique of the

Enlightenment. Eliot's post-Romanticism can be seen in some way as an attempt to unify the two historical strands of Spinoza and Kant through an Aristotelian approach to narrative and ethics.

The first chapter is an introduction to my argument, and tries to explicate the philosophical background to Eliot's project, which I describe as a 'religion of immanence'. I begin by exploring Spinoza's philosophical and political project, and in particular his doctrine of the three kinds of knowledge. I also discuss the reception of Spinoza's ideas by three of Eliot's contemporaries who assumed the task of introducing Spinoza to an English-speaking audience: George Henry Lewes (whose impact on Eliot's fiction should not be underestimated), Matthew Arnold, and J. A. Froude. The discussion then broadens out to set out the terms of the debate to which Eliot was a powerful contributor, albeit through the oblique medium of fiction.

This chapter is followed by a rather ambitious attempt to read Eliot's first fictional work, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, against the backdrop of Spinoza's three kinds of knowledge. This is a necessary preliminary to the rest of the study, as it clearly shows Eliot's Spinozistic antecedents, as well as her response to Kantianism, while at the same time pointing us towards the conclusion that, ultimately, Eliot reformulates Spinoza's third kind of knowledge as a way of negotiating the dispute between Spinoza and Kant about the possibility of metaphysical knowledge. I hasten to add that I do not offer the *Scenes* as an analogy for the three types of knowledge—I merely wish to suggest that Eliot's engagement with Spinoza and Kant is ultimately a *literary* one, and that this dispute, if it can be decided at all, will be decided—or at any rate approached—through narrative.

The third and final chapter of the first part of this study presents a wide-ranging and detailed reading of Eliot's first full-length novel, *Adam Bede*. In this chapter I firmly establish the nature of Eliot's narrative project, which is also a hermeneutic quest for meaning, and a search for a philosophical and

ethical grounding for knowledge. I shall begin to locate Eliot as a post-Romantic by introducing the work of the Jena Romantics (those key figures at the historical juncture of modernity and Classicism), and in particular the founding father of hermeneutics, Schleiermacher.

The second part of this study continues to situate Eliot within a post-Romantic framework, and develops a reading of *The Mill on the Floss* over three chapters, each devoted to different philosophical and ethical concerns. Chapter four shows in a more sustained way how Eliot's work interacts with the philosophy and literary theory of the Jena Romantics, and suggests that her turn to their ideas can be seen as an attempt at unifying the two competing traditions with which we have been concerned. This chapter also discusses the concept of music as a paradigm for a non-representational approach to language and literature, one which characterises the work of the Jena Romantics, and which will be seen to have important philosophical implications.

Chapter five discusses Eliot's use of the *Bildungsroman*, and explores how Eliot adapted the model in *The Mill on the Floss*. While ultimately it was unsuited to her needs in the form bequeathed by Goethe, it will nonetheless throw up surprising connections between hermeneutics and that other intense search for origins, Darwinism.

The sixth and final chapter shows that Eliot's attempt to unify the competing traditions of Spinoza and Kant is predicated on a narrative and ethical approach derived from Greek philosophy, and Aristotle in particular. We shall see that Eliot was able to overcome what we take to be the Romantic impasse of the sublime by rendering ethics in a more Aristotelian way, in which we find ethics redefined as socially concretised practice, and where an awareness of the fragility of the other person engenders pity. It is this, together with her distinctive narrative and literary project, which ultimately sets George Eliot apart from the philosophical systems of both Spinoza and Kant.

## Acknowledgements

This study would not have been completed without the help, support, and encouragement of many people, in many different ways. To all those listed below, and others I have failed to acknowledge, my grateful and lasting thanks.

Professor Stephen Prickett provided generous and stimulating supervision over the several years of this project, and influenced the direction of my thesis in ways that are still being revealed to me. I can only hope that the quid pro quo for him has been a fruitful interchange of ideas.

Dr Donald Mackenzie deputised for Professor Prickett for one year, during which time he took the trouble to read Spinoza and Kant, and made some fascinating connections.

Mr Richard Cronin came on board at a later stage as a joint supervisor, and generously gave his time and expertise to guide the project to a conclusion.

Dr Claire Colebrook initially encouraged me to undertake research in this area, and I think it is fair to say that this thesis would never have been written without her general encouragement and intellectual rigour.

Dr Peter Lynn proved an exemplary reader (and father), and suggested many improvements to the text.

Dr Alison Chapman was also an exemplary reader, and had to assume the additional burden of sharing part of her life with George Eliot.

Professor Andrew Bowie took the trouble to write to me with some information on Schleiermacher, and kindly provided me with an early version of his article on the 'Aesthetics of Music', prior to publication.

Dr Chris Burden read earlier drafts of chapters one, two, and three, and made many helpful comments about biblical criticism and hermeneutics.

Mrs Kathleen Adams, Honorary Secretary of The George Eliot Fellowship, kindly provided me with photocopies of early issues of *The George Eliot Fellowship Review*, as well a précis of the 1973 George Eliot Memorial Lecture.

The friendly and efficient staff at the Document Supply Centre at Glasgow University Library tracked down many books and journals that were essential to this project.

At a time when I was feeling financially challenged, the Arts and Humanities Graduate School generously gave me financial assistance to enable the project to continue.

The following people also helped me, either by giving me moral support, or by taking an interest in my work, both of which are important to the lonely scholar: my mother, Mrs Mayzie Hants; my step-mother, Mrs Franca Lynn; Miss Liz Reeves; and Mr Andrew Reeves.

Earlier versions of chapter two have been published as 'Bondage, Acquiescence, and Blessedness: Spinoza's Three Kinds of Knowledge and *Scenes of Clerical Life*', *George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies* 30-31 (September 1996), 32-47; and "'Mr Gilfil's Love Story" and the Critique of Kantianism', *The Victorian Newsletter* 95 (Spring 1999), 24-6. Many thanks to the editors of these journals, Professor William Baker (whose friendly emails and genuine interest in my work went beyond his editorial responsibilities) and Professor Ward Hellstrom respectively, for permission to include previously published material in this study.

## Abbreviations and Conventions

The following short titles are used throughout:

Haight	Gordon Haight, <i>George Eliot: A Biography</i> (first pub. 1968; London: Penguin, 1985)
<i>Letters</i>	<i>The George Eliot Letters</i> , ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-78)
Cross	<i>George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals, arranged and Edited by Her Husband, J. W. Cross</i> , Cabinet Edition, 3 vols. (Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood & Sons, [1886])
<i>Tractatus</i>	Benedict de Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> , trans. by Samuel Shirley (Lieden: E. J. Brill, 1989)
<i>Ethics</i>	Benedict de Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> , trans. by George Eliot, ed. by Thomas Deegan (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistic und Amerikanistic, Universität Salzburg, 1981)

The following abbreviations refer to the *Ethics*:

Pt. = Part; Prop. = Proposition; Schol. = Scholium; Dem. = Demonstration; Exp. = Explanation; Def. = Definition; Cor. = Corollary; App. = Appendix.



# Part One: George Eliot's Religion of Immanence

## I

### Introduction: The Philosophical Background

In July 1842, the young scholar Mary Ann Evans wrote to the Reverend James Watt in connection with her offer to undertake a 'silent' translation of Vinet's *Mémoire*.<sup>1</sup> For reasons which are not clear, the project did not come to fruition, and in February 1843 she returned the book, excusing the delay on account 'of being engaged in a translation of part of Spinoza's works for a friend'.<sup>2</sup> It appears that the work in question was the *Ethics*, a few sentences of which appeared in Charles Bray's *Autobiography*.<sup>3</sup> The following year Evans embarked on the arduous task of translating Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*.<sup>4</sup> She returned to Spinoza in 1849, not however to the *Ethics*, but to his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*,<sup>5</sup> the effect of which Evans found soothing as she watched her father's health deteriorate.<sup>6</sup> In the years that followed, Evans

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Haight, *George Eliot, A Biography* (1968; London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 52. Hereafter referred to as Haight.

<sup>2</sup> *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-78), I, 157-8. Hereafter referred to as *Letters*.

<sup>3</sup> Haight, p. 52. Haight does not mention the possibility, previously alluded to by him in the *Letters* (I, 158n.), that it may have been Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* which Evans began to translate, before moving on to the *Ethics*. It is certainly probable that Evans immersed herself deeply in Spinoza at this time as, contrary to the impression given by Haight (p. 52), it was a full year before Evans embarked on the translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*. In January 1844, Sara Hennell wrote to Mrs G. H. Hennell: 'Your proposition to deliver up the Strauss to Mary Ann has been very cordially received, and I am sure will be a great benefit. I think she will do it admirably' (*Letters* I, 171). Also, in a letter of 9 October, 1843 to Sara Hennell (*Letters*, I, 161-3), Evans writes in very Spinozistic terms, echoing his *Tractatus*. Thomas Deegan also observes a Spinozistic influence in Evans's letters to Sara Hennell, including a letter dated as early as 3 November, 1842. Deegan provides strong evidence that Evans did indeed start translating the *Tractatus* at least as early as 1843. See Thomas Deegan, 'George Eliot, George Henry Lewes, and Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*', *George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies* 22 (September, 1993), pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, trans. by George Eliot, 4th ed. (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1902).

<sup>5</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trans. by Samuel Shirley (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989). Hereafter referred to as *Tractatus*.

<sup>6</sup> Haight, p. 69.

translated Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1854),<sup>7</sup> and returned to Spinoza's *Ethics* (1856).<sup>8</sup> The effect of this translation work on the development of George Eliot, the name Evans adopted for her fictional works, has been fairly adequately dealt with in respect of Feuerbach and Strauss,<sup>9</sup> but not in respect of Spinoza, whose philosophical, religious and political concerns inform much of her work.<sup>10</sup> In particular, Eliot's translation of the *Tractatus* (which has never been found) has been very insufficiently remarked upon; any studies that have been made on the relation between Eliot and Spinoza tend to concentrate on the *Ethics*.<sup>11</sup>

Spinoza's philosophical and political programme is underpinned by a comprehensive and codifying 'philosophy of immanence'.<sup>12</sup> It is an unyielding deterministic system, challenging Cartesian dualism in its conception of a single unifying substance, all things being modes of that substance. In his identification of God with nature, Spinoza does not imply a deified nature substituted for the creative God of theism, but simply an immanent cause. Far from deifying nature, he is deifying *reason*. Spinoza's

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. by George Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

<sup>8</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. by George Eliot, ed. by Thomas Deegan (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1981). This translation is cited throughout in the main text, and referred to hereafter as *Ethics*.

<sup>9</sup> See especially E. S. Shaffer, 'Kubla Khan' and 'The Fall of Jerusalem': *The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Notable exceptions are Dorothy J. Atkins, *George Eliot and Spinoza* (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1978); P. Bourl'honne, *George Eliot: Essai de Biographie Intellectuelle et Morale* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1993); and Rosemary Ashton, *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). Hilda M. Hulme suggests that much of 'Dorothea's progress in self-knowledge' in *Middlemarch* relies on Spinoza's distinction between 'active' and 'passive' modes of thought. 'The Language of The Novel: Imagery', in Barbara Hardy, ed., *Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel* (London: Athlone Press, 1967), 87-124, pp. 118-24.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Atkins, *George Eliot and Spinoza*. Atkins hardly mentions the *Tractatus*.

<sup>12</sup> Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, 2 vols. (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1989; rpt. 1992), I, ix. Yovel prefers 'immanence' to both 'pantheism' and 'naturalism' as being 'better suited to capturing the *fundamental* Spinozistic idea that other philosophers have adapted or interpreted' (x-xi). Yovel traces the history of 'immanence' as a philosophical concept, arguing that the idea of immanence is far more pervasive than one imagines (xii). My interpretation of Spinoza's philosophical, religious and political programme is greatly indebted to Yovel's excellent and important study.

philosophy of immanence 'views this worldly existence as all there is, as the only actual being and the sole source of ethical value. God himself is identical with the totality of nature, and God's decrees are written not in the Bible but in the laws of nature and reason'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it is an anti-transcendent philosophy, in direct opposition to the Platonic tradition, the modern epitome of which is Kant, and which has been for the most part dominant in the history of Western philosophy.<sup>14</sup> Immanence stresses an Aristotelian ethical naturalism, and argues for an alternative ethics to that of the duty-based ethics of the Enlightenment.<sup>15</sup> In a sense, both Eliot and Spinoza could be said to challenge the Hellenistic tradition.<sup>16</sup> Spinoza did so philosophically, but by necessity with a similar discourse to that of the tradition with which he wished to take issue; Eliot turned to fiction. While their concerns are essentially the same, I will be arguing that Eliot, using as a basis Spinoza's philosophy of immanence, transformed it into a unique 'religion of immanence', which in

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<sup>13</sup> Yovel, *Spinoza*, I, ix. The question is then raised as to why Spinoza kept the term 'God', when he might just as well have said 'nature'. We will see below that his retention of these anthropomorphic appellations was part of a rhetorical strategy, and also related to his doctrine of alternative salvation.

<sup>14</sup> A. N. Whitehead famously commented that *all* European philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p. 39. I should make clear at this juncture that although Kant's anti-naturalistic ('critical') approach to knowledge and ethics can be characterised as occupying an ultimate position of 'transcendence', it is more properly 'transcendental', because he asks how knowledge and ethics are possible and refuses the validity of metaphysics, i.e., what lies outside human spatio-temporal perception. For Kant, we can only approach transcendence (what lies outside 'experience') because there are transcendental conditions for the possibilities of experience. The noumenal can only be approached via the sublime, that is, indications of an unknowable 'beyond'. From a Kantian perspective, Spinoza's *Ethics* would be attacked because of its metaphysical posturing, and similarly Plato's metaphysics would be attacked because of Kant's dislike of any external authority.

<sup>15</sup> Kant's 'categorical imperative', for example, seeks to provide an objective basis for morality; a 'universal law' that appeals to all rational beings. The fact of our having these moral imperatives does not, for Kant, *prove* the existence of God, but nevertheless leads us to some inkling, however shadowy, of transcendence. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Part II, *Critique of Teleological Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith (London: Oxford University Press, 1911), p. 113.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Arnold, who affords an interesting comparison with Eliot, regarded conduct ('Hebraism') as 'three-fourths of life', while science and art ('Hellenism') accounted only for one-fourth. See his *Literature and Dogma* (1873), in *The Complete Prose Works of Malcolm Arnold*, 11 vols., ed. by R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968), VI, 139-411, pp. 170-201. As we shall see below, Spinoza, even though he rejects all historical religions, builds his programme for a 'universal religion' on basic 'Hebraic' rules of conduct, in opposition to the 'transcendent' ethics of the Hellenistic tradition. See Yovel, *Spinoza*, I, 198.

some ways can be seen as an attempt to reconcile these two historical philosophical strands, roughly characterised as Spinozistic and Kantian.

Thomas McFarland, in *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*,<sup>17</sup> charts the *Pantheismusstreit*, or the controversy over pantheism, which dominated the age of the Romantics and beyond, such that only two ontological schemes seemed possible: the 'I am' of the Platonists, Descartes, and an uneasy alliance of Kant and Christianity; and the 'it is' of the Aristotelians, Spinoza and the Pantheists. On the whole, 'the age turned against Kant',<sup>18</sup> even though the consequences of Spinozism, which left no room for personal immortality or free will (at least not in the traditional theistic sense), caused 'a philosophical and emotional schizophrenia that saturated both literature and philosophy'.<sup>19</sup> Spinoza was felt to be 'right', and Kantianism, which tried to establish free will, immortality and indeed God, became marginalised as a philosophy.<sup>20</sup> For the Romantics and beyond, Spinozism became not only the *only* philosophy, but for many of them, a new religion. For this reason we must examine that philosophy in order to begin to understand what might have drawn Eliot and many of her contemporaries to Spinoza as a determining influence. Of course, I do not mean to neglect the Kantian side of the dichotomy, and we shall return to it below once we have examined this remarkable philosophy of immanence.

For Spinoza, rational understanding consists entirely of knowledge of causal relationships as they inhere in God-nature.<sup>21</sup> We can in theory trace back any event to an ultimate cause, that is, the single underlying unity, or

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<sup>17</sup> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). See especially chapter 2, 'The Spinozistic Crescendo', pp. 53-106.

<sup>18</sup> McFarland, *Coleridge*, pp. 62, 71, 101.

<sup>19</sup> McFarland, *Coleridge*, p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> Conceptions of free will and immortality were necessary Ideas for Kant's principles of practical reason. See McFarland, *Coleridge*, p. 196. They could, of course, only be known negatively.

<sup>21</sup> Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza: An Introduction to his Philosophical Thought* (London: Penguin Group, 1951; rpt. 1988), p. 41. I rely primarily on Hampshire in the subsequent discussion of the *Ethics*.

substance, which is the 'cause of itself'. This positing of one unifying substance is not only in tension with Cartesian dualism, but also both the materialist and the idealist answer to the problem of the necessary relations between mind and body. Spinoza views mind and body as two different attributes of the one substance; mental events and physical events are only qualitatively different, in essence being two different aspects of the same reality. The traditional distinction between mind and body, is related to the similar distinction between God and His creation. This anthropomorphic conception of God has resulted in the misconceptions of theologians and philosophers through the ages.<sup>22</sup> For Spinoza, arguments about free will, immortality and the problem of evil are incoherent—there is no problem if we conceive God and Nature as indistinguishable; and to deny this is to put a limit on God's perfection (*Ethics*, Pt. I, Prop. IV), which is a contradiction. God is the only free cause, by which Spinoza does not mean 'free' in the everyday human sense. God is free in the sense that he is 'self-creating', and entirely unaffected by other modes; whatever happens is simply an unfolding of God's essence. Spinoza makes it clear that even God is not free in the sense of His choosing one action over another: 'There is nothing contingent in nature: everything is determined by the necessity of the divine nature to a certain mode of existence and action' (*Ethics*, Pt. I, Prop. XXIX). If we cannot admit contingency, then it is clear that 'things could not have been produced by God in any other manner or in any other order than that in which they have been produced' (*Ethics*, Pt. I, Prop. XXXIII).

So, in what sense could Spinoza still claim some limited freedom for humans, and even some sort of emancipation or salvation? The answer is in Spinoza's special sense of the word 'free', and his insistence that to be free is *not* to be *undetermined*, because that concept involves a contradiction. Rather,

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<sup>22</sup> See Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (London: Heinemann, 1993). Spinoza emphasises this continuity between God and Nature; indeed, they are identical according to his monistic philosophy. Kant, in contrast, stresses human finitude which means that the distance between knowledge and divinity is insurmountable.

to be free is to be *self*-determined: 'I call that thing *free* which exists solely by the necessity of its nature and is determined to action by itself alone. I call a thing *necessary*, when it is determined by another to exist and act according to a certain and definite law' (*Ethics*, Pt. I, Def. 7). In a sense, only God can be completely free, but a limited form of freedom is made possible for some human beings through Spinoza's concept of the *conatus*, which he uses to explain purposive activity. The *conatus* is an individual's endeavour to preserve in his or her own being, that is, to resist as far as possible, external causes to which we are all to some extent in bondage. A human being can be free in so far as his or her *conatus* manifests itself and masters the 'passions', which is the name Spinoza gives to these external forces or modes. For Spinoza:

Human power is extremely limited and is infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes; and therefore we have not absolute power of adapting external things to our use. But whatever may happen to us in opposition to our interest, we shall bear with equanimity if we are conscious that we have done our duty, that our power does not extend so far as to enable us to avoid these evils, and that we are part of Nature, whose order we obey. If we distinctly and clearly understand this, that part of us which is called our intelligence, i.e., the better part of us, will fully acquiesce in it and will strive to persevere in that acquiescence. For so far as we possess intelligence, we desire nothing but what necessarily is, and we can acquiesce in nothing but what is true; and thus in so far as we rightly understand what is true, the effort of the better part of our own nature is in unison with the common order of universal nature (*Ethics*, Pt. IV, App. §32).

This freedom is still relative—only God is completely self-determined—but freedom worthy of the name is possible, and even a form of alternative salvation, made possible to those who can enter the esoteric realm of the third kind of knowledge.

It is with Spinoza's three kinds of knowledge that we come to a controversial aspect of his system. Spinoza illustrates all three kinds by way of a famous example of finding a fourth proportional:

Let there be given three numbers in order to obtain a fourth, which shall be to the third what the second is to the first. Merchants are in no doubt as to the necessity of multiplying the second by the third

and dividing the product by the first, because they have not yet forgotten what they heard from their tutor without any demonstration or because they have often tried the same process with the simplest numbers, or on the ground of prop. 19, Book 7 of Euclid, that is to say, on the ground of a common property of proportionals. But in the simplest numbers there is no need for this demonstration. For example, given the numbers 1, 2, 3, no one fails to see, that the fourth proportional number is 6, and this kind of cognition is much clearer than the others, because from the ratio which we intuitively see the first to have to the second, we conclude the fourth (*Ethics*, Pt. II, Prop. XL, Schol. 2).

The first kind of knowledge is the domain of the masses—the ignorant multitude who live in the realm of the imagination (*imaginatio*). It is confused knowledge, or ‘cognition from vague experience’ such as that gained from the senses, as well as gossip and calumny. It can have as its basis subservience to authority: the tradesman in the example accepts his schoolmaster’s general rule, and proceeds to make an inference in the particular case. The multitude have for the most part little access to the realm of ‘clear and distinct’ or ‘adequate’ ideas which constitute the second and third kinds of knowledge. The second kind is reason (*ratio*), and consists of ‘adequate common notions and ideas which we possess of the properties of things’, and is illustrated in the example by the merchant knowing the truths of geometry. He still uses the same rule as the tradesman who accepts the authority of the schoolmaster, but he can appreciate that the truth of the rule can be deduced logically from certain basic Euclidean axioms.<sup>23</sup> Yet another merchant has an ‘intuitive’ grasp of the self-evident nature of the rule as applied in a particular instance. This rather obscure doctrine of the third kind of knowledge is contrasted with the second kind in that we now no longer infer from the general to the particular, but we have ‘a synoptic grasp of some particular thing as it inheres in God-nature: essence through an immanent chain of causes’.<sup>24</sup> This elevated and sublime kind of knowledge is what has been seen as the semi-mystical aspect of Spinoza’s system; indeed, it is nothing less than salvation itself, for

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<sup>23</sup> *Ethics*, trans. & ed. by G. H. R. Parkinson (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1989 & 1992), p. 240n.

<sup>24</sup> Yovel, *Spinoza*, I, 210n.

Spinoza a true salvation, a secular equivalent of what the mystics had always sought but failed to attain. As Yovel remarks:

Spinoza was not a mystic, but he recognised in mysticism a misguided form of yearning and endeavour which, correctly transformed by reason and the third kind of knowledge, would become the rational philosopher's way of salvation, a reward as high in achievement as that which the mystics have been trying to attain by irrational means. In other words, it will be a secular and truly universal form of salvation.<sup>25</sup>

Thus we see that Spinoza has elevated reason to the place previously occupied by religion—in fact, he has proclaimed a 'religion of reason'.<sup>26</sup>

The masses certainly cannot as a rule aspire to the third kind of knowledge, and realistically very few of them will even reach the second kind, as they are constrained by their inadequate ideas of the relations of things—they cannot see the totality of the web.<sup>27</sup> Spinoza is nothing if not a practical philosopher, and at the heart of his *Tractatus* is the problem of how to live with the multitude, given that the majority will never rise to the level of reason, and will live in the irrational and confused domain of the *imaginatio*.

We have seen above that Spinoza was rehabilitated during the Romantic era, and his philosophy embraced, particularly in Germany, where it remained fundamental to that country's thought for much of the nineteenth century. Eliot's German reading helped to effect her shift from Evangelicalism to free-thinking.<sup>28</sup> Her translations of Feuerbach and Strauss have been shown to inform her work, and while she may have found Strauss too 'mythological', she was very receptive to Feuerbach, whose reformulation of the 'essence of Christianity as the essence of human feeling and imagination', established 'a

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<sup>25</sup> Yovel, *Spinoza*, I, 168.

<sup>26</sup> Yovel, *Spinoza*, I, 152.

<sup>27</sup> This is a constant image in *Middlemarch*, at the same time one of creativity and constraint. It is a suitably 'ambiguous' image. See Marilyn Lewis Hemminger, 'George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*: A Study of Vision and Form' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1976), pp. 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> Howard R. Murphy, however, argues that Eliot's views had started to shift fundamentally well before she encountered the German 'higher critics'. 'The Ethical Revolt Against Christian Orthodoxy in Victorian England', *American Historical Review* 60 (1955), 800-17, p. 801.



psychological basis to the study of Biblical texts'.<sup>29</sup> Spinoza was, of course, one of the forefathers of the 'higher' critics. His *Tractatus* is a radical critique of the historical religions, and a precursor of the later rationalist approach to the Bible.<sup>30</sup> But at the same time as Spinoza exposed the illusions of religious myth, he was acutely aware of the hold these illusions had on the domain of the *imaginato*, and he sought to use this fact *constructively*, given that the multitude, by definition, will always exist, and will always be guided by revelation and not reason.<sup>31</sup> Spinoza could thus be seen as philosophically radical, while at the same time politically conservative.

I will argue that Eliot assimilated Spinoza's ideas of the social value of myth, and the need—for reasons of social cohesion and political order—for a universal religion, based on certain nuclear Biblical precepts, in order to reshape the *imaginato*, 'so as to transform and institutionalise the latter's effects in semirational patterns'.<sup>32</sup> It will of course only be an *imitation* of reason, and the realm of the *imaginato* will still be dominated by confused and inadequate ideas, and live in bondage to the passions, but social order will be maintained and anarchy avoided by this semirational paradigm. Of course, what motivates the philosopher—reason—will not motivate the multitude, which will still need to be subservient to the power of the State, in order that its conduct conforms to that of the philosopher. The learned few will not try and disabuse the multitude from its belief in transcendental concepts and the authority of the Bible; there would be no point, and it would more suit the purposes of the philosopher to use the fact of the irrationality of the multitude *constructively*. As a result:

these two radically different types [i.e., the learned and the multitude] will manifest little or no difference in their external conduct, for each in his way will act in accordance with the rules of

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<sup>29</sup> Ashton, *The German Idea*, p. 156.

<sup>30</sup> See Hampshire, *Spinoza*, p. 151.

<sup>31</sup> Yovel, *Spinoza*, I, 133.

<sup>32</sup> Yovel, *Spinoza*, I, 130.

justice and mutual social benefit. Purified religion and the rationalized state are thus designed to engender in the multitude the same conduct that the rational model requires, even though it will be motivated by nonrational powers and by inadequate ideas.<sup>33</sup>

Eliot's emphasis on piety, duty, sympathy, and the 'Divine Law' will be related to Spinoza's political programme as outlined in the *Tractatus* (see below, chapter two). However, we first need to explore the response to Spinoza by some of Eliot's contemporaries, in order to justify the claim that the influence on Eliot of her translation of the *Tractatus* has been undervalued, and that it is perhaps the most important aspect of her reformulation of Spinoza's 'philosophy of immanence' into a distinctive 'religion of immanence'.

G. H. Lewes always maintained that Spinoza was not an atheist, and not even a pantheist in the 'common acceptation of the term'.<sup>34</sup> He notes that 'Spinoza did not deny the existence of God; he denied the existence of the world: he was consequently an *Acosmist*, not an atheist'.<sup>35</sup> This would seem to the theists, 'that logically there is but a trivial distinction between his Acosmism, which makes God the one universal being, and Atheism, which makes the cosmos the one universal existence. Observe, I say "logically" there is but little difference; spiritually, the difference is profound'.<sup>36</sup> Lewes

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<sup>33</sup> Yovel, *Spinoza*, I, 130..

<sup>34</sup> 'Spinoza, Spinozism', *Penny Cyclopaedia for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, 22 (1842), p. 353.

<sup>35</sup> *Biographical History of Philosophy* (London, 1857), p. 405n. This is a reworked version of his earlier article, 'Spinoza's Life and Works', *Westminster Review* 39 (May, 1843), 372-407. See also his 'Spinoza', *The Fortnightly Review* 4 (April, 1866), 385-406.

<sup>36</sup> Lewes, 'Spinoza', p. 398. Henry Hallam, in his *Introduction to the History of Europe, in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 4 vols., (1837-39), IV, 251, asserts that Spinoza's 'Deity could at most be but a cold passive intelligence, lost to our understandings and feelings in his metaphysical infinity'. Lewes, in his own copy, held at Dr Williams's Library, has written in the margin: 'It is all very well to talk about cold and passive, but why use these terms of contempt? If you *understand* Spinoza you know you are falsifying him by them, for can anything be more grand than or omniactise than his Deity? Whether cold or hot is another question and abundantly superfluous. Spinoza's Pantheism is in truth the grandest and most religious of all philosophies & as such it is recognised by Göthe [sic] & the German philosophers who all embrace his creed. If you are bent upon having a God who made the world (as well as himself) & then 'let it turn round his finger' as Göthe said, well & good, only don't imagine that [your] 'faint possible theism' is the only possible credo for the religious philosopher—being indeed a puzzle to every philosopher.' On p. 252, Hallam suggests that Spinoza's 'propositions [...] annihilate every possible hypothesis in which the being of a God can be intelligibly stated'. Lewes writes: 'pooh! every hypothesis possible to be reconciled to Thirty nine Articles—no further.' See William Baker, *The George Eliot-*

bemoans the fact that everywhere Spinoza has been branded as an atheist—except, of course, in Germany. He reminds us of Novalis's assessment of Spinoza as 'a God-intoxicated man',<sup>37</sup> and quotes the 'pious' Schleiermacher from his *Speeches on Religion*:

Offer up with me a lock of hair to the manes of the holy but repudiated Spinoza! [...] The great spirit of the world penetrated him; the Infinite was his beginning and his end; the universe his only and eternal love. He was filled with religion and religious feeling; and therefore it is that he stands alone, unapproachable; the master in his art, but elevated above the profane world, without adherents, and without citizenship.<sup>38</sup>

Lewes was at this stage a thoroughgoing empiricist, and could not accept Spinoza's 'initial error', namely that 'the subjective *idea* is the actual image or complete expression of the objective fact. [...] The order and connection of ideas is precisely the order and connection of things.' While this can be *deduced* from the premises, 'it is a position which is emphatically contradicted by all sound psychology. Nevertheless without it Metaphysics has no basis.'<sup>39</sup> According to Lewes, Spinoza was misled by the high claims Descartes made for geometry, and was wrong to suggest that 'metaphysical truths could be attained in the same way'.<sup>40</sup> The problem for modern philosophy, and in fact its 'first crisis', is that the only escape from Spinozism at the same time denies 'the possibility of all philosophy'.<sup>41</sup> So the choice for modern philosophy (until, of course, Kant) was one between 'Spinozism and Scepticism'. Lewes himself chose scepticism, but he acknowledges that Spinoza has 'become the

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*George Henry Lewes Library: An Annotated Catalogue of Their Books at Dr Williams's Library, London* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1977), item no. 927. All the known letters of Lewes, with the exception of those already published in Haight, have now been published, and they are full of interest to scholars interested in Eliot and Lewes and their circle. See *The Letters of George Henry Lewes*, ed. by William Baker, 2 vols. (Victoria, B. C.: University of Victoria, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> Lewes, *Biographical History*, p. 391.

<sup>38</sup> Lewes, *Biographical History*, p. 394. Lewes does not indicate which edition of the *Speeches*, simply giving it as *Rede über die Religion*, p. 47. There is some evidence that Eliot read Schleiermacher, but which book is not certain (see below, chapter three).

<sup>39</sup> Lewes, *Biographical History*, p. 411.

<sup>40</sup> Lewes, *Biographical History*, p. 412.

<sup>41</sup> Lewes, *Biographical History*, p. 411.

acknowledged parent of a whole nation's philosophy. [...] The ribald atheist turns out, on nearer acquaintance, to be "a God-intoxicated man".<sup>42</sup>

Lewes's assessment of the *Tractatus* stresses Spinoza's insistence on the need for a state religion, but only in respect of 'outward observances'.<sup>43</sup> The church will be subservient to State, which will regulate the religious observances 'for the sake of public tranquillity'.<sup>44</sup> He notes that the doctrine taught by 'the late *orthodox* and estimable Dr Arnold', is 'precisely similar to that taught by the heretical and persecuted Spinoza' (my italics).<sup>45</sup> He describes Spinoza's rationalist critique of the Bible, and his antagonism towards historical religion, in the shape of the priesthood, which he saw 'as injurious to the general welfare'.<sup>46</sup> It is clear that Lewes understood Spinoza's programme for a universal religion based on a certain key nuclear concepts laid down by the state, as part of the answer to the problem of the multitude.<sup>47</sup> Lewes quotes an anecdote which not only illuminates the prevailing sentimental notions of Spinoza, his humanity and his calm 'blessedness', but also illustrates the metaphorical and rhetorical nature of his whole programme:

One day his hostess asked him if he believed that she would be saved by her religion. He answered, 'Your religion is a good one; you ought not to seek another, nor doubt that yours will procure

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<sup>42</sup> Lewes, *Biographical History*, p. 413.

<sup>43</sup> Judaism has arguably always been more a matter of observance than dogma, the latter of which has preoccupied the Christian tradition.

<sup>44</sup> Lewes, *Biographical History*, p. 392.

<sup>45</sup> Lewes, *Biographical History*, p. 391. Lewes refers us to the Appendix to the first lecture of Thomas Arnold's *Introductory Lectures on Modern History*.

<sup>46</sup> Lewes, *Biographical History*, p. 392.

<sup>47</sup> These ideas could not have escaped Eliot. Thomas Deegan points out that the full extent of the intellectual partnership between Lewes and Eliot has been underestimated. They probably worked on some translations of the *Ethics* and the *Tractatus* as per Lewes's agreement with the publisher Bohn. See 'George Henry Lewes's Collaboration With George Eliot on Her Translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*', *The George Eliot-Henry Lewes Newsletter* 6 (September, 1982), 1-3. Also see Haight, pp. 199-200, for the story of the dispute with Bohn over this work. John Beer also notes the importance of Eliot's relationship with Lewes, and in particular his knowledge of German letters and science, to her fiction. Beer points out that it was through Lewes's scientific acquaintances that Eliot was introduced to many leading Oxford and Cambridge academics. See 'George Eliot and the Cambridge Ethos', in John Beer, *Providence and Love: Studies in Wordsworth, Channing, Myers, George Eliot, and Ruskin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 189-232, pp. 189-91.

your salvation, provided that you add to your piety the tranquil virtues of domestic life'.<sup>48</sup>

It is clear that Spinoza's assurances regarding her 'salvation', and his insistence on the value of her religion are at the same time rhetorical *and* 'true' in a philosophical sense. Given that she is one of the multitude, and that she cannot have 'clear and distinct' ideas about the nature of things, her idea of salvation will encourage her to live a good life, which she would manifestly not do by virtue of reason alone; she, like the rest of the ignorant multitude, requires promises of reward and threats of punishment to live in imitation of how the learned (those who have reached the second and third kinds of knowledge) live, that is, according to the dictates of reason. And, of course, Spinoza's advice to his hostess was 'true' in a philosophical sense: 'salvation' is possible, but salvation of a very different kind, one related to the life of reason and the third kind of knowledge. Spinoza chose his words carefully; he encouraged his hostess simply to *believe* in the truth of her religion, its actual veracity or otherwise being a different issue. His hostess believes in her religion because she is guided by revelation and not reason.

In a letter of 9 October, 1843, two years after she refused to go to church, Eliot wrote to Sara Hennell on the problem of reconciling the two groups of society guided by faith and reason respectively:

Ought we not on every opportunity to seek to have our feelings in harmony with those who are often richer in the fruits of faith though not in reasons, than ourselves? The results of non-conformity in a family are just an epitome of what happens in a larger scale in the world. An influential member chooses to omit an observance [e.g. Eliot's refusal to go to church!] which in the minds of all the rest is associated with what is highest and most venerable. He cannot make his reasons intelligible, and so his conduct is regarded as a relaxation of the hold that moral ties had on him previously. The rest are infected with the disease they imagine in him; all the screws by which order was maintained are loosened, and in more than one case a person's happiness may be

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<sup>48</sup> Lewes, 'Spinoza', p. 405.

ruined by the confusion of ideas which took the form of principles.<sup>49</sup>

Just like Eliot's family members, Spinoza's hostess will in all probability never be guided by reason, but Spinoza uses this fact constructively, not disabusing her of these beliefs based on inadequate ideas when they result in *outward* conformity to those of the philosopher; indeed, those very beliefs can be unwitting expressions of higher philosophical 'truths', which the philosopher has had to express equivocally.

Yovel convincingly argues that a major influence on Spinoza in his use of rhetorical, metaphorical, and dual language can be traced to his Marrano inheritance. The Marranos were Spanish and Portuguese Jews, converted to Christianity against their will, who had to practice a covert Judaism in the face of constant suspicion and harassment from the Inquisition. This need for prudence (Spinoza wore a signet ring with the inscription 'caute') and esotericism is partly reflected in Spinoza's frequent use of non-literal and even dissembling language. Of course, the main function of this technique is related to Spinoza's programme for the multitude, and to add a semi-religious dimension for those who can attain Spinoza's alternative, secular salvation.<sup>50</sup>

Spinoza insists that it is obvious to the true philosopher, that the realms of philosophical truth and religious authority are quite distinct. Lewes's essay makes it clear that he understood this distinction between truth on a philosophical level, and rhetorical 'truths' on a lower level, that of the

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<sup>49</sup> *Letters*, I, 162-3. This is so Spinozistic as to make further comment superfluous at this stage, but we can mention in passing that it provides further evidence that Eliot was deeply immersed in Spinoza in these formative years.

<sup>50</sup> See 'Spinoza, the Multitude, and Dual Language', in Yovel, *Spinoza*, I, ch. 5. Yovel writes: 'Spinoza's programme for the multitude cannot utilize clear and distinct ideas and their verbal correspondents as its vehicle. To have the desired effect upon its target group, it must be suited to the latter's mental powers and tendencies. This requires the philosopher to use language rhetorically, so that his discourse might trigger the desired effects in his audience. The rhetorical use of language has a social and cultural role that, far from being undignified, acquires philosophical import for Spinoza as part of his general theory of discourse. Just as people are divided into those led by the imagination and those guided by reason, so there must be different types of discourse suited to each group—and also discourse that will fit an eventual transition by allowing the rational model to inspire and externally reshape the imagination' (I, 130-1).

multitude and the realm of inadequate ideas. Lewes also approved of Spinoza's method of revealing the kernel of religion, distinguishing between philosophical truth and political expediency:

Read the fourteenth chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, and see how he distinguishes between what is essential and what collateral in religion; how faith in God and love of God, with the consequent love of mankind, are in his eyes the sum of all religion; how, even, regarding religious dogmas, it is not essential that they should be true, so that they be truly believed; and how it by no means follows that those who can give the best reasons for their faith are truly the most faithful, but, on the contrary, those who live most according to justice and charity. He knew his hostess was not wise, but he saw that she was virtuous.<sup>51</sup>

Matthew Arnold reviewed the *Tractatus* soon after its appearance in translation.<sup>52</sup> Spinoza, he says, wrote his *Tractatus* to show people the 'real teaching of the Bible, instead of the phantom with which they have so long been cheated'.<sup>53</sup> Arnold explains that Spinoza had managed, by his construction of a set of exegetical principles, to abstract out the Bible's ethical core, its divine revelation, which 'was simply: *Believe in God, and lead a good life*'. There is a distinction between the 'divine law' and 'human law': the former is universal, indifferent to nationhood, and inscribed in the heart, being no less than the road to 'blessedness'; the latter is temporal, and framed for the 'security and prosperity' of individual nations.<sup>54</sup> The human law of the Jews—obedience to God and the commandments—was only divine in the sense that it was 'dictated, by revelation, through the prophets'.<sup>55</sup> The prophets represented God's decrees as 'commands', because they had inadequate ideas as to the real nature of these 'eternal truths'. Christ announced them 'as *commands*, only because of the ignorance of the multitude: to those to whom it was "given to know the mysteries of the

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<sup>51</sup> Lewes, 'Spinoza', p. 405.

<sup>52</sup> Matthew Arnold, 'Spinoza and the Bible', *Essays in Criticism* (1865), rpt. in *Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1914), pp. 192-216.

<sup>53</sup> Arnold, 'Spinoza', p. 195.

<sup>54</sup> Arnold, 'Spinoza', p. 197.

<sup>55</sup> Arnold, 'Spinoza', pp. 197-8.

kingdom of God", he announced them, as he himself perceived them, as eternal truths'. The Apostles evidently understood the problem of the ignorant multitude, speaking to their respective audiences 'as unto carnal not spiritual'. However, in contrast to the prophets, whose message was fundamentally dogmatic, the Apostles 'wrote their Epistles as doctors and reasoners'. And because each of them conveyed his message differently, according to his own nature and with a specific audience in mind, we find we have an inconsistent and flawed account of the fundamental doctrines of religion, 'each apostle [having] built essential religion on a non-essential foundation of his own.'<sup>56</sup> These 'non-essentials' of religion, elsewhere described by Arnold as *Aberglaube*,<sup>57</sup> have obscured the 'essentials' of religion, those simple and basic moral precepts, the true substance of divine revelation.

Arnold reflects that, for Spinoza, theology and philosophy do not and should not conflict: the former only requires obedience; the latter, 'perfect knowledge'. Adherents of both can be 'saved', because to be saved is to be 'obedient'; and the speculations of theology are 'pious and impious, not as they are true or false, but as they confirm or shake the believer in the practice of obedience'.<sup>58</sup> Accordingly, Spinoza insists on the subjugation of the Church to State; and, further, the national church is to be remodelled and regulated so that it is not used as a platform for 'metaphysical Article-makers', and promotes only the central tenets of religion.<sup>59</sup>

Spinoza's system has captured the imagination of many great minds, notably Goethe, and for Arnold this can be located in its 'denial of final causes, and his stoicism, a stoicism active, not passive'.<sup>60</sup> At this point, Spinoza diverges most from the traditional Hebrew and Christian modes of thought, leaving no room for the notion of a transcendent or an interventionist

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<sup>56</sup> Arnold, 'Spinoza', pp. 198-9.

<sup>57</sup> See his *Literature and Dogma* (1873), in *The Complete Prose Works*, VI, pp. 202-13.

<sup>58</sup> Arnold, 'Spinoza', p. 201.

<sup>59</sup> Arnold, 'Spinoza', p. 205.

<sup>60</sup> Arnold, 'Spinoza', p. 210.



God, or for passive resignation to the vicissitudes of life. Arnold stresses the great gulf between the Spinozistic conception of the 'love of God' and its Christian equivalent; one is rooted in immanence, the other in transcendence: 'Spinoza's ideal is the intellectual life; the Christian's ideal is the religious life.' Yet, despite this:

by thus crowning the intellectual life with a sacred transport, by thus retaining in philosophy, amid the discontented murmurs of all the army of atheism, the name of God, Spinoza maintains a profound affinity with that which is truest in religion, and inspires an indestructible interest.<sup>61</sup>

J. A. Froude, whose *The Nemesis of Faith* was the subject of one of Marian Evans's earliest book reviews,<sup>62</sup> earned her admiration once again for his *Westminster Review* article on Spinoza.<sup>63</sup> After dismissing Spinoza's claim for the third kind of knowledge as the repository of simple, 'true ideas' on which all notions of certainty are founded,<sup>64</sup> he proceeds to criticise the geometric method of the *Ethics*, questioning whether, along with Lewes, Spinoza manages 'to bridge over the gulf between existing things and the abstract conception of them'. Froude's estimation is that Spinoza's demonstrations are not convincing, but in the sense that his system appeals 'not to the logical intellect but the imagination', he feels there might still be something gained by an examination of the overall shape of Spinoza's ontology.<sup>65</sup> Froude gives short shrift to Spinoza's argument for the existence

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<sup>61</sup> Arnold, 'Spinoza', p. 212. In a letter of Dec. 8, 1875, Arnold wrote to T. H. Huxley: 'Your letter [concerning criticisms of Arnold's *God and the Bible*] gave me great pleasure. First, because it put the saddle on the right horse, and made me indebted to Spinoza and not the Germans. It makes me rather angry to be affiliated to the German Biblical critics; I have had to read masses of them, and they would have drowned me if it had not been for the corks I had brought from the study of Spinoza. To him I owe more than I can say.' Microfilm copy of letter held in the A. K. Davis Collection, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. See also, Nicholas Murray, *A Life of Matthew Arnold* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), pp. 279, 379n.

<sup>62</sup> In the *Coventry Herald and Examiner* (March, 1849).

<sup>63</sup> 'Spinoza', *Westminster Review*, 64 (July, 1855), 1-37. Also see *Letters*, II, 211. Eliot wrote to Sara Hennell (21 July, 1855): 'You hardly do justice to Froude's article on Spinoza [Sara Hennell had reviewed it in the *Coventry Herald*, saying that it was 'less excellent' than George Henry Lewes's *Westminster Review* article of 1843]. I don't agree at all with Froude's own views, but I think his account of Spinoza's doctrines admirable.'

<sup>64</sup> Froude, 'Spinoza', pp. 5-6.

<sup>65</sup> Froude, 'Spinoza', p. 8.

of substance, finding it 'astonishing that Spinoza should not have seen that he assumes the fact that substance does exist to prove that it must'.<sup>66</sup> He then goes on to Spinoza's ontological argument for the existence of God, which enables Spinoza to claim this God as a being one and the same as the single self-caused Substance already established. Froude points out that Spinoza's ontological demonstrations were 'characteristic of the period', and the fact that Descartes, Berkeley and others also used similar arguments, but ended up with 'strangely opposite conceptions [...] of that Being whose existence they nevertheless agreed', only adds to 'the inconclusiveness of their reasoning'.<sup>67</sup> For Froude, these questions are not to be determined by metaphysics or geometrical demonstrations, and he rejects intellectually what he knows to be true intuitively:

The truth which is to be proved is one which we already believe; and if, as we believe also, our conviction of God's existence is, like that of our own existence, intuitive and immediate, the grounds of it can never adequately be analysed. [...] We ourselves believe that God is, because we experience the control of a 'power' which is stronger than we.<sup>68</sup>

Froude responds in a similar vein to Spinoza's arguments for freedom in a rigorously determined universe, and also the related problem of evil in such a universe. In the final analysis, conscience will dictate the truth or otherwise of these speculations, and for Froude, conscience dictates that Spinoza is wrong, although we should 'designedly avoid' these 'painful' speculations. He points out that while 'Pantheism is not Atheism, [...] the Infinite Positive and the Infinite Negative are not so remote from one another in their practical bearings', although we would do well to remember

that we are far indeed from the truth if we think that God to Spinoza was nothing else but that world which we experience. It is but one of infinite expressions of Him, a conception which makes us giddy in effort to realise it.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Froude, 'Spinoza', p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Froude, 'Spinoza', p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> Froude, 'Spinoza', pp. 11-2.

<sup>69</sup> Froude, 'Spinoza', p. 26.

The conclusions Spinoza reaches are simply the disguised conclusions of theology; indeed Spinozism retains 'all that is beautiful in Christianity', while at the same time shedding 'the more fearful features of the general creed'. Froude insists that questions such as free will and evil will not be answered by 'judiciously arranged demonstrations';<sup>70</sup> and 'practical instinct' will guide us in our conviction that at some point men determine their actions outwith the constraints of necessitarianism, thereby earning moral praise or censure. Similarly, the chain of causes can only operate so far, at which point there is freedom, which is 'fatal to necessitarianism'.<sup>71</sup>

However, Froude does seem to acknowledge, along with Lewes, that Spinozism is not a mere pantheism. The difference seems to lie in those Christian elements and associations, 'which in the system of Pantheism have no proper abiding place'.<sup>72</sup> He is even surprised to find in Spinoza a kind of salvation—that which is related to the third kind of knowledge, where 'the mind is raised above what is perishable in the phenomena to the idea or law which lies beyond them'. This idea or law is, of course, the knowledge of God, and the more knowledge of God we have, the more we are active rather than passive agents. We also come closer to achieving some sort of limited emancipation from the bondage of duration, seeing the world under the aspect of eternity (*sub species aeternitatis*).<sup>73</sup> Spinoza describes this semi-religious and esoteric doctrine in Book V of the *Ethics*, where he explains

that death is less hurtful in proportion as the mind possesses clear and distinct knowledge, and consequently in proportion as it loves God. Further, since (by Prop. 27, Pt. V) from the third kind of cognition arises the highest possible repose of mind, it follows that the human mind can be of such a nature that that portion of which we have shown to perish with the body (see Prop. 21, Pt. V) is of no moment compared with what remains of it (*Ethics*, Pt. V, Prop. XXXVIII, Schol.).

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<sup>70</sup> Froude, 'Spinoza', p. 30.

<sup>71</sup> Froude, 'Spinoza', pp. 36-7.

<sup>72</sup> Froude, 'Spinoza', p. 30.

<sup>73</sup> Froude, 'Spinoza', p. 32.

Even though, for Froude, the conclusions of Spinozism are to be resisted, he is not surprised that such a 'powerful' system has been so pervasive in European thought, one 'which has stolen over the minds even of thinkers who imagine themselves most opposed to it'. Schelling and Hegel's 'absolute pantheism', Herder and Schleiermacher's 'Pantheistic Christianity', Goethe's 'strong shrewd judgement' and Wordsworth's poetry all have a Spinozistic substratum.<sup>74</sup>

To his list of Spinozists, Froude might well have added Eliot; indeed, I will be arguing that not only was her *Weltanschauung* formed and informed by her absorption of Spinoza's philosophical works, but further that in the way that she thematises and problematises Spinoza's philosophical concerns in her novels, she becomes, in a sense, more Spinozistic than Spinoza himself.

In December, 1860, Eliot wrote an often quoted letter to Barbara Leigh Smith (Mme Bodichon), in which she shows herself to be sympathetic to the outward observances of religion, while recognising its intellectual limitations:

As for the 'forms and ceremonies' [of the Catholic religion], I feel no regret that any should turn to them for comfort, if they can find comfort in them: sympathetically, I enjoy them myself. But I have faith in the working-out of higher possibilities than the Catholic or any other church has presented, and those who have the strength to wait and endure, are bound to accept no formula which their whole souls—their intellect as well as their emotions—do not embrace with entire reverence. The highest 'calling and election' is to *do without opium* and live through all our pain with conscious, clear-eyed endurance.<sup>75</sup>

Basil Willey finds in Eliot 'the religious temperament cut off by the *Zeitgeist* from the traditional objects of veneration, and the traditional intellectual formations'. The tensions in her 'middle position of conservative-liberalism', were such as to make for a life of 'terrible earnestness', and for a heart ill at ease with the intellectual conclusions of her head.<sup>76</sup> This is the somewhat romantic view of Eliot, and as we shall see, I do not think it can be

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<sup>74</sup> Froude, 'Spinoza', p. 33.

<sup>75</sup> *Letters*, III, 366.

<sup>76</sup> Basil Willey, *Nineteenth Century Studies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1949), p. 238.

sustained.<sup>77</sup> I will argue that Eliot was *not* a woman of contradictions, and that her religious and philosophical position remained more or less consistent, as we will see from her novels, essays and letters. She was not simply like the other Victorian agnostics, hoping to replace the theological God with some kind of 'transcendent postulate' in an effort 'to maintain external moral sanctions'.<sup>78</sup> Nietzsche called this 'transcendent postulate' a 'shadow of the dead God'. However, in her notes on *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot maintained that

there is really no moral 'sanction' but this inward impulse. The will of God is the same thing as the will of other men, compelling us to work and avoid what they have seen to be harmful to social existence. Disjoined from any perceived good, the divine will is simply so much as we have ascertained of the facts of existence which compel obedience at our peril. Any other notion comes from the supposition of arbitrary revelation.<sup>79</sup>

Nevertheless, Nietzsche could not understand why the Victorian agnostics were clinging even more resolutely to a morality very much in a Christian framework once they had discarded their Christian beliefs. He even refers to Eliot, presumably thinking her representative of this repugnant class of English freethinkers:

They have got rid of the Christian God, and now feel obliged to cling all the more firmly to Christian morality: that is *English* consistency, let us not blame it on little blue-stockings *à la* Eliot. In England, in response to every little emancipation from theology one has to reassert one's position in a fear-inspiring manner as a moral fanatic. That is the *penance* one pays there. With us it is different. When one gives up Christian belief one thereby deprives oneself of the *right* to Christian morality. For the latter is

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<sup>77</sup> See also, E. S. Shaffer, 'Kubla Khan'. She writes: 'Willey's view leads him to the feeble conclusion that the effect of George Eliot's conversion to disbelief and the ensuing years of intellectual labour (so far from a mechanical work of translation) was that in her novels she 'preferred her heart to her head'. Nothing could be more characteristic of the impoverishment which passes for "history of ideas" in literary criticism, than this series of unfounded and inconsistent arguments and the vacuous conclusion which implicitly denies the value of the critic's own enterprise' (pp. 232-3).

<sup>78</sup> Kerry McSweeney, *George Eliot (Marian Evans): A Literary Life* (Hampshire & London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 37.

<sup>79</sup> *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals, Arranged and Edited by Her Husband, J. W. Cross*, Cabinet Edition, 3 vols. (Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood & Sons, [1886]), III, 39. Hereafter referred to as Cross.

absolutely *not* self-evident: one must make this point clear again and again, in spite of English shallowpates.<sup>80</sup>

Does Eliot postulate some sort of transcendent entity, something akin to Matthew Arnold's consciousness of the '*not ourselves*',<sup>81</sup> a shady area of our experience of which we are only dimly aware, but which nevertheless defines our moral imperatives? Did she simply believe that 'God, immortality, providence may not exist: yet man must therefore act as if they do?'<sup>82</sup> Critics have found it difficult to reconcile Eliot's determinism with the fact that the characters in her novels do seem to be causal agents, with narratorial praise or censure attached to their actions. One possible solution is offered by George Levine, who insists that Eliot 'was a consistent determinist, and that this is in no way incongruous with her continuous emphasis on moral responsibility and duty'.<sup>83</sup> He claims that Eliot basically adopts J. S. Mill's position, which is that the universe is completely determined, yet humans are still responsible for their actions.<sup>84</sup> In fact, for Eliot, a determined world is the only world where morality would have a basis; in an 'undetermined universe, every act would be capricious, because it need not be the result of one's own past thinking and experience or of one's consciousness of its possible effects'. The resolution of this 'determinist-freedom paradox', according to Levine, 'is essentially linguistic'. Mill effects a 'semantic shift' from 'free' meaning 'uncaused' to 'free' meaning 'capable of reasonable choice in accordance with our motives', which resolves the conflict between 'determinism' and 'freedom'.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps Mill is betraying himself as a root-Spinozist. The Spinozistic view of 'freedom', that of a human being 'free' *not* by being

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<sup>80</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 69.

<sup>81</sup> See his *Literature and Dogma* (1873), *The Complete Prose Works*, VI, pp. 182-3.

<sup>82</sup> U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *Religious Humanism in the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 112-3.

<sup>83</sup> George Levine, 'Determinism and Responsibility in the Works of George Eliot', *PMLA* 77 (March, 1962), 268.

<sup>84</sup> Levine, 'Determinism', p. 269.

<sup>85</sup> Levine, 'Determinism', pp. 277-8.

'undetermined', but by virtue of being 'self-determined', is not so far away from Mill's 'semantic shift'. Of course, Spinoza does not need to allow any, even limited choice in his ontological scheme, because the very idea of freedom in the conventional sense is incoherent and involves a contradiction. The free man *understands* the relations of cause and effect, and does not feel them as a constraint; on the contrary, this understanding is a form of emancipation from our finitude.

Nevertheless, the accepted wisdom seems to be that Eliot had a divided self, and that she was not ultimately concerned 'with the resolution of metaphysical inconsistencies'.<sup>86</sup> I shall be arguing that these inconsistencies and contradictions are more apparent than real, and when viewed against a backdrop of Eliot's 'religion of immanence', can be seen to resolve themselves. Indeed, it is no surprise that this view of Eliot as 'divided' has come to hold sway, given that it is precisely her allegiance to the competing philosophical traditions of Spinoza and Kant that has resulted in these misconceptions. I shall argue that far from merely living with these inconsistencies, Eliot's project is an attempt to reconcile and unify these two competing philosophical strands.

Broadly speaking, we can identify what is at stake by referring to the individualistic project of Kant and the Enlightenment, characterised by freedom from external authority and the assertion of self-determination and law. Against this there is what Kant would regard as the metaphysical pretensions of Spinoza, whereby some law is able to be intuited outside the self, and where we have the possibility of metaphysical knowledge and a sense of the totality beyond the self. Eliot, through narrative and ethics, negotiates between these two positions, and rather than assuming how we can

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<sup>86</sup> Knoepfelmacher, *Religious Humanism*, p. 113. He feels that 'Middlemarch thrives on paradox. It is a mystic's rejection of religion and a rationalist's plea for irrationality' (p. 114). 'But in its over-all compromise, its "middle" march between religious despair and religious affirmation, George Eliot's masterpiece implies a confidence in man's ability to surmount his enslavement to time and change' (p. 115).

know the totality, explores ways in which individuals might extend their intuition of that totality, which nevertheless is subject to the question of conditions. Whereas Spinoza had simply asserted a 'third' kind of metaphysical knowledge, Eliot insists that any such knowledge begins from the finite human subject. For Eliot, the Kantian categories are given through other people and through aesthetic experience, so on the one hand she is asking along with Kant how the Absolute is given or apprehended, but at the same time along with Spinoza she is affirming the ethical value of that striving to intuit the Absolute. However, rather than negotiate between these positions through philosophy, George Eliot explores the possibilities for a reconciliation through narrative. This is where she draws upon the rich resources of the Aristotelian tradition, where ethics and philosophy are primarily forms of life and practice, rather than abstract argument and theoretical dispute.



## II

### Bondage, Acquiescence, and Blessedness: Spinoza's Three Kinds of Knowledge and *Scenes of Clerical Life*

As we have seen, at the heart of Spinoza's *Tractatus* is the philosophical problem of the multitude. In formulating his political program, Spinoza assumes that there will always be a multitude, since it would be unrealistic to think that a majority of people could reach the second kind of knowledge—reason—let alone the esoteric third kind, reserved for a few rare individuals; those chosen few who can achieve that Spinozistic transmutation of the soul, an equipoise which is a oneness with Substance, or God.

Early in 1860, George Eliot, who had gained almost overnight fame owing to the reception of *Adam Bede*, wrote to her publisher in connection with the issue of a 'cheaper edition' of the *Scenes*:

I am very anxious that the 'Scenes of Clerical Life' should have every chance of impressing the public with its existence: first, because I think it of importance to the estimate of me as a writer that 'Adam Bede' should not be counted as my only book; and secondly, because there are ideas presented in these stories about which I care a good deal, and am not sure I can ever embody again.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Noble suggests that these 'ideas' are related to Eliot's 'doctrine of sympathy'.<sup>2</sup> However, this doctrine is an important part of all her works, so it seems doubtful that she would suggest that she might not be able to embody these ideas again. Derek and Sybil Oldfield, while recognising that the *Scenes* emphasise the need for sympathy, attribute its dominant philosophical tone to the unique influence of Feuerbach.<sup>3</sup> U. C. Knoepfelmacher also finds the influence of Feuerbach profound in this early work, in which Eliot 'wanted to

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<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, III, 240.

<sup>2</sup> George Eliot's 'Scenes of Clerical Life' (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> 'Scenes of Clerical Life: The Diagram and the Picture', in Barbara Hardy, ed., *Critical Essays on George Eliot* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 1-18, p. 2.

demolish the theological aspects of religion', while regarding 'this destruction as necessary to advance her humanist fundamentals'.<sup>4</sup> Feuerbach was, of course, a root-Spinozist—he regarded Spinoza as 'the Moses of modern freethinkers and materialists'<sup>5</sup>—so it is hardly surprising that the source of the *Scenes* is often identified as *The Essence of Christianity*.<sup>6</sup> There is more than Feuerbachian religion-as-anthropology going on here, however.<sup>7</sup> The fundamental 'ideas' referred to in Eliot's letter, I would suggest, are connected with her vision of a universal religion, a true religion divorced of anthropomorphism, but at the same time one that retains the mystical, esoteric and semi-religious overtones which are related to a Spinozistic ideal of secular salvation. This philosophical and political programme will need to reinterpret the role of the clergy, and I should like to offer a reading which places the principal clerical characters in the *Scenes*, respectively, broadly within the realms of the three kinds of knowledge which inform Spinoza's schema.<sup>8</sup>

When introducing his prospective author, George Henry Lewes informed John Blackwood that the *Scenes*

consist of tales and sketches illustrative of the actual life of our country clergy about a quarter of a century ago; but solely in its *human* and not at all in its *theological* aspect; the object being to do what has never yet been done in our Literature, for we have had

<sup>4</sup> *George Eliot's Early Novels* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Yovel, *Spinoza*, II, 51.

<sup>6</sup> Eliot's translation of this work appeared in 1854, but she did not finish translating the *Ethics* until February 19, 1856, only six months before she started to write 'Amos Barton'. See Haight, p. 199. George Henry Lewes wrote the entry on Spinoza in the *Penny Cyclopaedia for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* (1842), and a major article on Spinoza's 'Life and Works' in the *Westminster Review* the following year. His *Biographical History of Philosophy* was published in a revised edition in 1857, so he must have been revising the work as Eliot started the *Scenes*.

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy J. Atkins argues that Feuerbach, for example, posits an individual basis for ethics, whereas Spinoza 'recognises a universal moral order on which human values may be based'. Further, Eliot was free to change from literature to philosophy, because through Spinoza, she was able to synthesise determinism with freedom and a 'doctrine for human morality'. *George Eliot and Spinoza*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> This reading was suggested by Dorothy J. Atkins, but not developed. See *George Eliot and Spinoza*, p. 164. I am not suggesting that *Scenes of Clerical Life* is an allegory, or that there is a direct schematic connection between the three clergymen and Spinoza's three kinds of knowledge. However, a reading informed by Spinoza's epistemology may be instructive, and help address some problems of the interpretation of Eliot's philosophical and religious position.

abundant religious stories polemical and doctrinal, but since the 'Vicar' and Miss Austen, no stories representing the clergy like any other class with the humours, sorrows, and troubles of other men. He begged me particularly to add that—as the specimen sent will sufficiently prove—the tone throughout will be sympathetic and not at all antagonistic.<sup>9</sup>

Eliot in the *Scenes* is promulgating a *purified* religion, based on certain key nuclear concepts of human solidarity, and which seeks to use constructively the hold that religious doctrine has on the multitude. This universal religion is made more incarnate in the later novels, and in particular *Silas Marner*, but the groundwork for it is apparent in the *Scenes*. In 1853, Eliot told Charles Bray: 'Heaven help us! said the old religions—the new one, from its very lack of that faith, will teach us all the more to help one another.'<sup>10</sup> The *Scenes* represent both a critique of, and a reformulation of the traditional role of the clergy, and the interaction of the three clergymen with their respective communities allows Eliot to lay the groundwork for the constructive hermeneutic exercise which characterises her first full length novel, *Adam Bede*. But it is in what F. R. Leavis calls the 'prentice-work'<sup>11</sup> of the *Scenes*, that Eliot can feel free to embody so concretely certain philosophical ideas even at the expense of artistic coherence.<sup>12</sup>

The series starts with the story of Amos Barton, who is representative of the domain of the multitude and the inadequate and confused ideas of the first kind of knowledge. We then proceed to Mr Gilfil, who, through a painful process of tragedy, comes to the acquiescent state of the second kind of knowledge, which relies on clear and distinct ideas, and who represents the ideal type of clergyman, whose flock by his encouragement act in an imitation of reason, even though they are inspired by the dubious grounding of the first

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<sup>9</sup> *Letters*, II, 269.

<sup>10</sup> *Letters*, II, 82.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon Haight, ed., *A Century of George Eliot Criticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 238.

<sup>12</sup> Henry James thought it 'contains [...] only a small number of the germs of her future power'. 'Amos', 'is much the best'; 'Gilfil', 'a failure'; and 'Janet' is unrealistic. Haight, ed., *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, pp. 45-6.

kind of knowledge. The narrative of his painful past also contains a searching critique of Kantianism, and by extension the dubious alliance between Christianity and Kantianism which sought to use Kantianism as a focus for Christian apologetics.<sup>13</sup> This appropriation of Kantianism was achieved by superimposing a body of transcendent and externally motivated ethics on what was essentially a negative philosophy: Kant circumscribed the extent of our knowledge, and did not allow for anything more than intimations of a state beyond our 'common plane of immanence'.<sup>14</sup> The series is finished by the portrait of the Reverend Edgar Tryan, one of the rare individuals who reaches the 'blessed' state of the third kind of knowledge, an intuitive knowledge of the relations of cause and effect, which opens up the possibility of a truly secular salvation.

Eliot's critique of anthropomorphism in the shape of the egoistic Amos Barton, her critique of Kantianism, and the backdrop of Spinozistic immanence can help us to define her humanism as one which rejects human finitude in favour of an intersubjective humanism which can extend beyond its worldly capacity. Kantianism insists that human knowledge is finite and does not extend to the noumenal, all such claims for 'positive' human knowledge being illegitimate and 'metaphysical'. Eliot stresses the ability of immediate psychology to replace such human or finite authority, and rejects Kant's postulation of the noumenal in favour of a reformulated Spinozism that translates the second and third kinds of knowledge into a language of feeling and sympathy.

#### Mr Barton

'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton' opens with the image of Shepperton church, which 'was a very different-looking building five-and-

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<sup>13</sup> See above, chapter one, for a discussion of the *Pantheismusstreit*.

<sup>14</sup> This phrase is Deleuze's. See his *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. by Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1988), p. 122.

twenty years ago'.<sup>15</sup> The narrator 'recall[s] with a fond sadness Shepperton Church as it was in the old days' (42), where 'the innovation of hymn-books was as yet undreamed of', and 'even the New Version was regarded with a melancholy tolerance' (43).

The importance of custom and tradition for Eliot cannot be overestimated. In the summer of 1856, not long before she started the *Scenes*, Eliot, in a long review of Richl's *Land und Leute*, shows her sympathy with his conservatism in respect of his wishing to retain the customs and traditions of the peasant class, which she regards as a class analogous 'in mental culture and habits, with that of the English farmers who were beginning to be thought old-fashioned nearly fifty years ago', together with 'farm servants and labourers'.<sup>16</sup> To the collective consciousness of this class, 'law presents itself as "the custom of the county"', and it is his pride to be versed in all customs. *Custom with him holds the place of sentiment, of theory, and in many cases of affection*'.<sup>17</sup>

Mr Amos is immediately contrasted unfavourably with 'Mr Gilfil, an excellent old gentleman, who smoked very long pipes and preached very short sermons'. Mr Gilfil is, of course, the subject of the next Scene, but his merits are immediately juxtaposed against Barton's demerits. Barton is 'quite another sort of clergyman' (43), who breaks with tradition and custom with his plan to rebuild Shepperton Church, with his disruption of the arrangements for the music at the services, and his doctrinal and exegetical excursions. It is significant that we are introduced to Barton by virtue of our 'eavesdropping' on a conversation about him by some of his parishioners. Mrs Patten—a survivor from the retrospective 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story'—articulates the alienation and loss of community associated with Barton's curacy:

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<sup>15</sup> *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. by David Lodge (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 41. Hereafter page nos. are cited in the text.

<sup>16</sup> 'The Natural History of German Life', in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. by Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 266-99, p. 274. Hereafter referred to as *Essays*.

<sup>17</sup> *Essays*, p. 279.

'Eh, dear', said Mrs Patten, falling back in her chair, and lifting up her little withered hands, 'what 'ud Mr Gilfil say, if he was worthy to know the changes as have come about i' the Church these last ten years? I don't understand these new sort o' doctrines. When Mr Barton comes to see me, he talks about nothing but my sins and my need o' marcy. Now, Mr Hackit, I've never been a sinner. From the fust beginning, when I went into service, I al'ys did my duty by my emplyers. I was a good wife as any in the county—never aggravated my husband. [...] If I'm not to be saved, I know a many as are in a bad way. But it's well for me as I can't go to church any longer, for if th' old singers are to be done away with, there'll be nothing left as it was in Mr Patten's time; and what's more, I hear you've settled to pull the church down and build it up new?' (48)

Barton's preoccupation with doctrine and exegesis is totally out of harmony with the needs of the community. He is the wrong type of clergyman to guide the multitude constructively into an imitation of reason which will make for social cohesion and help avoid disintegration. The community is rife with gossip and calumny, which are two of the insidious and debilitating elements of the first kind of knowledge, and which characterise the level of apprehension of the multitude. Indeed, Barton is no different from his parishioners in this respect: for all his university education, he is just as much influenced by the vicissitudes of public opinion, as the scandal with the Countess demonstrates.

As Eliot stated in her exposition of Riehl's views, any 'system which disregards the traditions and hereditary attachments of the peasant, and *appeals only to a logical understanding which is not yet developed in him*, is simply disintegrating and ruinous to the peasant character' (my italics).<sup>18</sup> Barton's appeals to logic are ineffective, as the workhouse scene illustrates. We are reminded that:

to have any chance of success, short of miraculous intervention, he must bring his geographical, chronological, exegetical mind pretty nearly to the pauper point of view, or of no view; he must have some approximate conception of the mode in which the doctrines that have so much vitality in the plenum of his own brain will comport themselves *in vacuo*—that is to say, in a brain that is neither geographical, chronological, nor exegetical. It is a flexible

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<sup>18</sup> *Essays*, p. 282.

imagination that can take such a leap as that, and an adroit tongue that can adapt its speech to so unfamiliar a position. The Rev. Amos Barton had neither that flexible imagination, nor that adroit tongue (63).

Barton goes beyond the fundamental concepts of justice, mutual help and solidarity, and invokes transcendent and supernatural images (not to mention faulty syllogisms) which are not conducive to a reshaping of the pauper mentality. Barton reveals himself to be as materially and spiritually impoverished as his parishioners:

'Do you like being beaten?'

'No-a'.

'Then what a silly boy you are to be naughty. If you were not naughty, you wouldn't be beaten. But if you are naughty, God will be angry, as well as Mr Spratt; and God can burn you for ever. That will be worse than being beaten'.

Master Fodge's countenance was neither affirmative nor negative of this proposition.

'But', continued Mr Barton, 'if you will be a good boy, God will love you, and you will grow up to be a good man.' (65)

Barton, for all his having 'gone through the Eleusinian mysteries of a university education' (59), is firmly part of the climate of inadequate ideas which characterises the multitude in its reliance on the first kind of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> This first kind of knowledge can take many forms, some of which can facilitate social cohesion by encouraging the multitude to act in an imitation of reason, which we shall see in relation to 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story'. Barton is not qualified for the second kind of knowledge—reason—which relies on clear and distinct ideas; Barton is even more confused than his parishioners. He simply adds to the inconstancy and confusion with his incoherent doctrines, part Tractarian, part Low Church,<sup>20</sup> which Eliot seeks to satirise and demythologise. Barton, as Mr Bond observes, is 'too high learnt to have much common-sense' (85), while Mr Cleves 'is the true parish priest, the

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<sup>19</sup> Yovel describes 'two sorts of multitude: the crude and the educated'. Spinoza envisaged the latter group 'both as a target in itself and as the medium by which reformed ideas should eventually reach the uneducated multitude'. *Spinoza*, I, 136-37.

pastor beloved, consulted, relied on by his flock; a clergyman who is not associated with the undertaker', one who

has the wonderful art of preaching sermons which the wheelwright and the blacksmith can understand; not because he talks condescending twaddle, but because he can call a spade a spade, and knows how to disencumber ideas of their wordy frippery (93).

But Cleves is no less educated than Barton; indeed, at the monthly Clerical Meeting, 'he is perhaps the best Grecian of the party'(94). Barton's education is superficial, and not socially useful: he has 'a natural incapacity for teaching'; he is able to carry the 'the pauper imagination to the dough-tub, but was not able to carry it upwards from that well-known object to the unknown truths which it was intended to shadow forth'(63).

It is significant that Cleves cultivates his own land, while Barton does not. Mr Cleves is a man of the people, in tune with their needs, who 'gets together the working men in the parish on a Monday evening and gives them a sort of conversational lecture on useful practical matters'(93-4). In the article on Riehl, one is again reminded of the treatment of Barton:

Another questionable plan for elevating the peasant, is the supposed elevation of the clerical character by preventing the clergyman from cultivating more than a trifling part of the land attached to his benefice; that he may be as much as possible of a scientific theologian, and as little as possible of a peasant.<sup>21</sup>

Far from being an elevated personage in Eliot's estimation, Barton is no more than a Philistine, in what in the same article, is one of the earlier uses in English of the term.<sup>22</sup> In fact, Eliot gives the term a 'wider meaning' than Riehl admits:

We imagine the *Philister* is the personification of the spirit which judges everything from a lower point of view than the subject demands—which judges the affairs of the parish from the egotistic or purely personal point of view—which judges the affairs of the

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<sup>20</sup> Knoepfelmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> *Essays*, p. 282.

<sup>22</sup> *Essays*, p. 296 and note.



nation from the parochial point of view, and does not hesitate to measure the merits of the universe from the human point of view.<sup>23</sup>

Barton is representative of this type. He interprets everything according to expediency and in terms of his advancement. He fails to see that in her extended stay at the Vicarage, the Countess is manipulating him, even though he is aware 'of the strong disapprobation it drew on him, and the change of feeling towards him it was producing in his kindest parishioners'. Barton 'still believed in the Countess as a charming and influential woman' (98), notwithstanding the strain on his finances, and the consequent effect on the health of Milly, his own 'Angel in the House', whose death, ironically, partly humanises him.<sup>24</sup>

The poet Edward Young is afforded very similar treatment to that meted out to Amos Barton, in an essay which Eliot started in April 1856, but was not able to finish until the following December, after the completion of 'Amos Barton'.<sup>25</sup> U. C. Knoepfelmacher observes that both Young and Barton 'are incapable of reconciling the worldliness of their personal ambitions with the otherworldliness of their professed religious teachings'.<sup>26</sup> Although Eliot is more heavy-handed in respect of Young, whose 'Night Thoughts' to her showed 'the reflex of a mind in which the higher human sympathies were inactive',<sup>27</sup> both clergymen are not representatives of true religion, but of 'egoism turned heavenward'.<sup>28</sup> Both men, by virtue of their 'adherence to abstractions', and their 'want of genuine emotion', are lacking in the sensibilities which will respond to the 'details of ordinary life'.<sup>29</sup> A passage omitted in the 1884 version of this article deals with what Eliot refers to as

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<sup>23</sup> *Essays*, p. 297

<sup>24</sup> For an interesting discussion of the deathbed scene in 'Amos Barton' and other Victorian novels, see Walter E. Houghton's *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 277 and note.

<sup>25</sup> 'Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young', *Essays*, 335-85.

<sup>26</sup> *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> *Essays*, p. 358.

<sup>28</sup> *Essays*, p. 378.

<sup>29</sup> *Essays*, p. 371.

'the true source of the emotion', and also corresponds with Spinoza's epistemological scheme:

Wherever abstractions appear to excite strong emotion, this occurs in men of active intellect and imagination, in whom the abstract term rapidly and vividly calls up the particulars it represents, these particulars being the true source of the emotion; and such men, if they wish to express their feeling, would be infallibly prompted to the presentation of details. Strong emotion can no more be directed to generalities apart from particulars, than can skill in figures can be directed to arithmetic apart from numbers. Generalities are the refuge at once of deficient intellectual activity and deficient feeling.<sup>30</sup>

Just like Mr Ely, whose speech to Mr Pilgrim 'was a generality which represented no particulars to his mind' (50), Barton's sermons deal with these abstractions, and do not have—in a Spinozistic sense—a 'constructive hermeneutical function',<sup>31</sup> tending merely to disabuse the multitude from their beliefs that they have previously held on the basis of authority. Barton is a representative of the historical religion with which Eliot wishes to take issue, and his doctrinal excursions do more harm than good:

The sermon in question, by the by, was an extremely argumentative one on the Incarnation; which, as it was preached to a congregation not one of whom had any doubt of that doctrine, and to whom the Socinians therein confuted were as unknown as the Arimaspians, was exceedingly well adapted to trouble and confuse the Sheppertonian mind. (73)

Eliot had made an earlier attack in a similar vein on the writings of the Evangelical preacher, Dr Cumming. According to Eliot:

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<sup>30</sup> *Essays*, p. 381. It is interesting that Eliot uses the term 'active'. Spinoza uses the terms 'passive' and 'active' to characterise those who respectively are in bondage to, and comparatively resistant to the effect of external modes. The former group is typically the multitude who are determined by these external modes; the latter groups are representative of the second and third types of knowledge, and are 'free', or 'active', in so far as they are self-determined. Those in the realm of the first kind of knowledge only have recourse to generalities; those in the realm of the second kind may deduce from generalities to particulars; while those rare individuals who reach the third kind of knowledge have an intuitive grasp of particulars without the need to infer from generalities. We may also note in passing that this is evidence which is in tension with Peter Jones's dismissal, in *Philosophy and the Novel*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 51, of Spinoza as a major influence on Eliot. Charles Wesley Schaefer points out that Jones is 'thinking of Spinoza solely as a metaphysician and forgetting Spinoza the ethicist'. 'Middlemarch Sub-Species: An Ethical Study of Mr Casaubon' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1988).

<sup>31</sup> This phrase is Yovel's. See *Spinoza*, I, 145.

Dr Cumming's Christian pays his debts for the glory of God; were it not for the coercion of that supreme motive, it would be evil to pay them. A man is not to be just from a feeling of injustice; he is not to help his fellow men out of good-will to his fellow men; he is not to be a tender husband and father out of affection; all these natural muscles and fibers are to be torn away and replaced by a patent steel-spring—anxiety for the 'glory of God'.<sup>32</sup>

'Happily', for Eliot,

the constitution of human nature forbids the complete prevalence of such a theory. Fatally powerful as religious systems have been, human nature is stronger and wider than religious systems, and though dogmas may hamper, they can not absolutely repress its growth: build walls round the living tree as you will, the bricks and mortar have by and bye to give way before the slow and sure operation of the sap. But next to that hatred of the enemies of God which is the principle of persecution, there perhaps has been no perversion more obstructive of true moral development than this substitution of a reference to the Glory of God for the direct promptings of the sympathetic feelings.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, Barton's theology is religion perverted; but while Eliot seeks to criticise its transcendent aspect, she, following Spinoza, is aware of its powerful influence on minds capable of vacillation. Barton's is one such mind: 'He would march very determinedly along the road he thought best; but then it was wonderfully easy to convince him which *was* the right road' (67).

Still, Eliot's publisher thought the characterisation of Barton was too harsh:

I hate anything like a sneer at real religious feeling as cordially as I despise anything like cant, and I should think this author is of the same way of thinking although his clergymen with one exception are not very attractive specimens of the body. The revulsion of feeling towards poor Amos is capitally drawn although the asinine stupidity of his conduct about the Countess had disposed one to kick him.<sup>34</sup>

There certainly *is* a sneer at Barton, but precisely because he lacks the 'real religious feeling' present in other more exceptional clergymen. As U. C. Knoepfelmacher observes, Barton's 'supernatural religion', and his 'doctrines about salvation obstruct his efforts to ease the burdens of the present'.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming', *Essays*, 158-89, p. 187.

<sup>33</sup> *Essays*, p. 187.

<sup>34</sup> *Letters*, II, 272.

<sup>35</sup> *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 48.

Perhaps in response to her editor's remonstrations, the Epilogue has a chastened and autumnal tone, which underlines a degree of narrative sympathy for Barton. His tragic situation is heightened in that he seems to have a sense of what lies beyond the multitude, but is unable to progress beyond that level of understanding. Mr Barton does not transcend his worldly finitude, but he uses a language of transcendence as though he had, with the result that his 'ideas' divorce him—literally and metaphorically—from the community. Perhaps that is the real tragedy of his situation.

### Mr Gilfil

When old Mr Gilfil died, thirty years ago, there was general sorrow in Shepperton; and if black cloth had not been hung round the pulpit and reading-desk, by order of his nephew and principal legatee, the parishioners would certainly have subscribed the necessary sum out of their own pockets, rather than allow such a tribute of respect to be wanting (119).

Mr Gilfil enjoyed this respect because he represented the true parish priest; one who, unlike Mr Barton, preached sermons which

made no unreasonable demand on the Shepperton intellect—amounting, indeed, to little more than an expansion of the concise thesis, that those who do wrong will find it the worse for them, and those who do well will find it the better for them; the nature of wrong-doing being exposed in special sermons against lying, backbiting, anger, slothfulness, and the like; and well-doing being interpreted as honesty, truthfulness, charity, industry, and other common virtues, lying quite on the surface of life, and having very little to do with deep spiritual doctrine (126).

Indeed, at this time in the religious history of Shepperton, 'to find fault with the sermon was regarded as almost equivalent to finding fault with religion itself' (126). It is also suggested that the parishioners were 'perhaps almost as much the better for this simple weekly tribute to what they knew of good and right, as many a more wakeful and critical congregation of the present day' (122). Gilfil is a man of the people, and it is pointed out that 'a superficial observer might have seen little difference, beyond his superior shrewdness, between the Vicar and his bucolic parishioners'. In contrast to the egoistic and anthropomorphic Barton, Gilfil speaks the language of the

multitude; he has a 'constructive hermeneutical function', 'for it was his habit to approximate his accent and mode of speech to theirs' (125). In terms of Spinoza's political and religious programme, Gilfil represents the ideal clergyman, one who by promulgating nuclear doctrines of justice and solidarity, encourages the multitude to act in an imitation of the dictates of reason, which in turn helps to achieve social cohesion, and to pave the way for the purification of religion.<sup>36</sup> This universal religion will be divorced of its historical antecedents and theological baggage; it will be a true religion, with one brand of piety for the multitude, and another for those who use as their common currency the adequate ideas which characterise the realms of the second and third kinds of knowledge. Thus the rhetorical and metaphorical aspects take on great importance, and in the case of sermons, it is form, as much as content, which is significant. Even young Master Stokes, 'a flippant town youth' (126), was able to write a sermon 'so astonishingly like a sermon, having a text, three divisions, and a concluding exhortation beginning "And now, my brethren"' (127). The multitude is still subservient to authority, and is 'perfectly aware of the distinction between them and the parson, and had not at all the less belief in him as a gentleman and a clergyman for his easy speech and familiar manners'. However, they are still in bondage to the inadequate ideas of the first kind of knowledge, and have metaphysical and theological notions which realistically cannot be expunged from their collective imagination:

The benefits of baptism were supposed to be somehow bound up with Mr Gilfil's personality, so metaphysical a distinction as that between a man and his office being, as yet, quite foreign to the mind of a good Shepperton Churchman, savouring, he would have thought, of Dissent on the very face of it. (125)

However, according to Spinoza's programme, while the multitude is acting in an imitation of the behaviour of those, like Gilfil, who rely on reason, this will be used *constructively*, and they will not be disabused of their

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<sup>36</sup> Yovel, *Spinoza*, I, 130.

inadequate ideas. While it is to be hoped that some of these purified ideas will filter down to the realm of the *imaginato*, and enable some members to live according to the dictates of reason, it is enough for the multitude (which by definition will always exist) to live in an approximation of these dictates, even though the dubious grounding of their apprehensions is the first kind of knowledge.

After this introductory chapter, we proceed back in time to the Cheverel Manor of 1788, presided over by the pre-Romantic figure of Sir Christopher Cheverel. These retrospective chapters are in part a searching critique of Kantianism. The particular focus of Eliot's attention seems to be Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, which sought to apply something of the 'universality' of the categorical imperative to aesthetics, and making use of the sublime, to suggest further that we can gain intimations of a transcendent realm, 'on the mere recommendation of a pure practical reason that legislates for itself alone'. Although Kant admits 'that such a disposition of the mind is but a rare occurrence', he insists that

the source of this disposition is unmistakable. It is the original moral bent of our nature, as a subjective principal, that will not let us be satisfied, in our review of the world, with the finality which it derives through natural causes, but lead us to introduce into it an underlying supreme Cause governing nature according to moral laws.<sup>37</sup>

Accordingly, the narrator uses the discourse of art criticism to underline the sterility and artificiality of this historical moment which marks the end of classicism:

And a charming picture Cheverel Manor would have made that evening, if some English Watteau had been there to paint it: the castellated house of grey-tinted stone, with the flickering sunbeams sending dashes of golden light across the many-shaped panes in the mullioned windows, and a great beech leaning athwart one of the flanking towers, and breaking, with its dark flattened boughs, the too formal symmetry of the front (133).

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<sup>37</sup> *Critique of Judgement*, Part I, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith (London: Oxford University Press, 1911), p. 51; *Critique of Judgement*, II, 113.

The description of the dining room has resonances of a Kantian aesthetic, with the latter's emphasis on the pure frame of the work of art which delineates it from any function of use. It was

less like a place to dine in *than a piece of space enclosed simply for the sake of beautiful outline*; and the small dining-table, with the party round it, seemed an odd and insignificant accident, rather than anything connected with the *original purpose* of the apartment (my italics, 134).

In her essay 'The Natural History of German Life', Eliot remarks on the 'falsification' of art in a discussion of realism, which points to her sympathy with the Dutch school of genre painting, and a Wordsworthian concern for 'the extension of our sympathies':

This perversion is not the less fatal because the misrepresentation which gives rise to it has what the artist considers a moral end. The thing for mankind to know is, not what are the motives and influences which the moralist thinks *ought* to act on the labourer or the artisan, but what are the motives and influences which *do* act on him.<sup>38</sup>

This dismissal of the categorical imperative (or ought) is followed by a little observed criticism of Dickens, who is characterised as a 'great novelist' in respect of his descriptions of the 'external traits' of his characters, but seen as deficient in his being unable to 'give us their psychological character'. When he does attempt a move into the psychological realm, he becomes 'as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness'.<sup>39</sup> Eliot also levels this type of charge at writers of the 'oracular' species in her article 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', which was completed shortly before she commenced writing the *Scenes*. Eliot observes that

the ability of a lady novelist to describe actual life and her fellow-men, is in inverse proportion to her confident eloquence about God and the other world, and the means by which she chooses to conduct you to true ideas of the invisible is a totally false picture of the visible.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Essays*, p. 271.

<sup>39</sup> *Essays*, p. 271.

<sup>40</sup> *Essays*, p. 311.

We can also note an oblique attack on Kantianism in Eliot's discussion of the 'mind-and-millinery' species of writers:

Lady novelists, it appears, can see something else besides matter; they are not limited to phenomena, but can relieve their eyesight by occasional glimpses of the *noumenon*, and are, therefore, naturally better able than any one else to confound sceptics, even of that remarkable, but to us unknown school, which maintains that the soul of man is of the same texture as the polypus.<sup>41</sup>

Eliot herself was charged with 'unreality' in respect of her characterisation of Sir Christopher and Lady Cheverel, who, according to a contemporary reviewer, 'strike us as old acquaintances whom we have known not in real life, but in books'.<sup>42</sup> I would suggest that several of the characters in this story are 'unrealistic', simply because they are in the first instance philosophical vehicles, rather than fully realised characters.<sup>43</sup>

Sir Christopher Cheverel represents the Kantian concept of a good will, which

is good not because of what it performs or effects, not by its aptness for the attainment of some proposed end, but simply by virtue of the volition, that is, it is good in itself, and considered by itself is to be esteemed much higher than all that can be brought about by it in favour of any inclination, nay, even of the sum-total of all inclinations.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Essays*, p. 310. Eliot's views on Kant and Kantianism were probably influenced by George Henry Lewes, whose *Biographical History of Philosophy* was published in a revised edition in 1857. He must have been revising the work as Eliot started the *Scenes*. Lewes (at this stage, at any rate) was a thorough-going empiricist, and claimed that because experience is 'the source of all ideas', and a priori ideas non-existent, 'Scepticism is inevitable'. He claims that 'the veracity of Consciousness, which he [Kant] had so laboriously striven to establish, and on which his Practical Reason was based, is only a relative, subjective veracity. Experience is the only basis of Knowledge: and Experience leads to Scepticism'. *Biographical History of Philosophy*, p. 565.

<sup>42</sup> *Quarterly Review* 108 (October 1860), 469-99, p. 478.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas A. Noble argues that Eliot's depiction of Cheverel Manor is not realistic, because it does not issue from experience, and that her characterisations of Sir Christopher, Lady Cheverel, Miss Assher, and Captain Wybrow reflect a 'lack of familiarity with her material'. He notices 'the painted backdrop, the flat crowded surface which reminds one of certain Pre-Raphaelite paintings, which share with this description the mid-nineteenth century predilection for meticulously detailed representation'. *George Eliot's 'Scenes of Clerical Life'*, p. 127. In criticising Eliot on artistic grounds, Noble fails to appreciate that the representation of Cheverel Manor, and the characterisation of some of her characters in this fashion, is a conscious decision to give form to her philosophical ideas.

<sup>44</sup> *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics*, trans. by T. K. Abbott (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), p. 11.



Sir Christopher has an 'inflexibility of will', but also 'some of that sublime spirit which distinguishes art from luxury, and worships beauty apart from self-indulgence' (159). In Kantian fashion, he has a pure aesthetic, free from all determination and interest. He demonstrates his Kantian detachment and rational adherence to a law for its own sake as he dismisses the entreaties of the widow Mrs Hartropp: "But it is useless to talk and cry. I have good reasons for my plans, and never alter them" (139). In fact, Sir Christopher 'had gone through life a little flushed with the power of his will' (167), and does not see why his plan for the marriage of Captain Wybrow and Miss Assher should not come to fruition:

'Yes Maynard', said Sir Christopher, chatting with Mr Gilfil in the library, 'it really is a remarkable thing that I never in my life laid a plan, and failed to carry it out. I lay my plans well, and I never swerve from them—that's it. A strong will is the only magic'. (213)

Sir Christopher's plans seem to have the authority and absoluteness of the Kantian formulation of the autonomous will:

Autonomy of the will is that property of it by which it is a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition). The principle of autonomy then is: Always so to choose that the same volition shall comprehend the maxims of our choice as a universal law.<sup>45</sup>

For Kant, the rational man as 'legislator', achieves 'a certain dignity and sublimity', and is able to perform actions which have 'a moral worth'. The autonomous will is the starting point of all true morality:

*Morality*, then, is the relation of actions to the autonomy of the will, that is, to the potential universal legislation by its maxims. An action that is consistent with the autonomy of the will is *permitted*; one that does not agree therewith is forbidden. A will whose maxims necessarily coincide with the laws of autonomy is a holy will, good absolutely. The dependence of a will not absolutely good on the principle of autonomy (moral necessitation) is obligation. This cannot be applied to the holy being. The objective necessity of actions from obligation is called *duty*.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Kant, *Metaphysic*, p. 71. Compare Barton, who shows a rule-following which is determined by external motivations rather than rational adherence to a law for its own sake.

<sup>46</sup> Kant, *Metaphysic*, p. 70.

Captain Wybrow, who also has a strong will (and a weak heart), is a grotesque caricature of this Kantian concept of duty. It is his *raison d'être*, to which all feeling must be subordinated:

'Why do you push me away, Tina?' said Captain Wybrow in a half-whisper; 'are you angry with me for what a hard fate puts upon me? Would you have me cross my uncle—who has done so much for us both—in his dearest wish? You know I have duties—we both have duties—before which feeling must be sacrificed' (145).

Captain Wybrow 'was a young man of calm passions, who was rarely led into any conduct of which he could not give a plausible account to himself'. While nature 'had given him an admirable figure, the whitest of hands, the most delicate of nostrils, and a large amount of serene self-satisfaction', she had also, on account of his weak heart, 'guarded him from the liability to a strong emotion'. He lacks genuine emotion and sympathy, this relation to self being characteristic of the Kantian doctrine of autonomy, which conflicts with Eliot's intersubjective humanism, and which manifests itself in his unswerving devotion to his self-serving conception of duty:

Sir Christopher and Lady Cheverel thought him the best of nephews, the most satisfactory of heirs, full of grateful deference to themselves, and, above all things, guided by a sense of duty. Captain Wybrow always did the thing easiest and most agreeable to him from a sense of duty: he dressed expensively, because it was a duty he owed to his position; from a sense of duty he adapted himself to Sir Christopher's inflexible will, which it would have been troublesome as well as useless to resist; and, being of a delicate constitution, he took care of his health from a sense of duty (164).

Indeed, Captain Wybrow is only too willing to submit to Sir Christopher's will in the matter of his match with Miss Assher, 'from a sense of duty' (165). And as Captain Wybrow becomes the accepted lover, and the courtship commences, Sir Christopher

seemed every day more radiant. Accustomed to view people who entered into his plans by the pleasant light which his own strong will and bright hopefulness were always casting on the future, he saw nothing but personal charms and promising domestic qualities

in Miss Assher, whose quickness of eye and taste in externals formed a real ground of sympathy between her and Sir Christopher (193).

Sir Christopher's acknowledgement of Miss Assher is dominated by the aesthetic rather than the ethical, the aesthetic for Kant being a detachment from purposiveness and sympathy, and hence the irony of the false sympathy between them.

This story also has an hermeneutic aspect: Sir Christopher and Captain Wybrow cannot read and understand people. They simply look for externals, and are as sterile as the 'picture' of the manor itself. Miss Assher is described as though she were a painting; she 'produced an impression of splendid beauty'. Her dress was 'relieved here and there by jet ornaments, gave the fullest effect to her complexion. [...] The first *coup d'œil* was dazzling' (169). Caterina, in contrast, is described in natural images (she doesn't wear powder!), usually associated with animals.<sup>47</sup> To Sir Christopher she is 'a clever black-eyed monkey' (143); to Captain Wybrow she is his 'little singing-bird' (146); and at times of crisis she is 'a poor wounded leveret' (184). Caterina is unable to master her feelings, which issue forth in 'ungovernable impulses' (198). She is one of those 'emotional natures whose thoughts are no more than the fleeting shadows cast by feeling' (185). The only times when she ceases to be in bondage to this 'conflict of emotions' (169) is when she sings, which is when she is able to enter 'one of those moods of self-possession and indifference which come as the ebb-tide between the struggles of passion' (168). When she sings, she breaks free of the constraints of external modes, and becomes 'active' in the Spinozistic sense; that is, she has a glimpse of the freedom that comes with self-determination, and recovers some sort of equilibrium in the face of life's vicissitudes:

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<sup>47</sup> See Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot* (London: The Athlone Press, 1959), pp. 202-204.

And her singing—the one thing in which she ceased to be passive, and became prominent—lost none of its energy. She herself sometimes wondered how it was that, whether she felt sad or angry, crushed with the sense of Anthony's indifference, or burning with impatience under Miss Assher's attentions, it was always a relief to her to sing. (195)<sup>48</sup>

Miss Assher, significantly, has 'no ear', and even though she claims to like music, is more interested in style than substance:

'O, I assure you, I doat on it; and Anthony is so fond of it; it would be so delightful if I could play and sing to him; though he says he likes me best not to sing, because it doesn't belong to his idea of me. What style of music do you like best?' (172)

Similarly, Anthony, 'whose perceptions were not acute enough for him to notice the difference of a semitone' (171), is in diametric opposition to the elemental and sensual world of Caterina. Caterina has an 'unconscious beauty' (133), and is associated with the seasons, with the ebb and flow of nature, which carries on in its course in this determined world:

The inexorable ticking of the clock is like the throb of pain to sensations made keen by a sickening fear. And so it is with the great clockwork of nature. Daisies and buttercups give way to the brown waving grasses, tinged with the warm red sorrel; the waving grasses are swept away, and the meadows lie like emeralds set in the bushy hedgerows; the tawny-tipped corn begins to bow with the weight of the full ear; the reapers are bending amongst it, and it soon stands in sheaves; then, presently, the patches of yellow stubble lie side by side with streaks of dark-red earth, which the plough is turning up in preparation for the new-thrashed seed. And this passage from beauty to beauty, which to the happy is like the flow of a melody, measures for many a human heart the approach of foreseen anguish—seems hurrying on the moment when the shadow of dread will be followed up by the reality of despair (165).

In the middle of this dichotomy of will and feeling, and somewhat open to attack from both sides, stands Mr Gilfil, himself in love with Caterina. But Gilfil, in contrast with Sir Christopher and Captain Wybrow, can read and understand people. He 'did not deceive himself in his interpretation of Caterina's feelings' (162). Gilfil can master his feelings, and control his passions, so that they become, in a Spinozistic sense, genuine emotions. His

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<sup>48</sup> Hence the importance of art in its immediate impassioned experience, and not in Kantian aesthetic detachment.

intersubjective sensibility is in direct opposition both to Sir Christopher's 'autonomy', Captain Wybrow's lack of genuine emotion, and to the egoism displayed by Barton in the previous story. When he comes to tell Caterina that the situation between her and Captain Wybrow 'may lead to very bad consequences' (190), he shows that he understands the relations of cause and effect that constitute the web on which their lives are spun. He appears to understand that for the sake of social cohesion he must encourage Caterina to follow the *dictates* of reason, even though her inspiration to follow these dictates might be grounded in the first kind of knowledge, her sense of wrong, for example, being 'rather instinctive than reflective' (198). Even though he feels for Caterina in her torment, he also realises the effects such ruptures would have on the community of the manor: 'Remember, I entreat you, that the peace of the whole family depends on your power of governing yourself' (191).

Gilfil's prescriptions are grounded in his understanding and reason, and on the 'adequate' ideas of the second kind of knowledge; Captain Wybrow, who gives Caterina similar advice ('My dear Caterina, let me beg of you to exercise more control of your feelings' [197]), does so because her behaviour impinges on his own plans and ends. Lady Cheveral, who, significantly, only notices the 'slight outward changes' of Caterina's physiognomy, gives her 'Tillotson's Sermons'. This volume, by a representative of the historical religion which Eliot is trying to reformulate is, as a 'means of edification', singularly inappropriate: 'Excellent medicine for the mind are the good Archbishop's sermons, but a medicine, unhappily, not suited to Tina's case' (195). She has the added inconvenience of missing Gilfil's sermon, which is pronounced 'excellent' by Lady Assher. Gilfil fulfils his hermeneutic task: to speak to the multitude in their own language, so that they may absorb certain nuclear doctrines which make for social cohesion, while at the same time reshaping the realm of the *imaginato* so that these purified ideas will be

assimilated, and for some, to be observed on the grounding of reason and not authority. However, while Lady Assher is certainly conducive to part of Gilfil's hermeneutic project, it seems doubtful that she will ever reach his level on the epistemological scale:

'But I wish you could have heard the sermon this morning. Such an excellent sermon! It was about the ten virgins: five of them were foolish, and five were clever, you know; and Mr Gilfil explained all that. What a very pleasant young man he is! so very quiet and agreeable, and such a good hand at whist' (197).

Even at Gilfil's darkest hour, when he fears for Caterina's life, he still thinks 'of the sad consequences for others as well as himself' (223). His 'human' ministrations, and 'unspoken sympathy' help to humanise Sir Christopher as he tries to cope with the tragedy: 'The first tears he had shed since boyhood were for Anthony' (224). We may note that while both men in this interview are using religious discourse, Sir Christopher's use is theological, while Gilfil's is rhetorical and metaphorical—they may speak in the same way, but Gilfil uses the *language* of transcendence to stress the *immanence* of our ethical realm:

At last the Baronet mastered himself enough to say, 'I'm very weak, Maynard—God help me! I didn't think anything would unman me in this way; but I'd built everything on this lad. Perhaps I've been wrong in not forgiving my sister. She lost one of *her* sons a little while ago. I've been too proud and obstinate'.

'We can hardly learn humility and tenderness enough except by suffering', said Maynard; 'and God sees we are in need of suffering, for it is falling more and more heavily on us' (224).

The realisation that the missing Caterina might indeed have loved Anthony, and Gilfil's revelations regarding the indelicacy of Captain Wybrow's behaviour towards Caterina, represent something of an epiphany for Sir Christopher, who is drawn out of his Kantian detachment:

Sir Christopher relaxed his hold of Maynard's arm, and looked away from him. He was silent for some minutes, evidently attempting to master himself, so as to be able to speak calmly. 'I must see Henrietta immediately', he said at last, with something of his old sharp decision; 'she must know all; but we must keep it from every one else as far as possible. My dear boy', he continued in a kinder tone, 'the heaviest burthen has fallen on you. But we

may find her yet; we must not despair: there has not been time enough for us to be certain. Poor dear little one! God help me! I thought I saw everything, and was stone-blind all the while' (225).

Caterina, too, needs to be integrated into a common humanity—her pure 'naturalism' is seen to be just as inadequate as Sir Christopher's pure 'rationalism'. Again, Mr Gilfil uses religious language rhetorically and metaphorically as he attempts to persuade Caterina that in ascribing blame to herself over her putative intention to kill Wybrow, she is judging events from a very limited perspective:

'Tina, my loved one, you would never have done it. God saw your whole heart; He knows you would never harm a living thing. He watches over His children, and will not let them do things they would pray with their whole hearts not to do. It was the angry thought of a moment, and he forgives you' (234).

Gilfil's implicit position is close to Spinoza's: that God, or Nature, is the only free cause, and everything that happens is an emanation from his divine nature, and could not have happened in any other way.<sup>49</sup> We are free in so far as we are self-determined, 'active' individuals who are able to master the passions, and tap the source of genuine emotion.<sup>50</sup> Tina herself locates the cause of her misery: she 'was so full of bad passions' (234). Gilfil is not in bondage to these inadequate ideas: 'They do not master me so'. He uses language that has a religious aura, but is firmly rooted in immanence:

We are always doing each other injustice, and thinking better or worse of each other than we deserve, because we only hear and see separate words and actions. We don't see each other's whole nature. But God sees that you couldn't have committed that crime' (235).

Gilfil's ministrations and Caterina's confessions cement their love and make for 'a new consecration' (236), but it is music, significantly, which transforms her state from a passive to an 'active' agent, allowing the shackles of finitude to be loosened:

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<sup>49</sup> *Ethics*, Pt. 1, Prop. XVII, Cor. 2 and Schol.; Pt. I, Prop. XXXIII; Pt. I, Prop. XXIX.

<sup>50</sup> *Ethics*, Pt. I, Def. 7; Pt. IV, App. §32.

The vibration rushed through Caterina like an electric shock: it seemed as if that instant a new soul were entering into her, and filling her with a deeper, more significant life. [...] Maynard thanked God. An active power was reawakened, and must make a new epoch in Caterina's recovery (240).

U. C. Knoepfelmacher argues that 'Gilfil' has a more negative ending than 'Amos',<sup>51</sup> but from a Spinozistic perspective this view cannot be sustained. Amos Barton remained in thrall to the appetites and passions of the first kind of knowledge, and is effectively banished from his community after Milly's death. Gilfil achieves the fairly rare state of the second kind of knowledge, which relies on clear and distinct ideas, and is 'rewarded' at least by being able to taste 'a few months of perfect happiness' (243) with Tina, who however must die for the ethical and philosophical impulse of the story to be fulfilled. The same author goes on to suggest that 'both stories attack those who would escape the limits of ordinary existence: Amos Barton's Christianity and Tina's Romanticism are checked by the realities of the temporal world'.<sup>52</sup> This might well be true, but manifestly it is Barton's *kind* of Christianity which is found to be inadequate. Gilfil is fully aware of the vicissitudes of our immanent realm, and it is in his *understanding* of the determined nature of the world that enables him to be 'active' in the philosophical sense, gaining some sort of limited freedom from external modes.

The short epilogue shows Mr Gilfil, 'the old gentleman of caustic tongue, and bucolic tastes', who has reached 'the unexpectant quiescence of old age' (243).<sup>53</sup> Even though he is 'a man whose best limb is withered', he has nonetheless 'been sketched out by nature as a noble tree. The heart of him was sound, and the grain was of the finest'. He is the clergyman who can

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<sup>51</sup> George Eliot's *Early Novels*, p. 72.

<sup>52</sup> George Eliot's *Early Novels*, p. 72.

<sup>53</sup> According to Gordon Haight, this was 'intended to soften the ending of the story with a picture of Mr Gilfil in his cheerful old age'. *Letters*, II, 324n. Rather, I would suggest it reinforces his achieving the level of reason (*ratio*), as well as giving the reader a final glimpse of the organic Shepperton community.



mould and shape the realm of the *imaginato*; a clergyman 'who, with all his social pipes and slipshod talk, never sank below the highest level of his parishioners' respect' (244).

How might we begin to assess Eliot's distribution of the Kantian schema according to the way her characters relate to the world, in what seems to be a deliberate juxtaposition with the Spinozistic mode of apprehension and ethical awareness displayed by Gilfil? I have already suggested that it makes little sense to criticise the 'unrealistic' nature of Eliot's characters. Indeed, that seems to be just the point. Confronted with a discourse of ethics and aesthetics that is concerned with arguments and rational justification, Eliot demonstrates the absurdity of such a way of thinking in terms of *lived* experience.

It is hard to *realise* the implicit character of Kantian philosophy and Eliot's parody of rationalism provides some salutary insight for current ethical concerns. As Andrew Bowie and others have observed, current post-structuralist versions of ethics are heavily indebted to Kantianism and the focus on pure formal structures (and Kantian approaches also dominate liberal theory, in particular the work of John Rawls).<sup>54</sup> What Eliot's style demonstrates is that ethics and aesthetics are not argumentative forms but *ways of life*. Kantianism has often been described as an empty formalism, but Eliot's story fleshes out the character of that formalism: its way of viewing the world, the social relations it effects and, ultimately, its highly implausible character as a possible way of life.

#### Mr Tryan

As we enter the Red Lion hostelry, we enter once again the domain of the first kind of knowledge, presided over by the lawyer Dempster, who is sounding off against 'the introduction of demoralising, methodistical doctrine

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<sup>54</sup> See Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997); and John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

into this parish' (247). The hermeneutic aspect is again important—Dempster and his followers cannot interpret their world correctly, this failure even extending to the derivations of words themselves.<sup>55</sup> Evangelicals are 'no better than Presbyterians', who according to Dempster, 'are a sect founded in the reign of Charles I, by a man named John Presbyter' (248). Luke Byles knows the correct derivation of the word, but he is branded 'an insolvent atheist' and 'a deistical prater', and his 'Encyclopaedia [...] a farrago of false information' (248-49). For Mr Dempster and his followers, Evangelicalism in the shape of Mr Tryan means that he 'preaches without book', and is 'against good works' (251). Mr Pilgrim the doctor, who 'looked with great tolerance on all shades of religion that did not include a belief in cures by miracle' (259), defends Mr Tryan, pronouncing his sermon 'capital', being as it was 'addressed to those void of understanding' (251). But Dempster maintains that to 'tell a man that he is not to be saved by his works, and you open the flood-gates of all immorality' (251). Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* contains a very similar argument:

As in the dying parent dies the child,  
Virtue with Immortality expires.  
Who tells me he denies his soul immortal,  
*Whate'er his boast, has told me he's a knave.*  
*His duty 'tis to love himself alone,*  
Nor care though mankind perish, if he smiles.

Eliot quoted the above lines in her essay on Young, and replied in no uncertain terms:

We can imagine the man who 'denies his soul immortal', replying, 'It is quite possible that *you* would be a knave, and love yourself alone, if it were not for your belief in immortality; but you are not to force upon me what would result from your own utter want of moral emotion. I am just and honest, not because I expect to live in another world, but because, having felt the pain of injustice and dishonesty towards myself, I have a fellow-feeling with other men, who would suffer the same pain if I were unjust or dishonest towards them. [...] And in opposition to your theory that a belief in immortality is the only source of virtue, I maintain that, so far as moral action is dependent on that belief, so far the emotion which

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<sup>55</sup> Knoepfmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 79.

prompts it is not truly moral—is still in the stage of egoism, and has not yet attained the higher development of sympathy.<sup>56</sup>

Milby is the very essence of mediocrity,<sup>57</sup> a place where the different varieties of religion are brought into juxtaposition, and none is found to be adequate, and where 'even the Dissent [...] was then of a lax and indifferent kind' (258). Even the sound Churchman Mr Crewe is not venerated in the same way as Mr Gilfil of the preceding story. Although Mr Crewe is part of the landscape, a parson whose 'inaudible sermons [...] had been part of Milby life for half a century' (253 & 258), it is illustrative of the degeneracy and moral laxity of Milby (as opposed to Gilfil's organic Shepperton) that 'the parishioners saw no reason why it should be desirable to venerate the parson or anyone else: they were much more comfortable to look down a little on their fellow creatures' (258). We do however see the potential for 'some purity, gentleness, and unselfishness', underlined here by natural images which are superimposed on the inorganic, and which seem to transcend the limitations of Milby's temporal realm:

To a superficial glance, Milby was nothing but dreary prose: a dingy town, surrounded by flat fields, lopped elms, and sprawling manufacturing villages, which crept on and on with their weaving-shops, till they threatened to grasp themselves on the town. But the sweet spring came to Milby notwithstanding: the elm-tops were red with buds; the churchyard was starred with daisies; the lark showered his love-music on the flat fields; the rainbows hung over the dingy town, clothing the very roofs and chimneys in a strange transfiguring beauty. (262)

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<sup>56</sup> *Essays*, pp. 373-74. Eliot finally completed this article between the completion of 'Amos Barton' and 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story'. Some critics have found it difficult to reconcile the tone of this article with the sympathetic portrayal of Mr Tryan in 'Janet's Repentance'. This contradiction is more apparent than real: it is Mr Tryan's individual qualities which are important, and that the fact of his being an Evangelical preacher is incidental. See *Letters*, II, 347. Also, it must be remembered that Eliot never completely rejected Christianity—it was only historical Christianity that she sought to demolish and then reformulate along the lines of a Spinozistic 'universal religion'. Eliot was always an 'emotional' Christian, even if not an 'intellectual' one. See *Letters*, III, 231. Martin J. Svaglic points out that Eliot's 'basic inspiration which gave direction to all her works and led her to make of her novels a plea for human solidarity was Christianity'. 'Religion in the Novels of George Eliot' in Haight, ed., *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, 285-94, p. 286.

<sup>57</sup> Knoepfelmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 79.

This potential for change is linked to Mr Tryan, who is the representative of a true universal religion; one rooted in immanence, but at the same time containing a semi-religious element relating to Spinoza's idea of secular salvation. In a letter to her publisher, Eliot explains the real theme of the story:

The collision in the drama is not at all between 'bigotted churchmanship' and evangelicalism, but between *irreligion* and religion. Religion in this case happens to be represented by evangelicalism. [...] I thought I made it apparent in my sketch of Milby feelings on the advent of Mr Tryan that the conflict lay between immorality and morality—irreligion and religion.<sup>58</sup>

Thus the town divides itself 'into two zealous parties, the Tryanites and the anti-Tryanites', the former wishing 'to establish a Sunday evening lecture on the grounds that old Mr Crewe did not preach the Gospel', and the latter now being 'convinced [...] that Mr Crewe was the model of a parish priest, and his sermons the soundest and most edifying that ever remained unheard by a church population'. Eliot's irony is mostly, but not exclusively, reserved for the anti-Tryanites, whose first snipe against the evening lecture is to present a petition, 'carried to Mr Prendergast by three delegates representing the intellect, morality, and wealth of Milby' (264). The three delegates that comprise this Holy Trinity of irreligion are, respectively, Mr Dempster, Mr Tomlinson, and Mr Budd. The uneducated townspeople are very responsive to Dempster's demagoguery, since they are in thrall to the first kind of knowledge. Despite his alcoholism, they are confident of his hermeneutic skills:

'He's a long-headed feller, Dempster; why, it shows yer what a headpiece Dempster has, as he can drink a bottle o' brandy at a sittin', an' yit see further through a stone wall when he's done, than other folks 'll see through a glass winder' (257).

As indicated above, the Tryanites are also subjected to satirical treatment: to the Misses Linnet, Mr Tryan is an eligible bachelor; to Miss

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<sup>58</sup> *Letters*, II, 347. John Blackwood had advised Eliot to 'soften' her picture of human nature, and had asked: 'When are you going to give us a really good active working clergyman, neither absurdly evangelical nor absurdly High Church?' *Letters*, II, 344-345.

Pratt, he is the object of her intellectual and poetical pretensions.<sup>59</sup> They all eagerly assist in Tryan's scheme for a Lending Library. Mary Linnet, who 'combined a love of serious and poetical reading with her skill in fancy-work', has a bookcase, the 'chief ornaments' (265) of which are mainly eighteenth-century works, including Burke's *On the Sublime and Beautiful*.<sup>60</sup> Despite her impressive reading list, the bookcase had not been added to for fifteen years, and the most that can be said of her intellect is that Mrs Pettifer 'didn't know a more sensible person to talk to' (266). Rebecca Linnet is a devotee of pulp fiction, whose taste in fashion corresponds with those of the heroine of the latest book borrowed from the circulating library.<sup>61</sup> Mrs Linnet only reads 'the purely secular portions' of Mr Tryan's religious books: the *Life of Leigh Richmond*, for example, is found to be of interest not for its Evangelicalism, but because Leigh Richmond 'found out all about that woman at Tutbury as pretended to live without eating' (270). Miss Pratt, Milby's resident bluestocking, is more interested in the doctrinal aspects of Tryan's ministry, and is grateful to him for awakening to her the 'errors of Romanism' (269), the chief one of which is its 'denial of the great doctrine of justification by faith' (270). She also dabbles in 'authorship, though it was understood that she had never put forth the full powers of her mind into print'. This would appear no great loss, as her 'latest production', consisting of 'Six Stanzas, addressed to the Rev. Edgar Tryan', opens with the line: 'Forward, young wrestler for the truth!' (269)

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<sup>59</sup> Knoepfelmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>60</sup> It is interesting to note that Kant makes use of Burke's discussion of the sublime in his aesthetic writings. For Kant, it is through the sublime that we can gain 'intimations' of transcendence. See Roger Scruton, *Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 89. Perhaps it is part of Eliot's reaction against the eighteenth-century that these works are relegated to the status of 'ornaments'. See Thomas Pinney's headnote to Eliot's essay on Young, *Essays*, p. 335.

<sup>61</sup> For examples of the types of books referred to here, see Eliot's essay 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', *Essays*, 300-24.

Mr Tryan, according to Eliot, is an 'ideal' character, 'made of human nature's finer clay'.<sup>62</sup> When he enters Mrs Linnet's parlour, 'the strange light from the golden sky falling on his light-brown hair [...] makes it look almost like an auréole' (276). But it is in his human and not his theological aspect that we are introduced to him. Tryan's presence 'called forth all the little agitations that belong to the divine necessity of loving' (275-6) in the Miss Linnets and Eliza Pratt; and notwithstanding Miss Pratt's doctrinal 'oration', Mr Tryan's religion is seen to be firmly rooted in humanity, as he enquires about the progress of his 'good works' (278), and relates the story of his first meeting with Mrs Dempster, with whom he will commune, and whose simple and unselfconscious religion of the heart will partly temper his doctrinal zeal.

Janet initially has no sympathy for the teaching of the Gospel: for her, 'that is the best Gospel that makes everybody happy and comfortable' (290). 'Kindness is my religion', she tells Mrs Pettifer, refusing to break an old tie even though she is a 'Tryanite' (330). Janet's mother, Mrs Raynor, holds a simple religion of basic nuclear concepts, which is presented sympathetically, while at the same time obliquely criticising the doctrine of justification by faith:

Mrs Raynor had her faith and her spiritual comforts, though she was not in the least evangelical and knew nothing of doctrinal zeal. I fear most of Mr Tryan's hearers would have considered her destitute of saving knowledge, and I am quite sure she had no well-defined views on justification. Nevertheless, she read her Bible a great deal, and thought she found divine lessons there—how to bear the cross meekly, and be merciful. Let us hope that there is a saving ignorance, and that Mrs Raynor was justified without knowing exactly how (291).<sup>63</sup>

There is certainly no sympathy held between Janet and Mrs Dempster, who is content to think her son can do no wrong. Dempster himself is in

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<sup>62</sup> *Letters*, II, 375.

<sup>63</sup> This is reminiscent of the story of Spinoza and his hostess (see above, Chapter 1). Mrs Raynor is ignorant, but her crude piety, even though its grounding is in the first kind of knowledge, will serve to foster social cohesion. She will not be 'saved' as such; Eliot uses the word in a rhetorical sense only.

almost complete bondage to the passions of the first kind of knowledge: he is 'callous in worldliness, fevered by sensuality, enslaved by chance impulses'. Even he is not altogether beyond redemption, however; the 'deep-down fibrous roots of human love and goodness' surface in his relationship with his mother, and provide an experience of 'close brotherhood with us through some of our most sacred feelings' (299).

It is these 'sacred' feelings of brotherhood and personal communion that are the basis of Mr and Mrs Jerome's attraction to Mr Tryan and his ministry. Mrs Jerome, who 'had not a keen susceptibility to shades of doctrine', respects Mr Tryan simply as a 'Church clergyman'; and even though 'in the first instance she had the greatest repugnance to renouncing the religious forms in which she had been brought up', she soon concluded that:

'the ministers say pretty nigh the same things as the Church parsons, by what I could iver make out, an' we're out o' chapel i' the mornin' a good deal sooner nor they're out o' church. An' as for pews, ours is a deal comfortabler nor any i' Milby Church'. (301)

Similarly, Mr Jerome 'had not a theoretic basis for Dissent', it recommending itself to him simply 'as piety and goodness', and Mr Tryan 'as a good man and a powerful preacher, who was stirring the hearts of people' (305). As Mrs Pettifer points out, Mr Tryan 'puts himself on a level with one, and talks to one like a brother' (329), confirming that, like Mr Gilfil, he fulfils a 'constructive hermeneutic function'. The narrator is insistent to stress that it is Mr Tryan as an individual which is important, and in a scathing attack on the Utilitarian doctrine of 'the balance of happiness', lambasts the 'inherent imbecility of feeling' (373) of those who believe

that individuals really exist for no other purpose than that abstractions may be drawn from them—abstractions that may rise from heaps of ruined lives like the sweet savour of a sacrifice in the nostrils of philosophers, and of a philosophic Deity. (374)

Notwithstanding his tenacious quest for the bodies and souls of Milby, Tryan still has 'an acute sensibility to the very hatred or ridicule he did not flinch from provoking'. Mr Tryan is no 'gratuitous martyr', and 'he had no pugnacious pleasure in the contest', having an 'acute sensibility to blame', and a 'dependence on sympathy'. Thus Mr Jerome's homely compassion and 'soothing words were balm to him' (310).<sup>64</sup> Even Mr Tryan, then, has his painful moments, where he remembers 'the time before he had taken the yoke of self-denial'. The narrator muses that

it is apt to be so in this life, I think. While we are coldly discussing a man's career, sneering at his mistakes, blaming his rashness, and labelling his opinions—"Evangelical and narrow" or "Latitudinarian and Pantheistic" or "Anglican and supercilious"—that man, in his solitude, is perhaps shedding hot tears because his sacrifice is a hard one, because strength and patience are failing him to speak the difficult word, and do the difficult deed. (312)<sup>65</sup>

The world of Milby is seen at its lowest moral ebb during the playbill episode, and even though it is intended as satire of 'Milby wit',<sup>66</sup> the Anti-Tryanites' 'derisive glances and virulent words' (315), and the breakdown of community associated with the spread of gossip, calumny, and religious strife upset Mr Tryan's equipoise: 'outwardly Mr Tryan was composed, but inwardly he was suffering acutely'. The virulent nature of the opposition soon dissipates, however, the townspeople finding it 'inconvenient' to conduct commerce along sectarian lines; and by the time of the Tryanites' second procession to the church, the shouts of 'hatred and scorn' have become 'whispers [...] of sorrow and blessing' (315). It is at this point that Janet seems to have a premonition of Mr Tryan's death, unaware that she will share in his final epiphany, when he will scale the lofty heights of the third kind of

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<sup>64</sup> David Carroll argues that Mr Jerome 'is an anachronism, representing the idea of community before religious and industrial upheavals, and reconciling in his person most of the conflicts of contemporary Milby'. "'Janet's Repentance" and the Myth of the Organic', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35 (1980), 331-48, p. 340.

<sup>65</sup> We may recall that Spinoza was felt to be much more than a pantheist by many Victorian men of letters. See above, chapter one.

<sup>66</sup> *Letters*, II, 362.



knowledge, bringing us closer to some conception of the possibility of secular salvation.

The main redeeming feature of Evangelicalism, for all its faults, is palpably that of 'duty, that recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self'. This is qualitatively a very different kind of 'duty' to that grotesquely misrepresented by Captain Wybrow of the preceding story, whose concept of duty was characterised by a Kantian adherence to the purity of one's will. The 'divine work' which presents itself to Mr Tryan's followers as a duty, however, is firmly other-directed, and though they seem to recognise a 'higher' law, and hold transcendent notions, the practical effect of their conduct results in behaviour which conforms to those basic nuclear doctrines of justice, solidarity and compassion that are at the heart of Eliot's reformulated Christianity, a religion rooted in immanence:

Whatever might be the weaknesses of the ladies who pruned the luxuriance of their lace and ribbons, cut out garments for the poor, distributed tracts, quoted Scripture, and defined the true Gospel, they had learned this—that there was divine work to be done in life, a rule of goodness higher than the opinion of their neighbours; and if the notion of heaven in reserve was a little too prominent, yet the theory of fitness for that heaven consisted in purity of heart, in Christ-like compassion, in the subduing of selfish desires. They might give the name of piety to much that was only puritanic egoism; they might call many things sin that were not sin; but they had at least the feeling that sin was to be avoided and resisted, and colour-blindness, which may mistake drab for scarlet, is better than total blindness, which sees no distinction of colour at all (320).

Mr Tryan himself is full of these imperfections that mark our common humanity, but nevertheless he is one of 'the real heroes, of God's making' pursuing 'the blessed work of helping the world forward' (321). This 'blessed' work, is pursued indefatigably, even at the expense of his health, illustrated by his refusal of the offer of a horse from Mr Jerome which will surely hasten his death.<sup>67</sup> Mr Jerome's warning ('We mustn't fling our lives away') is duly

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<sup>67</sup> U. C. Knoepfelmacher sees this refusal as an 'obsessive desire for martyrdom'. *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 84.

ignored, Mr Tryan flying in the face of the categorical imperative.<sup>68</sup> “No, not fling them away lightly, but we are permitted to lay down our lives in a right cause. There are many duties, as you know, Mr Jerome, which stand before the taking of our own lives” (326). Mr Tryan ‘believed himself consumptive, and he had not yet felt any desire to escape the early death which he had for some time contemplated as probable’ (404). In fact, Mr Tryan is beginning to reveal himself as the Spinozistic free man, inasmuch as ‘the more the mind knows by the second and third kind of cognition, the less it will suffer by emotions which are evil, and the less it fears death’.<sup>69</sup>

Janet’s first meeting with Tryan, where she overhears his words of support to the consumptive Sally Martin, bring home to Janet that her interpretation of Mr Tryan’s mode of ministry has been wrong: ‘there was none of the self-satisfied unction of the teacher, quoting, or exhorting, or expounding, for the benefit of the hearer, but a simple appeal for help, a confession of weakness’. Janet recognises ‘this fellowship in suffering’, and her ‘entire absence of self-consciousness which belongs to a new and vivid impression’ (361), lead them to share a fleeting moment of personal communion.

After this initial meeting, Janet’s suffering becomes more acute in direct proportion to Dempster’s physical and mental deterioration. She becomes embroiled in a spiral of bitterness and despair, almost totally in bondage to the ‘angry passions’ of the first kind of knowledge, and even makes ‘wild reproaches against that one patient listener’, Mrs Raynor, who ‘saw too clearly all through the winter that things were getting worse in Orchard Street’ (335). This suffering culminates in her ejection, at the hands of Dempster, from the

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<sup>68</sup> One of Kant’s examples of universal maxims relates to suicide. The maxim of suicide ‘cannot possibly exist as a universal law of nature, and consequently would be wholly inconsistent with the supreme principle of duty’. *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Ethics*, p. 47.

<sup>69</sup> *Ethics*, Pt. V, Prop. XXXVIII. This is not to say that Tryan would willingly take his own life; it is only to suggest that he doesn’t fear death. His *conatus*, or ability to preserve in his own being, would stop him committing suicide.

family home, where Janet finds herself 'on the confines of the unknown' (343), without even her restoring faith: 'Oh, if some ray of hope, of pity, of consolation, would pierce through the horrible gloom, she might believe *then* in a Divine love—in a heavenly Father who cared for His Children! But she had no faith, no trust' (344). However, the familiar sound of the church clock awakes her from her disembodied state, Janet having a 'strong instinctive dread of pain and death which made her recoil from suicide' (345).<sup>70</sup> Mrs Pettifer—a Tryanite—takes her in, but Janet is still very much in thrall to the inadequate ideas of the first kind of knowledge, and completely determined by the actions of external modes, which is the complete antithesis of the free individual, who is free insofar as he or she is *self*-determined.<sup>71</sup> 'her thoughts, instead of springing from the action of her own mind, were external existences, that thrust themselves imperiously on her like haunting visions' (348). The one 'untried spring' (350) amidst this desolation might be the influence of Mr Tryan, whose secrets of faith seem to offer some hope for her renovation. It is clear that Mr Tryan offers something new, not just 'barren exhortation' and the prescriptions of historical religion, with its promises of reward and threats of punishment. Janet simply 'wanted *strength* to do right'; she needed someone who would 'understand her helplessness, her wants', and who could 'unlock the chambers of her soul' (351).

Their first meeting after the crisis is like a church service: 'it was dusk, and the candles were lighted', and it is soon confirmed that Janet 'had not deceived herself' (355) in her instinctive turning to Mr Tryan, who has an intuitive grasp of the causes of her condition. Tryan realises that a mutual confession will be the most efficacious in Janet's restoration,<sup>72</sup> but it is also

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<sup>70</sup> This shows Janet's *conatus* in operation; it should not be equated with Mr Jerome's Kantian prescription to Mr Tryan: 'We mustn't fling our lives away' (327).

<sup>71</sup> *Ethics*, Pt. I, Def. 7.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story', pp. 234-35. Similarly, Gilfil judges that a mutual confession will be most effective in helping to temper Tina's 'bad passions'. Both Gilfil and Tryan rely on adequate ideas, which are characteristic of the second and third kinds of knowledge. There is however a qualitative difference between the two clergymen's respective levels of

clear that this is by no means a one-way process, and that he also must grasp reality and be partly humanised :

In this artificial life of ours, it is not often we see a human face with all a heart's agony in it, uncontrolled by self-consciousness; when we do see it, it startles us as if we had suddenly waked into the real world of which this every day one is but a puppet-show copy. For some moments Mr Tryan was too deeply moved to speak (357).

Mr Tryan's heartfelt confession shows that he once was in bondage to the passions, and his story redefines the traditional formulations of theology. For Tryan, 'sin' is bondage to the passions; and 'strength' is the becoming of an 'active' individual, revelling in the freedom of self-determination and removing the shackles of finitude:

'But a dear friend to whom I opened my mind showed me it was just such as I—the helpless who feel themselves helpless—that God especially invites to come to Him, and offers all the riches of His salvation: not forgiveness only; forgiveness would be worth little if it left us under the power of our evil passions; but strength—that strength which enables us to conquer sin' (357-8).

We can see that he is using the language of transcendence metaphorically and rhetorically, but it is still rooted in immanence. The salvation to which he refers is a secular salvation for those who can reach the third kind of knowledge. However, Tryan's entreaty, although it is human and not theological in its intent, sounds to Janet altogether too much like the traditional discourse of theology to suit her position, having found no comfort in the prescriptions of traditional theology. This indicates that she may perhaps be able to move up the epistemological scale to at least the second kind of knowledge:

'But', said Janet, 'I can feel no trust in God. He seems always to have left me to myself. I have sometimes prayed to Him to help me, and yet everything has been just the same as before. If you felt like me, how did you come to have hope and trust?' (358)

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apprehension: Gilfil's grasp of particulars is *deduced* from generalities; Tryan's is an *intuitive* grasp of the *essence* of a particular thing as part of the web of immanence.

Mr Tryan sees intuitively what Janet needs; that is, a confession of his own, a deeply-felt human account of suffering and redemption.<sup>73</sup> And just like Janet, in his darkest hour Mr Tryan found traditional religion wanting:

‘I was convinced that if I ever got health and comfort, it must be from religion. I went to hear celebrated preachers, and I read religious books. But I found nothing that fitted my own need. The faith that puts the sinner in possession of salvation seemed, *as I understood it*, to be quite out of my reach. I had no faith; I only felt utterly wretched, under the power of habits and dispositions which had wrought hideous evil’ (360, my italics).

It is clear that for Mr Tryan, knowledge is understanding of the real meaning of faith and salvation, and he describes how through his reformulated religion, a true universal religion, he is able to breathe the ‘pure free air’ of immanence:

‘As long as we live in rebellion against God, desiring to have our own will, seeking to have happiness in the things of this world, it is as if we shut ourselves up in a crowded stifling room, where we breathe only poisonous air; but we have only to walk out under the infinite heavens, and we breathe the pure free air that gives us health, and strength, and gladness. It is just so with God’s spirit: as soon as we submit ourselves to his will, as soon as we desire to be united to him, and made pure and holy, it is as if the walls had fallen down that shut us out from God, and we are fed with his spirit, which gives us new strength’ (361).

For Tryan, ‘submit ourselves to his will’ means realise the determined nature of our existence; and the ‘walls’ which ‘shut us out from God’, are external modes which we are in bondage to, and must be resisted to gain a sort of freedom which comes with the recognition and understanding of the determined nature of our immanent realm. Indeed, the very idea of resignation and submission to an immanent reality, so crucial to an understanding of Eliot’s ethics, is seen to be ‘active’ in the philosophical sense, at once resolving the seeming paradox between determinism and responsibility:

‘We cannot foretell the working of the smallest event in our own lot; how can we presume to judge of things that are much too high for us? There is nothing that becomes us but entire submission, perfect resignation. As long as we set up our own will and our own

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<sup>73</sup> The fact that this mutual confession is realised through narrative itself should be noted, as it will have important consequences below.

wisdom against God's, we make that wall between us and his love which I have spoken of just now. But as soon as we lay ourselves entirely at his feet, we have enough light given us to guide our own steps; as the foot soldier who hears nothing of the councils that determine the course of the great battle he is in, hears plainly enough the word of command which he must obey' (362).

Mr Tryan is now seen firmly to be guided by the third kind of knowledge, that semi-religious realm in which one no longer deduces particulars from generalities, but has an intuitive knowledge of the relations of cause and effect in the determined world. His actions are, of course, consistent with reason, but the operation of logic is somehow circumvented, enabling a quantum leap into a semi-mystical realm, which is both the result of and the reward for those rare few who have attained the 'blessedness' and 'power' of the third kind of knowledge, and are presented with the opportunity of a true, secular salvation. Mr Tryan's Spinozistic equipoise has a marked effect on Janet: a 'calmness', and 'a delicious hope [...] of purification and inward peace' (365), which even the 'adequate' ideas of the second kind of knowledge cannot account for:

. Blessed influence of one true loving human soul on another! Not calculable by algebra, not deducible by logic, but mysterious, effectual, mighty as the hidden process by which the tiny seed is quickened, and bursts forth into tall stem and broad leaf, and glowing tasseled flower.

Mr Tryan tells Janet that 'God is training us for the eternal enjoyment of his love' (364), and we can see how far we are away from the traditional theistic concepts of immortality and the everlasting soul, as it is clear that Mr Tryan has in mind the Spinozistic sense of the 'eternal'. Spinoza makes an important distinction between the 'eternal' and the 'everlasting':

By *eternity* I understand existence itself, conceived as following solely and necessarily from the definition of the thing which is eternal.

Exp. For existence so conceived is an eternal truth, inasmuch as it is the essence of the eternal thing; consequently, it cannot be

explained by duration or time, even though the duration be conceived as without beginning and end.<sup>74</sup>

The third kind of knowledge leads to an 'intellectual love of God' which itself is eternal,<sup>75</sup> and of itself leads to a greater degree of blessedness and perfection.<sup>76</sup> Janet is now feeling a 'new freedom', and has sensed a 'blessed opening' (371) in the shape of Mr Tryan, who can 'divine' the difficulties that Janet will have to face along the road to redemption, and who will use his intuitive knowledge to summon up the shadowy reserves of semi-religious experience:

such unseen elements Mr Tryan called the Divine will, and filled up the margin of ignorance which surrounds all our knowledge with the feelings of trust and resignation. Perhaps the profoundest philosophy could hardly fill it up better (374).

The reference to 'the margin of ignorance' is an acceptance that our knowledge of the chain of cause and effect is necessarily limited and partial; only God has complete knowledge and thus complete freedom in Spinoza's special sense of the term. But, as Spinoza says, in so far as we 'bear with equanimity' those things which seem to be 'in opposition to our interest', and understand 'that we are part of Nature, whose order we obey',<sup>77</sup> we can gain a sort of freedom, that comes with our understanding of our place within 'the common universal order of nature'. What Mr Tryan chooses to call the 'Divine Will', is not a transcendent notion: the 'unseen elements' which constitute it are simply 'feelings of trust and resignation', feelings not dissimilar to a Spinozistic 'equanimity'. In Spinoza's semantic and philosophical revolution, there truly is a 'Divine Will', but one, of course, far divorced from its original acceptance.

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<sup>74</sup> *Ethics*, Pt. 1, Def. 8. See *Ethics*, ed. by G. H. R. Parkinson, p. 226n. Parkinson writes: 'In effect, eternity is necessary existence—or perhaps it would be better to say, a certain feature of necessary existence. Such existence, Spinoza says, cannot be explained in temporal terms, just as the truth that the interior angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles is a timeless truth. In short, the eternal is not the everlasting; it is timeless.'

<sup>75</sup> *Ethics*, Pt. V, Prop. XXXIII (Eliot trans.).

<sup>76</sup> *Ethics*, Pt. V, Prop. XXXI, Schol.

<sup>77</sup> *Ethics*, Pt. IV, App. §32.

Janet feels something of the 'blessing of serene freedom' that 'lies in all simple direct acts of mercy', as she tends to Mr Dempster after his accident. The 'sick-room' is where 'the moral relation of man to man is reduced to its utmost simplicity: bigotry cannot confuse it, theory cannot pervert it, *passion*, *awed into quiescence*, can neither pollute nor perturb it' (my italics, 384). This 'blessedness' that Janet is in sight of as she becomes more philosophically 'active' is, as Gilles Deleuze points out, of a different order to our temporal realm:

The word *blessedness* should be reserved for these active joys: they appear to conquer and extend themselves within duration, like the passive joys, but in fact they are eternal and are no longer explained by duration; they no longer imply transitions and passages, but express themselves and one another in an eternal mode, together with the adequate ideas from which they issue (*Ethics*, Pt. V, Props. XXXI-XXXIII).<sup>78</sup>

Janet does have a slight relapse, however, when the temptation for alcohol almost proves too strong, and 'where her prayers did not help her, for fear predominated over trust' (396). Once again, the act of confession restores her equilibrium, and this time 'prepared her soul for the stronger leap by which her faith grasps the idea of the Divine sympathy' (397). It is significant that in these moments of Spinozistic equipoise, when 'the Divine Presence did not now seem far off', Janet has no need of the supports of traditional religion: 'prayer itself seemed superfluous in those moments of calm trust'. These moments represent 'baptismal epochs, when the soul, dipped in the sacred waters of joy and peace, rises from them with new energies, with more unalterable longings' (398).

Janet gradually recovers her equipoise (400) at the same time as Mr Tryan gradually becomes to be accepted by the community. Even Messrs. Budd and Tomlinson, the remaining two thirds of the anti-Tryanite triumvirate, find that their theories are inadequate in explaining this clergyman who seems to be of a different mould:

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<sup>78</sup> Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, p. 51.



Twist and stretch their theory as they might, it would not fit Mr Tryan; and so, with that remarkable resemblance as to the mental processes which may frequently be observed to exist between plain men and philosophers, they concluded the less said about him the better (401).

Janet and Tryan ever more closely commune; Tryan having a 'new yearning for [...] pure human joys' which Janet can provide, and Tryan representing for Janet 'repose from that conflict of emotion, with trust in the unchangeable, with an influx of a power to subdue self'. The 'heaven-sent' Tryan had 'loosed her bonds' of subservience to the passions, and helped her achieve a calm equipoise that is characteristic of a person moved by the adequate ideas of the second and third kinds of knowledge. It is natural that Janet should be tending to Mr Tryan in his last illness: God's will, which is simply the 'train of events' (409) leading up to his illness, dictates that Janet should have this honour. And as Mr Tryan lies 'calmly conscious of the reality' of death, he tells Janet that now that she has 'a sure trust in God', he can be released from his temporal existence. They then share 'a sacred kiss of promise' (410), which is not intended to suggest that they will physically meet again in some transcendent realm, but that insofar as Mr Tryan has achieved the 'blessed' state of the third kind of knowledge, he will be 'saved' in a sense which has resonances beyond the metaphorical and rhetorical use of the term. Mr Tryan's state of 'blessedness' is nothing less than the Spinozistic ideal of secular salvation itself, one related to the third kind of knowledge, where one sees the world under the aspect of eternity, achieving a limited emancipation from the bondage of finitude. It is a true universal salvation which inheres in and defines our 'common plane of immanence' (see above).

U. C. Knoepfmacher suggests that Tryan's death 'marks a triumph over his temporal self',<sup>79</sup> while David Carroll argues that Tryan 'achieves a kind of

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<sup>79</sup> Knoepfmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 85.

heaven [...] in Janet's memory', in contrast to Dempster's hell.<sup>80</sup> Mr Tryan does achieve a 'kind of heaven', but it is more than this sort of hallowed remembrance. Mr Tryan achieves a kind of Spinozistic 'eternity', which while far removed from theistic notions of 'immortality' and the everlasting soul, nonetheless reveals a metaphysical dimension to Spinoza's thought.<sup>81</sup>

Eliot uses the language of traditional Christianity while at the same time evoking this Spinozistic ideal, because she is to some extent reformulating Spinoza's third kind of knowledge into a language of feeling and sympathy, which is in contradistinction to his purely philosophical mode of discourse. George Eliot posits the literary and the intersubjective, which in themselves while not being sufficient are certainly necessary for any ethical position or the recognition of 'higher' knowledge or experience.

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<sup>80</sup> "'Janet's Repentance'", p. 347. In 1849, in a letter to Sarah Hennell, Eliot seems to refer to this phenomenon: 'Poor and shallow as one's own soul is, it is blessed to think that a sort of transhumanation is possible by which the greater ones can live in us.' *Letters*, I, 280. Significantly, Eliot was translating the *Tractatus* at the time.

<sup>81</sup> See Yovel, *Spinoza*, pp. 169-171; and see *Ethics*, Pt. V, Prop. XXXVIII, Schol.

### III

## Beyond Hermeneutics: *Adam Bede* and the Power of Narrative

Tell me not that I am a mere prater—that feeling never talks. [...] I will talk, and caress and look lovingly until death makes me as stony as the Gorgon-like heads of all the judicious people I know. What is anything worth until it is uttered? Is not the Universe one great utterance? Utterance there must be in word or deed to make life of any worth.<sup>1</sup>

We have now tentatively begun to define George Eliot's philosophical and ethical position, which asserts an intersubjective humanism which can in some sense extend beyond its worldly capacity, and which is in tension with Kant's formulation of the limits of human knowledge. Kantianism insists on the finite nature of our experience, but does warn against the inevitable speculative capacities of Reason to posit objects beyond finite experience. While Reason must 'check' its capacity to posit these objects, certain aspects of Reason (the moral law, freedom, the Sublime) go beyond finite experience. However, it still remains that for Kant human *knowledge* is finite and does not extend to the noumenal, all such claims being illegitimate and 'metaphysical'. Eliot rejects Kant's postulation of the noumenal in favour of a reformulated Spinozism that translates the second and third kinds of knowledge into a language of feeling and sympathy.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter I shall begin to explore this particular language against a backdrop of what David Carroll terms the mid-nineteenth-century 'crisis of interpretation'. In *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations* he describes the attempt to find 'that Victorian Holy Grail, a comprehensive synthetic philosophy'. Eliot as a polymath was particularly suited to this task,

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Sara Hennell, April 1849, *Letters*, I, 279.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest that feeling is not important for Kant (e.g. in the *Aesthetic*); the key difference here is Eliot's sympathy and intersubjectivity. Feeling, for Kant, is *reflective*, i.e., the subject reflects upon the pleasure of aesthetic judgement; and the subject feels a respect for the moral law insofar as the law is other than its own (finite) interests.

Carroll claims, as each of her disciplines—biblical criticism, philosophy, biology, history—was concerned at a fundamental level with ‘the problem of interpretation’.<sup>3</sup>

The paradigmatic metaphor for this hermeneutic quest is that of the circle, and I shall discuss this in relation to one of the founding fathers of hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher. His distinctive formulation of the hermeneutic circle and his hermeneutical approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures is related to the ideas Mackay discussed in *The Progress of the Intellect* (1850), which Eliot reviewed with approval. According to Eliot, Mackay takes as a given ‘the presence of undeviating law in the material and moral world—of that invariability of sequence which is acknowledged to be the basis of physical science, but which is still perversely ignored in our social organisation, our ethics and our religion’. She pinpoints the ‘law of consequences’ as the ‘master key’ to ‘divine revelation’:<sup>4</sup>

It is Mr Mackay’s faith that divine revelation is not contained exclusively or pre-eminently in the facts and inspirations of any one age or nation, but is coextensive with the history of human development, and is perpetually unfolding itself to our widened experience and investigation, as firmament upon firmament becomes visible to us in proportion to the power and range of our exploring instruments.<sup>5</sup>

Eliot goes on to quote Mackay approvingly: ‘The true religious philosophy of an imperfect being is not a system of creed, but, as Socrates thought, an infinite search or approximation.’<sup>6</sup> For Eliot, Mackay is akin to the German critics: his ‘mythical’ themes may be ‘still startling to the English theological mind’,<sup>7</sup> but nonetheless Eliot urges our theologians to adopt

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<sup>3</sup> David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 2-3. I am much indebted to this excellent study. See also George Levine, ‘George Eliot’s Hypothesis of Reality’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35, 1 (June, 1980), 1-28.

<sup>4</sup> *Essays*, pp. 30-1. This is pointed out by Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Essays*, pp. 30-1.

<sup>6</sup> *Essays*, p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> *Essays*, p. 40.

Mackay's 'liberal' biblical criticism, where the 'spirit' and not the 'letter' becomes important in the interpretative quest.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Eliot's review of Greg's *The Creed of Christendom* (1851) gives considerable prominence to Greg's statement of the 'inexorable law of consequences', a crucial idea in determining Eliot's ethical and philosophical position:

Let any one look back upon his past career, look inward on his daily life, and then say what effect would be produced upon him, were the conviction once fixedly embedded in his soul, that everything done is done irrevocably, that even the omnipotence of God cannot uncommit a deed, cannot make that undone which has been done; that every act of his must bear its allotted fruit according to the everlasting laws—must remain for ever ineffaceably inscribed on the tablets of universal Nature. And, then, let him consider what would have been the result upon the moral condition of our race, had all men ever held this conviction.<sup>9</sup>

It was, however, Charles Bray, whose *The Philosophy of Necessity* (1841) Eliot read during her Coventry period, who subsequently claimed to have provided 'the base of the philosophy which she afterwards retained'.<sup>10</sup> He maintained that Eliot 'always held with me as a sequence to such doctrine of consequences that one of the greatest duties of life was unembittered resignation to the inevitable'.<sup>11</sup> Eliot's novels—her 'experiments in life'—are

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<sup>8</sup> *Essays*, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> *Leader*, 2 (20 September 1851), 897-9, in Joseph Wiesenfarth, ed., *George Eliot: A Writer's Notebook 1854-1879 and Uncollected Writings* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1981), p. 235.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Bray, *Phases of Opinion and Experience During a Long Life: An Autobiography* (London, 1885), p. 73. Albert J. Fyfe insists that while '*Adam Bede* may seem orthodox enough, [...] the work actually exemplifies the utilitarian system of George Eliot's friend Charles Bray'. 'The Interpretation of *Adam Bede*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 9 (September, 1954), 134-9.

<sup>11</sup> Bray, *Autobiography*, p. 74. Eliot agreed with Bray's basic premise of the law of consequences, but found herself 'unable to agree with much that you say in relation to the religious ideas and the moral tendencies. For I dislike extremely a passage quoted by Sarah [in *Christianity and Infidelity* (London, 1857), p. 131; *The Philosophy of Necessity*, 2 vols. (London, 1841), I, 205-6] in which you appear to consider the disregard of individuals to be a lofty state of mind. My own experience and development deepen every day my conviction that our moral progress may be measured by the degree in which we sympathize with individual suffering and individual joy. The fact that in the scheme of things we see a constant and tremendous sacrifice of individuals is, it seems to me only one of the many proofs that urge upon us our total inability to find in our own natures a key to the Divine Mystery. I could more readily turn Christian and worship Jesus again than embrace a Theism which professes to explain the proceedings of God'. (Letter to Charles Bray, 15 November, 1857, *Letters*, II, 403)

informed by this doctrine,<sup>12</sup> which as Carroll points out, 'goes hand-in-hand with a vivid awareness of the unknown continually pressing in on the known, of the need for faith and knowledge, credulity and scepticism, to work together'.<sup>13</sup>

Another important idea which was working itself out during this time of intellectual ferment was the development theory, which Eliot's friend Herbert Spencer, in his *The Principles of Psychology* (1855), had already adumbrated well before the publication in 1859 of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. The rise of the empirical sciences, and the far-reaching influence of the theories of Mill, Spencer and Comte,<sup>14</sup> together with the fundamental influence of Spinoza, provided the context for Eliot's contribution to this task, which was none other than to 'progressively uncover the known laws of the universe'.<sup>15</sup> As Rosemary Ashton points out, all of these Empirical-positivist writers with whom Eliot shared her world, 'looked to history to verify their claims, and all used the methods and terminology of science'.<sup>16</sup> It is not surprising then, that Eliot should approve so wholeheartedly of the German social historian Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl's 'social-political conservatism', which at once combines a thoroughly 'historical' approach to the empirical and inductive investigation of natural laws, a 'social-political-conservatism', reflected in a deference for tradition, and a belief in the inevitable progress (or 'development') of humanity.<sup>17</sup> Although Eliot stopped short of labelling herself as a positivist—in fact she never accepted any philosophical system wholeheartedly, with the possible exception of Feuerbach's while she was translating his *Essence of Christianity*—and preferred to characterise herself

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<sup>12</sup> *Letters*, VI, 216.

<sup>13</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 17. He goes on to observe that 'it is only the uncertain gap between the known and the unknown that makes both life and narrative possible' (p. 35).

<sup>14</sup> Lewes was of course Comte's great populariser. See his *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences* (London, 1853).

<sup>15</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Ashton, *George Eliot*, p. 20.

as a meliorist,<sup>18</sup> her generous review of Riehl's work reflects a sympathy with his views, and might just as well stand as a summary of her own position:

The views at which he has arrived by this inductive process, he sums up in the term—*social-political-conservatism*; but his conservatism is, we conceive, of a thoroughly philosophical kind. He sees in European society *incarnate history*, and any attempt to disengage it from its historical elements must, he believes, be simply destructive of social vitality. What has grown up historically can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws. The external conditions which society has inherited from the past are but the manifestation of inherited internal conditions in the human beings who compose it; the internal conditions and the external are related to each other as the organism and its medium, and development can take place only by the gradual consentaneous development of both.<sup>19</sup>

Rosemary Ashton notes that towards the end of the Riehl review, all of Eliot's 'intellectual agreements'—Spinoza, Feuerbach, Spencer, Lewes—seem to coalesce in her 'prescription' for the social novel, which must needs be 'realistic' and 'moral':<sup>20</sup>

Our social novels profess to represent the people as they are, and the unreality of their representations is a grave evil. The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. [...] Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People.<sup>21</sup>

This connection between art and morality is brought out strongly in Eliot's review of Ruskin's *Modern Painters III* (1856). Despite all his faults, Ruskin teaches us a 'truth of infinite value', that of 'realism—the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature,

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<sup>18</sup> According to the OED (2nd edition), the word was first used in 1858, and refers to 'the doctrine, intermediate between pessimism and optimism, which affirms that the world may be made better by rightly-directed effort'. See Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot*, p. 236, for a discussion of Eliot's meliorism.

<sup>19</sup> *Essays*, pp. 286-7. Ian Adam points out the connection between the Riehl review and *Adam Bede*, which was published the following year: 'indeed, at some points it is not only spirit, but illustration itself which is identical'. 'The Structure of Realisms in *Adam Bede*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 30 (1975), 127-49, p. 136. See also John Goode, 'Adam Bede', in Barbara Hardy, ed., *Critical Essays on George Eliot* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 19-41, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Ashton, *George Eliot*, p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> *Essays*, pp. 270-1, cited by Ashton, *George Eliot*, p. 21.

and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality'. Eliot notes that Ruskin is a polymath, who when he

brings his varied studies to bear on one great purpose, when he has to trace their common relation to a grand phase of human activity, it is obvious that he will have a great deal to say of interest and importance to others besides painters. The fundamental principles of all just thought and beautiful action or creation are the same, and in making clear to ourselves what is best and noblest in art, we are making clear to ourselves what is best and noblest in morals; in learning how to estimate the artistic products of a particular age according to the external attitude and mental life of that age, we are widening our sympathy and deepening the basis of our tolerance and charity.<sup>22</sup>

We discussed earlier the received wisdom (following Basil Willey) that Eliot had a divided self, and that she refused to allow 'metaphysical inconsistencies' to hinder her art. We concluded that from a Spinozistic perspective these inconsistencies are more apparent than real, and that her philosophical position is perfectly consistent with ethical responsibility; indeed, it is meaningless without it (see above, chapter one). According to Graham Hough, there is no dichotomy to resolve: Eliot for the most part observed the rules of society because they had stood the test of time. He points out that 'there is no need to despise a particular set of rules because they are not absolute; it is enough if they can give dignity and the means of happiness to those who belong to it'. This (one might say Spinozistic) approach to these fundamental ethical questions, far from resulting in emotional or philosophical schizophrenia, satisfies her 'positivistic and scientific credentials' at the same time as it reinforces traditional values.<sup>23</sup>

However, in establishing Eliot's positivist and empiricist credentials, we may be in danger of neglecting the other side of the philosophical divide in the nineteenth-century: the transcendentalism of Carlyle, the Catholicism of

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<sup>22</sup> [*Modern Painters III*], 'Arts and Belles Lettres', *Westminster Review* 65 (April 1856), USA ed., 343-4, in Wiesenfarth, ed., *Uncollected Writings*, p. 273.

<sup>23</sup> Graham Hough, 'Novelist-Philosophers-XII: George Eliot', *Horizon* 17 (Jan. 1948), 50-62, p. 57.



Newman, and the philosophical idealism of Green.<sup>24</sup> That Eliot would not dismiss this opposing tendency in philosophy and letters is suggested by her famous reaction to her first reading of *The Origin of Species*:

It will have a great effect in the scientific world, causing a thorough and open discussion of a question about which people have hitherto felt timid. So the world gets on step by step towards brave clearness and honesty! But to me the Development theory and all other explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes.<sup>25</sup>

Further, it is little observed that George Henry Lewes's magnum opus, *Problems of Life and Mind* (third series, 1879) which Eliot revised prior to publication after Lewes's death, is as Jack Kaminsky points out, a comprehensive attempt to unite the two seemingly incompatible positions of empiricism and idealism into a synthetic 'empirical metaphysics'.<sup>26</sup> Kaminsky argues that the traditional view of Lewes as a thorough-going positivist, while understandable, is false, and that his dispute with metaphysics is for the most part concerned with its methods rather than its subject matter: Lewes 'was not in opposition to metaphysical speculation per se'.<sup>27</sup> And K. M. Newton argues that Spencer and Lewes should not to be thought of as 'pure' empiricists; indeed, one of Lewes's 'main concerns was to account for the Kantian categories which condition human knowledge in evolutionary and biological terms, thus effecting a reconciliation between Kantian thinking and empiricism'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jack Kaminsky, 'The Empirical Metaphysics of George Henry Lewes', *Journal of the History of Ideas* XIII (1952), 314-32, p. 314

<sup>25</sup> *Letters*, 3, 227. This issue shall be discussed in greater detail in chapter five.

<sup>26</sup> Kaminsky, 'Empirical Metaphysics', p. 314.

<sup>27</sup> Kaminsky, 'Empirical Metaphysics', p. 317. Valerie Dodd, in revealing the contents of a notebook belonging to Eliot now held in the Nuneaton Library, points out that in Eliot's 'chain' of philosophers through the ages, she includes Kant and Hegel of 'only four thinkers who survived into her own century'. Dodd argues that this is evidence of her continuing interest in Idealism. The other two nineteenth-century thinkers are Gall (the phrenologist) and Comte. See Valerie A. Dodd, 'A George Eliot Notebook', *Studies in Bibliography: Papers of the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia* 34 (1981), 258-62, p. 262.

<sup>28</sup> K. M. Newton, *George Eliot: Romantic Humanist* (Totowa, N. J: Barnes & Noble, 1981), p. 59. Newton also points out that in *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1, 219, Lewes cites Eliot, and 'suggests her agreement with his belief that Kantian thinking can be reconciled

Eliot had a distrust of all systems, and not exclusively metaphysical systems, so it is not surprising that not only would she be less confident than the other members of her circle about the hermeneutic quest, but that she would look for another discourse in which to conduct her 'experiments in life'. This discourse would be particular and individual, rather than general and synthetic, and would embrace the human and the intersubjective, rather than the broad sweep of abstractions from philosophical or scientific first principles:

But my writing is simply a set of experiments in life—an endeavour to see what our thought and emotion may be capable of—what stores of motive, actual or hinted as possible, give promise of a better after which we may strive—what gains from past revelations and disciplines we must strive to keep hold of as something more sure than shifting theory. 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.<sup>29</sup>

Before we begin to discuss these 'experiments' in the form of some key scenes from *Adam Bede*, and discuss them in relation to Schleiermacher, Kant and Spinoza, it will be necessary to set the historical context in order to back up our claim that Eliot's work might be informed by these philosophical concerns.

After the *Pantheismusstreit* (the Pantheism Controversy) and Kant's death, the first half of the nineteenth century was notable for the sustained attempt somehow to find a synthesis of Kant and Spinoza, of which the latter assumed utmost importance (see above, chapter one).<sup>30</sup> The Romantics had an anti-Kantian impulse, but they nonetheless took up Kant's suggestion of the Sublime in the third *Critique* as a way of bridging the gap between the

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with empiricism' (p. 60). See also Edith Simcox's tribute to 'George Eliot' in *The Nineteenth Century* 9 (1881), 778-801.

<sup>29</sup> *Letters*, VI, 216-7.

<sup>30</sup> B. A. Gerrish tells the fascinating story about this controversy, which from a seemingly insignificant episode 'grew into a broad literary debate about the merits of Spinoza's allegedly "pantheistic" conception of God'. See 'The Secret Religion of Germany: Christian Piety and the Pantheism Controversy', *The Journal of Religion* 67 (October 1987), 437-55, p. 439.

phenomenal and the noumenal that the first and second *Critiques* had opened up. The possibility of a 'constitutive aesthetic form' is present in the third *Critique*, and 'arises out of the connection between the sublime and the reason', although however it is 'inconceivable that Kant should have allowed a breakthrough to the noumenal world'.<sup>31</sup> Kant had no answer to the irreparable fracture of the autonomous subject, seemingly operating at once in the phenomenal realm of cause and effect, and the noumenal world of freedom and poetry.<sup>32</sup> Kant's only 'solution' to this dichotomy 'was to split the subject down the middle, secreting its liberty at such an unsearchable depth that it becomes at once inviolable and ineffectual'.<sup>33</sup> Kantianism had the third kind of knowledge of Spinoza and other 'metaphysical' pretensions (such as Leibniz's 'dogmatism') in its sights, and was not just an attempted answer to Hume's scepticism.<sup>34</sup> However, the early German Romantics responded to the Kantian 'crisis' by taking up Kant's own suggestion that the sublime could reveal those moments not exhausted by Reason, affirming that which Kant had refuted. Here, the position of art and poetry becomes crucial. For the Romantics, it was the sublime figured through art which could provide a sense

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<sup>31</sup> Adam Hazard, *Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1983), p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford and Cambridge, Ma: Blackwell, 1990), p. 81.

<sup>33</sup> Eagleton, *Ideology*, p. 100. Husserl claims that Kant, 'warned by Hume's scepticism, fears [...] every recourse to the psychological as an absurd perversion of the genuine problem of the understanding, [...] [and] gets involved in this mythical concept-formation. [...] His transcendental concepts are thus unclear in a quite peculiar way, such as that for reasons of principle they can never be transposed into clarity, can never be transformed into a formation of meaning which is direct and procures self-evidence'. Thus Kant is not truly 'radical', he is 'a child of his time, completely bound by its naturalistic psychology'. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (first pub. 1954; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 115.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Allison offers a corrective to what he perceives has been a one-sided interpretation by Anglo-American critics, viz., that the *Critique of Pure Reason* was directed for the most part at Hume's scepticism. Allison claims that Kant's little known *On a Discovery*, which was published at the same time as the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), points to the conclusion that the *Critique of Pure Reason* was equally distinguishing itself from Leibnizian rationalism. See *The Kant-Eberhard Controversy: An English translation together with supplementary materials and a historical-analytic introduction to Immanuel Kant's 'On a Discovery According to Which Any New Critique of Pure Reason Has Been Made Superfluous by an Earlier One'* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 104.

of the noumenal: art could attempt to bridge the gap, and affirm (contra Kant) the possibility of metaphysical knowledge.<sup>35</sup> Wordsworth (an 'imaginative' Spinozist according to John Jones),<sup>36</sup> seems to have expressed this idea in 'Tintern Abbey':

While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy  
We see into the life of things.<sup>37</sup>

The key figure for our purposes in the Jena group of early Romantics is Friedrich Schleiermacher, whom it is probable that Eliot read.<sup>38</sup> She would

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<sup>35</sup> K. M. Newton argues that Eliot's work can be seen as an attempt to reconcile two facets of Romanticism: the 'egoist' strand, comprising Byron, Chateaubriand, Lenau, Stirner and Nietzsche, who represent an 'anti-metaphysical' position; and 'organicist Romantic', comprising Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle, Schelling and Schleiermacher, but without their 'metaphysical basis'. *George Eliot: Romantic Humanist*, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> John Jones, *The Egotistical Sublime: A History of Wordsworth's Imagination* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954), p. 36. He writes: 'Because Wordsworth saw the world as an intelligible complex—"frame" is his favourite term—and yet was neither pure materialist nor pure idealist, it may fairly be said that his closest philosophical link was with Spinoza. And this is an illuminating comparison, provided that imaginative kinship be not confounded with formal allegiance. Both were possessed of an intense ethical passion; both talked much of virtue and wisdom as a discipline (critics have noted the Judaic quality of 'Michael' and other narrative poems); both had the same instinctive reaction to the Cartesian problem of matter and mind, admitting difference but denying opposition. Above all, both were monists'.

<sup>37</sup> *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by E. de Selincourt, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944), II, 260, ll. 47-9.

<sup>38</sup> On the 2nd of November, 1851, Eliot wrote to Sarah Hennell, asking her to send 'the MS translation of Schleiermacher's little book and also the book itself' (*Letters*, I, 372). Haight says in a note that he cannot identify the book 'with certainty'. The only works of Schleiermacher's that appear to have been translated into English before and during this time are: *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1851); *Schleiermacher's Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*, translated by William Dobson (Cambridge, 1836); and *The Life of Schleiermacher as Unfolded in his Autobiography and Letters* (London, 1860). However, given that Eliot was only requesting an MS translation, and not a published translation, we may have to rule them out (reluctantly in the case of the *Brief Outline*, as it contains some hermeneutics). Otherwise, the book which automatically suggests itself is the famous *Speeches*, which appeared in numerous editions during the nineteenth century, but not in an English edition, although it is possible that a translation of some sort was in circulation. Another (admittedly slight) possibility is that Eliot was being ironic when she asked for Schleiermacher's 'little' book, and that she in fact was referring to his voluminous *The Christian Faith*. Some evidence for this is provided in the same letter to Sarah Hennell, where Eliot directs her to an article by James Martineau in the *Prospective Review* 7 (1851), 472-501, entitled, 'The Harmony of the Intuitional and Logical Elements in the Ultimate Grounds of Religious Belief'. In this article, Martineau cites *The Christian Faith* at length, thus possibly prompting Eliot's interest in it. I certainly believe that Eliot read *The Christian Faith* some time before writing *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). I am thinking of the passage in that novel where the narrator describes Maggie as being 'unhappily quite without that knowledge of the irreversible laws within and without her which, governing the habits, becomes morality, and, developing the feelings of submission and dependence, becomes religion' (book 4, chapter 3). This seems to me to be very close to Schleiermacher's characteristic idea of religion as 'a feeling of absolute dependence'. Although Schleiermacher evoked this idea in the *Speeches*, it was only in *The Christian Faith* that he formulated it in precisely this way.

certainly have been aware of his ideas, ranging from his early Romanticism to his later hermeneutics, as these were intimately related to various ideas that were part of the intellectual milieu of the mid-Victorian period.<sup>39</sup>

Stephen Prickett, in his recent book *Origins of Narrative*, explores the contribution of Schleiermacher to the Jena group, claiming that he remained more of a Kantian than some of the other members of the group, in particular Jacobi, Fichte and Schelling, each of whom allowed Kant's ideas of reason to be 'constitutive' rather than merely 'regulative'.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, while it is true that Schleiermacher followed Kant in his seeming appropriation of the ideas of the third *Critique*, together with Kant's emphasis on 'subjectivity', it remains clear that in the *Speeches* Schleiermacher was primarily motivated by an anti-Kantian impulse; indeed, the *Speeches* were written for those 'cultured despisers' of religion who were a product of the *Aufklärung* and Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1792).<sup>41</sup> It seems that Schleiermacher's work is in part an attempted synthesis of Kant and Spinoza, one which overturns the negativity of the Kantian formulation of religion, while also being in tension with the metaphysical approach of orthodox religion which itself would be a legitimate target of Kantianism. For Schleiermacher, religion is a completely separate realm, and not an object of knowledge per se: 'it is religion that first completes the circle of the truly human'.<sup>42</sup>

Julia A. Lamm argues that two early essays of Schleiermacher, written during 1793-94, establish his system as that of a 'post-Kantian Spinozism,

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<sup>39</sup> None of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics was published during Eliot's lifetime, with the exception of part of the *Brief Outline to the Study of Theology*. See K. Clements, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Pioneer of Modern Theology* (London: Collins, 1987), p. 157. Notwithstanding this fact, it would be inconceivable that an area of such fundamental concern and topical debate could have escaped her attentions.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Prickett, *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 189.

<sup>41</sup> Rudolf Otto, Introduction to the 1926 rpt. of the 1st ed. of the *Speeches*, rpt. in Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion, Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. by John Oman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958, from the 3rd German edition), pp. 16-7.

<sup>42</sup> Otto, Introduction to Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, p. xviii.

which has four defining characteristics: an organic monism, an ethical determinism, a higher realism, and a nonanthropomorphic view of God'.<sup>43</sup> Lamm observes that Schleiermacher was heavily influenced by Jacobi, who posited a stark choice between, on the one hand, 'atheism, pantheism, and determinism', which he saw as various interpretations of Spinozism; and on the other, 'Christian theism and free will'. In the context of Kant's three *Critiques*, Schleiermacher developed his own version of Spinozism, but one modified and circumscribed by the critical philosophy, a so-called 'third alternative' to Jacobi's rather severe dichotomy.<sup>44</sup>

Richard Crouter, in his edition of the *Speeches*, argues that 'Schleiermacher's work brilliantly reflects the tensions between the religious thought of the Enlightenment and Romanticism'.<sup>45</sup> Crouter reflects on the differences and similarities between the *Speeches* and Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Both works are eschatological, and emphasise the importance of history, although Kant emphasises duty over desire, while for Schleiermacher 'a serene moment of eternity is disclosed in the immediate relation of an individual to the universe'. Both works 'envisage the human in a broken world', and make morality and religion less dependent on external authorities. While Kant proposes a natural religion, against all forms of 'ecclesiastical faith that is rooted in Scripture, myth, miracles, and ritual', Schleiermacher regards natural religion as being 'shallow' and 'deistic', and 'sees in the actual lived religion ("positive religions") the locus of true faith and contrasts this with its corrupt institutional forms'. While Kant rationalizes dogma, Schleiermacher in the *Speeches* 'stands aloof from the intellectual problems of specific Christian dogmas'.<sup>46</sup> In other words, it appears that

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<sup>43</sup> Julia A. Lamm, 'Schleiermacher's Post-Kantian Spinozism: The Early Essays on Spinoza, 1793-94', *The Journal of Religion* 74, 4 (October 1994), 476-505, p. 476.

<sup>44</sup> Lamm, 'Schleiermacher's Post-Kantian Spinozism', p. 504.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Crouter, Editor's Introduction to Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. by Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Crouter, Editor's Introduction, pp. 26-7.

Schleiermacher was trying to synthesise two opposing tendencies, not wanting either to remain entirely within one, nor wanting to embrace the other. Schleiermacher, in contrast to the philosophical systems of Kant and Fichte,

seeks a more open-ended, literary-rhetorical way of defending a philosophical interpretation of religion that will give religion its due on its own terms. [...] If the Kantian dichotomy between spirit and nature, represented by the realms of noumena and phenomena, is too great for Schleiermacher, the romantics' insistence in collapsing these distinctions into a single mode of poetic awareness ends with too vacuous a line being drawn between spirit and nature.<sup>47</sup>

Schleiermacher is perhaps best characterised as a 'thinker of finitude', steering a course between Kant and the Romantics.<sup>48</sup>

For Schleiermacher, understanding is an unending task, so the search for meaning, what he terms the 'inner unity' is only to be achieved in an approximate and provisional sense.<sup>49</sup> However, we can find a substitute for this sense of completeness that is sought; for Schleiermacher this is located in 'feeling' (*Gefühl*).<sup>50</sup>

The sum total of religion is to feel that, in the highest unity, all that moves us in feeling is one; to feel that aught single and particular is only possible by means of this unity; to feel, that is to say, that our being and living is a being and living in and through God. But it is not necessary that the Deity should be presented as one distinct object.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Crouter, Editor's Introduction, p. 39.

<sup>48</sup> Jack Forstman, *A Romantic Triangle: Schleiermacher and Early German Romanticism* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), pp. 81-6, cited in Crouter, Editor's Introduction, Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, p. 38. Hans W. Frei has written extensively on this difficult area. See especially *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); and *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. by George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>49</sup> David Carroll observes that 'the search [for meaning] is continuous—the hermeneutic circle never stops turning—the most that can be gained at each stage is a fresh and conditional awareness of unity and meaning'. *George Eliot*, p. 35.

<sup>50</sup> Julia A. Lamm notes the importance of feeling (*Gefühl*) for Schleiermacher, and locates this in the fact 'that he was deeply troubled by the unbridgeable gap that Kant had established between freedom and desire, a gap that Schleiermacher interpreted as a further reification of the gulf between phenomena and noumena found in the *Critique of Pure Reason*'. 'The Early Philosophical Roots of Schleiermacher's Notion of *Gefühl*, 1788-1794', *Harvard Theological Review* 87:1 (1994), 67-105, p.73.

<sup>51</sup> Schleiermacher, *Speeches* (Oman ed.), pp. 49-50.

It appears that, for Schleiermacher, the concept of God is secondary to the essence of religious feeling, and certainly Schleiermacher would seem to suggest this, when he stresses that

religion is not knowledge and science, either of the world or of God. Without being knowledge, it recognises knowledge and science. It is itself an affection, a revelation of the Infinite in the finite, God being seen in it and it in God.<sup>52</sup>

Religion for Schleiermacher is not about ethics or metaphysics, or even strictly speaking, theology. This invites an immediate comparison with Spinoza, whose *Tractatus* established principles of biblical criticism that would inspire the later German 'higher' critics. Inspired by Spinoza's approach, if not by his rigorous philosophy of immanence, Schleiermacher radically historicised and demythologised the Scriptures in a manner akin to his revered predecessor (see above, chapter one). According to Schleiermacher:

The sacred writings were not for perfect believers alone, but rather for children in belief, for novices, for those who are standing at the entrance and would be invited in, and how could they go to work except as I am now doing with you? [...] As you can easily see, a communication of this sort could be nothing other than poetical or rhetorical. Akin to the rhetorical is the dialectic, and what method has from old been more brilliantly or more successfully employed in revealing the higher nature, not only of knowledge, but of the deeper feelings? But if the vehicle alone satisfies, this end will not be reached. Wherefore, as it has become so common to seek metaphysics and ethics chiefly, in the sacred writings, and to appraise them accordingly, it seems time to approach the matter from the other end, and to begin with the clear-cut distinction between our faith and your ethics and metaphysics, between our piety and what you call morality.<sup>53</sup>

Certainly Schleiermacher cannot escape completely the historical charge that has been levelled at him most often, that of being a Spinozist, as any number of quotations from his *Speeches* reveal Spinozistic 'echoes', if not a 'radical immanence' which parallels Spinoza's fundamental doctrine of the

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<sup>52</sup> Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, p. 36. John Martin Creed claims that Schleiermacher, like Hegel, 'breaks with the conception of a God external to the world'. *The Divinity of Jesus Christ: A Study in the History of Christian Doctrine since Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), p. 41.

<sup>53</sup> Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, p. 34.



single substance with infinite attributes.<sup>54</sup> However, Schleiermacher denied the literal charge of Spinozism and pantheism at every point, notwithstanding his famous eulogy of Spinoza quoted by Lewes (see above, chapter one). In a note to the third edition of the *Speeches*, Schleiermacher insists that he only ascribed piety and religiosity to Spinoza, and that he did not subscribe to his philosophical system:

How would I expect that, because I ascribed piety to Spinoza, I would myself be taken for a Spinozist? Yet I had never defended his system, and anything philosophic that was in my book was manifestly inconsistent with the characteristics of his views and had quite a different basis than the unity of substance. Even Jacobi [who we can recall fuelled the Pantheism Controversy] has in his criticism by no means hit upon what is most characteristic. When I recovered my astonishment, in revising the second edition, this parallel occurred to me.<sup>55</sup>

Otto suspects that Schleiermacher is being slightly disingenuous here, and claims that some of the revisions to the *Speeches* could be seen 'as an attempt to give [it] a Christian interpretation'. In any case, he believes the work fully deserves its pantheistic and Spinozistic labels, and any attempt on Schleiermacher's part to avoid these charges was a failure.<sup>56</sup> Van A. Harvey takes the view that Schleiermacher regarded the concept of God, for example, 'as almost irrelevant to religion in the first edition', but in the second and third, all the offending passages are 'eliminated or revised' to take account of the sensibilities of his more 'orthodox' readers.<sup>57</sup> Further, Harvey claims that the second and third editions lack the 'agnostic' and 'radical' character of the first edition.<sup>58</sup> Richard Crouter, in his careful study, gives a balanced account

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<sup>54</sup> Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religion in the Age of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 57.

<sup>55</sup> Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, p. 104.

<sup>56</sup> Otto, Introduction to Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, p. xviii.

<sup>57</sup> Van A. Harvey, 'On the New Edition of Schleiermacher's *Addresses on Religion*', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971), 488-512, p. 499.

<sup>58</sup> Harvey, 'On the New Edition', p. 502. He writes: 'Although Schleiermacher regarded religious intuition as something like insight into the unceasing and unified activity of the universe, he also felt it important to stress that any attempt by the intellect to conceptualize or symbolize this unity went beyond the limits of intuition and threatened to collapse into "empty mythology".'

of the changes, and claims that changes, both stylistic and substantial, were made for a variety of reasons, only one of which was because of the effort to play down the Spinozistic associations.<sup>59</sup> However, Harvey, in his characteristic way, tells us we are missing the point, as:

the radicality of the Schleiermacher's early position does not consist in his pantheism or, indeed, in any view he articulated regarding God and the universe. It consists, rather, in his view that the entire dispute—pantheism versus theism—is irrelevant for religion as he conceives it because religion neither posits nor requires such a relationship. The idea of God is not itself essential to any religious intuition of the universe. One should take Schleiermacher seriously when he writes that religion has nothing to do with the God of existence and moral demand.<sup>60</sup>

Bernard Reardon believes that there is no overwhelming evidence of inconsistency throughout the *Speeches*, and 'no radical break in the continuity of his doctrines'.<sup>61</sup> However, despite being extremely close at times to a Spinozistic position, Schleiermacher cannot be classed as a pantheist, because 'feeling' while not knowledge per se, is the 'transcendental ground of all knowledge as of all action'. Feeling is the unity of the self that 'alone provides the means by which His [God's] reality can become accessible to us'. Ultimately 'God and the Universe are, then, not the same, but neither can they be conceived apart from one another; if there is no complete identification of the two ideas, nor is there a complete separation'.<sup>62</sup> Nor equally can Schleiermacher be seen to reduce religious experience to pure subjectivity. The 'feeling of absolute dependence', which in the mature theology of *The Christian Faith* replaces his earlier *Gefühl*, 'is an intuition of ultimate reality

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<sup>59</sup> Crouter, Editor's Introduction, pp. 56-58.

<sup>60</sup> Harvey, 'On the New edition', p. 504.

<sup>61</sup> Reardon, *Religion*, p. 31.

<sup>62</sup> Reardon, *Religion*, pp. 44-45. But compare John Cobb, who argues that 'Schleiermacher requires little more than that the universe as a whole be understood as a living and infinite unity on which each of its parts must be seen as absolutely dependent. Specifically, Schleiermacher finds fully acceptable the philosophy of Spinoza.' John Cobb, *Living Options in Protestant Theology: A Survey of Methods* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), p. 131. However, Richard R. Niebuhr argues that Schleiermacher is incorrectly seen by 'existentialist' theologians as a pantheist or mystic because they cannot shake off 'the Kierkegaardian-Kantian dictum of the infinite abyss between God and man'. Richard R. Niebuhr, *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 13.

and not merely—*pace* Schleiermacher's critics—a purely subjective state'.<sup>63</sup> In surveying the whole of Schleiermacher's theology, Reardon is left with the impression of a

theology subtly transformed into a philosophy of idealist monism. How precisely this has been done tends to elude him, however. The traditional landmarks are there: revelation, the Bible, the articles of faith, the church. Yet all show in a perspective new and somehow altered. Their objectivity has become less palpable, their meaning more equivocal.<sup>64</sup>

The 'equivocal' nature of Schleiermacher's programme—the blend of Kantianism and Spinozism, its radical break with the rationalist and empirical tradition, all the while maintaining an ostensible orthodoxy—cannot be considered apart from his hermeneutics. Indeed, as Crouter points out, one of the reasons for the revisions in the *Speeches* over a long period, is that they in part 'reflect the author's continued struggle with the problem of knowledge and utterability of the experience of unity between self and consciousness'. His concerns became deeper and wider, as he wanted to perceive the 'unity that lies behind all human knowing'.<sup>65</sup>

Schleiermacher thus established a general *philosophical* hermeneutics, and in doing so freed the more narrow theological hermeneutics from its ecclesiastical shackles.<sup>66</sup> For this reason he has the distinction of being the founder of the modern discipline of hermeneutics, which became not only about the understanding of biblical texts, but about all texts; indeed, about the 'art' of understanding anything at all.<sup>67</sup> It goes without saying that the Bible would now be read as any other text; that is, using general hermeneutical principles rather than narrow biblical exegesis.<sup>68</sup> Understanding became 'a

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<sup>63</sup> Reardon, *Religion*, p. 42.

<sup>64</sup> Reardon, *Religion*, p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> Crouter, Editor's Introduction, p. 58.

<sup>66</sup> Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 44.

<sup>67</sup> Translator's Introduction, Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. by Heinz Kimmerle, trans. by James Duke and Jack Forstman (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> Translators' Introduction, Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, p. 7.

dynamic process' between the universal and the subjective, between 'comparison' and 'divination'; that is, not only the comparison of authors and texts, but also a 'feeling' as to 'how language as a living thing has affected the fabric of thought and the mode of presentation' (see below). And importantly for Schleiermacher, 'also necessary is some insight into the kind of person who writes in order to descry how qualities unique to the author shaped the production'.<sup>69</sup> In the following paragraphs from the *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*, Schleiermacher begins to claim for the new discipline of hermeneutics its status as an 'art', the consequences of which will become apparent:

§132. The full understanding of a discourse or piece of writing is a kind of artistic achievement, and thus requires an 'art doctrine' or technology, which we designate by the term 'hermeneutics'.

§133. Such a technology exists insofar as its rules of interpretation form a system resting on principles directly evident from the nature and thought of language.

§134. This 'technology' must be used; to exclude [it] would be possible only if one should somehow assume a miraculously inspired and perfect understanding of the canon.<sup>70</sup>

§140. No writing can be fully understood except in connection with the total range of ideas out of which it has come into being and through a knowledge of the various relations important to the writers' lives and to the lives for whom they write.

For every writing bears a relation to the collective life of which it is part, just as a single sentence relates to the whole discourse or writing in which it appears.<sup>71</sup>

The problem which immediately presents itself, is as Schleiermacher himself says: 'One must already know a man in order to understand what he

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<sup>69</sup> Translators' Introduction, Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, p. 5. Kimmerle, in his Afterword to the *Handwritten Manuscripts*, insists on the importance of feeling for Schleiermacher, where he stresses the intersubjective, social, and historical aspect of Schleiermacher's thought.

<sup>70</sup> Note how Schleiermacher continues the Kantian emphasis on human finitude and our difference from divine intuition.

<sup>71</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline to the Study of Theology*, trans. by Terence N. Tice (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox, 1966), pp. 56-8. A translation of this work was carried out by the English Congregationalist W. Farrer (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1850). It is not known whether Eliot read it or even knew of its existence. None of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, with the exception of the few paragraphs given here, was published until the twentieth-century.

says, and yet one first becomes acquainted with him by what he says.'<sup>72</sup> This is just one instance of the circular nature of all of our understanding, the classic hermeneutic circle: the apparent paradox that 'the whole is understood from the parts, so the parts can be understood only from the whole'. For Schleiermacher, 'this principle is of such consequence for hermeneutics and so incontestable that one cannot even begin to interpret without it.'<sup>73</sup> The consequence of this paradox is that a text can never be understood completely: 'understanding is an unending task'.<sup>74</sup> The 'art' of hermeneutics:

requires agility, an ability to weave from the grammatical to psychological side and from the comparative to divinatory method. Furthermore, interpretation involves constant movement back and forth, for it is always open to revision and supplementation. Since the life of the language and the life of the person form an infinite horizon, perfect understanding is an ideal ever approximated but never attained.<sup>75</sup>

But how does one begin to grasp meaning, however provisional? Schleiermacher answers his own question, by way of an example of the development of language in children:

For a child every instance of relating a name to an object must seem indefinite. It does not become definite until after many comparisons, and comparison demands references to particulars. Only by means of associating and comparing particular meanings does one begin to grasp the inner unity. The inner unity is that which is representable in every particular instance of the intuition. But since the completeness of the particular is never reached, the task is unending. Is there any substitute for this feeling of completeness? And even if one had such a substitute, would there

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<sup>72</sup> Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, MS 1, p. 56.

<sup>73</sup> Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, MS 5, p. 196. The problem of the hermeneutic circle is a later manifestation of Zeno's classic paradoxes. Interestingly enough, Eliot was wrestling with these paradoxes possibly as late as 1877, where in the notebook held in the Nuneaton Library, she refers to Zeno, 'author of the four arguments against motion'. Notebook no. GE890 ELJ-8. And see Dodd, 'A George Eliot Notebook', pp. 258-9. Dodd tentatively assigns a dating of 1867-1877 for the notebook.

<sup>74</sup> Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, MS 1, p. 41.

<sup>75</sup> Translator's Introduction, Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, p. 6. Richard R. Niebuhr points out that the Spinozistic 'idea of an ultimate, organic, unity of meanings rested uncasily with Schleiermacher's insistence on the infinitality of interpretation'. For Schleiermacher, there is not 'only one correct exegesis of a text'; this is the falsehood of 'dogmatic' hermeneutics as opposed to philosophical hermeneutics. *Schleiermacher*, p. 91. One might add in passing that this is in tension with those who would argue that Schleiermacher underwent an unproblematical or uncritical assimilation of Spinoza's philosophy.

be any guarantee that one had grasped the inner unity accurately? The guarantee could not be another rule having to do with method. It could only be feeling. Thus this feeling must be the substitute for completeness. [...] The task can only be completed by approximation.<sup>76</sup>

In his ground-breaking work, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity from Kant to Nietzsche*, Andrew Bowie makes a careful study of the relationship between Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutics* and the little-known *Aesthetics*.<sup>77</sup> He argues that the term 'divination', which as we have seen in the above example is the counterpoint to the 'comparative', has been wrongly taken (by Dilthey onwards) to mean *Einfühlung*, or "feeling one's way into" another person's thought via their writings'. This has resulted in a 'psychologist' interpretation of divination, which Schleiermacher did not intend, and which is an absurdity anyway because Schleiermacher never used the term *Einfühlung* in the first place. Bowie argues that the standard interpretation cannot be sustained, as it clearly rejects the possibility that Schleiermacher could yet offer a way out of the 'hopeless relativism that would make any kind of understanding between people impossible'.<sup>78</sup> On the contrary, Schleiermacher's formulation of the aesthetic act of 'divination' involves 'production' and 'creation' (*Erzeugung*), and, far from being a 'mystical act of identification' with another author or speaker, is actually part of immediate self-consciousness itself. The art of 'divination', then, is 'a necessary component of our everyday, and always incomplete, praxis of understanding each other and the world'.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, MS 1, pp. 76-7.

<sup>77</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 157. He writes: 'Schleiermacher was one of the first philosophers to take the "linguistic turn". Whilst Kant sees the "conditions of possibility" of knowledge as being the necessary categorical operations of our consciousness, Schleiermacher sees these conditions as dependent on language. [...] Language therefore "deconstructs" the opposition of the empirical and the a priori because it is both sensuous and intelligible' (pp. 146-7). I am much indebted to this excellent study. Bowie has recently translated and edited Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, together with various related texts. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. by Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>78</sup> Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, p. 163.

<sup>79</sup> Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, p. 164.

The apparent paradox of subjectivity and meaning is central to Eliot's work, and perhaps especially *Adam Bede*, whose central characters Dinah and Hetty, dramatise the search for a coherent world view. In many ways all the other characters in the novel try to understand, assimilate or synthesise the 'extremes' represented by Dinah and Hetty.<sup>80</sup> Carroll points out that the very language of *Adam Bede*—that of 'optics, perspective, focus'—already makes the problem of hermeneutics central to the novel.<sup>81</sup> Hetty and Dinah are continually unable to grasp each other's meaning, and the narrator is in no doubt that the blame should be shared equally, and that Dinah, for all her 'divinity', has yet to learn the 'art' of 'divination':

It is our habit to say that while the lower nature can never understand the higher, the higher nature commands a complete view of the lower. But I think the higher nature has to learn this comprehension, as we learn the art of vision, by a good deal of hard experience, often with bruises and gashes incurred in taking things up by the wrong end, and fancying our space wider than it is.<sup>82</sup>

Stephen Prickett makes an analysis of the 'typology' of *Adam Bede*, and reads 'The Two Bed-Chambers' scene in terms of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics.<sup>83</sup> The unending nature of interpretation, and the need for sympathetic 'divination', mean that while each girl's 'vision' is flawed, what becomes important

is the relationship between that vision and the unrepeatable context of the personal circumstances from which it arises. Both must be understood with sympathy and imagination—even though in the end judgement must be made. Seen thus this contrast between the

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<sup>80</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 83. According to U. C. Knoepfelmacher, Dinah and Hetty 'are incomplete halves'. *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p.118. John Goode adds: 'If the primary function of "The Two Bed Chambers" scene is to underlie the difference between them, it is also true that both are looking for a world beyond that in which they find themselves.' *Adam Bede*, p. 39. W. J. Harvey provides an excellent discussion of imagery and symbolism in the novel, which largely contributes to the effect of this dichotomy, especially of animal and nature imagery in relation to Hetty. See *The Art of George Eliot* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), pp. 222-45.

<sup>81</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 75.

<sup>82</sup> George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. by Stephen Gill (London: Penguin, 1980), p. 206. Hereafter, references will be given in the text.

<sup>83</sup> Stephen Prickett, 'Romantics and Victorians: From Typology to Symbolism,' in Stephen Prickett, ed., *Reading the Text: Biblical Criticism and Literary Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 182-224, p. 212.

two girls' act of worship becomes one of the most subtle and penetrating hermeneutical exercises in Victorian fiction.<sup>84</sup>

This is an extremely helpful reading because it establishes the key issue here as modalities of self-consciousness.<sup>85</sup> Obviously, the less-formed model is Hetty's narcissistic variety. Her self-regard is purely aesthetic and personal: in terms of Kant she suffers from a failure of the categories, treating herself as an external object rather than a self-determining subject.<sup>86</sup> She lacks the critical distinction between herself as an empirical object of inner perception (the 'I'), and the subject which determines this content. Her self-love is directed to what she *is*—rather than the intersubjective ethical capabilities:

No eyelashes could be more beautiful than Hetty's, and now, while she walks with her pigeon-like stateliness along the room and looks down on her shoulders bordered by the old black lace, the dark fringe shows to perfection on her pink cheek. They are but ill-defined pictures that her narrow bit of imagination can make of the future; but of every picture she is the central figure, in fine clothes (199).

Conversely, Dinah's negation of the human world in favour of theological knowledge is just as limiting but in the other direction: an emphasis on metaphysical exteriority which fails to take into account her human situatedness and finitude.<sup>87</sup> She cannot 'accommodate' herself

to the discovery that some of those cunningly-fashioned instruments we call human souls have only a limited range of music, and will not vibrate in the least under a touch that fills others with tremendous rapture or quivering agony (141).

Dinah's 'window' is just as much a self-deceiving mirror as Hetty's glass.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Prickett, 'Romantics and Victorians', pp. 212-3.

<sup>85</sup> Carroll suggests that Dinah and Hetty 'achieve transcendence through their own typologies. [...] In their exclusive focus they both become their opposites'. *George Eliot*, p. 82.

<sup>86</sup> For Kant, the aesthetic rests upon an ideal of agreement. To regard something as beautiful entails that it be regarded as beautiful for all. In Kantian terms, this distinguishes beauty from mere pleasure or interest.

<sup>87</sup> George R. Creeger, in 'An Interpretation of *Adam Bede*', *ELH* 23 (1956), 213-38, also senses that 'Dinah is an incomplete person' (p. 235), and demonstrates 'a kind of unwillingness to become fully involved in life' (p. 236).

<sup>88</sup> Prickett, 'Romantics and Victorians', p. 212. He sees Hetty's religion as 'a textbook case of Feuerbachian projection', and suggests that the novel as a whole reflects 'the uncertainties that were increasingly to affect not merely biblical criticism, but all post-Kantian epistemology' (p. 213). He further suggests that while both girls are caught up in a



She closed her eyes, that she might feel more intensely the presence of a Love and Sympathy deeper and more tender than was breathed from the earth and sky. That was often Dinah's mode of praying in solitude. Simple to close her eyes, and feel herself enclosed by the Divine Presence; then gradually her fears, yearning anxieties for others, melted away like ice-crystals in a warm ocean. She had sat in this way perfectly still, with her hands crossed on her lap, and the pale light resting on her calm face, for at least ten minutes, when she was startled by a loud sound, apparently of something falling in Hetty's room. But like all sounds that fall on our ears in a state of abstraction, it had no distinct character, but was simply loud and startling, so she felt uncertain whether she had interpreted it rightly (202).<sup>89</sup>

Dinah cannot interpret the noises, and can only rely on opening the Bible at random to make the choice between her conflicting impulses; and her literal interpretation of the parable of Paul at Ephesus leads her totally to misjudge the situation and Hetty's needs.<sup>90</sup> Dinah's advice to Hetty is too 'metaphysical' and 'anthropomorphic', telling her in vague terms that she may well be in trouble one day, the trouble that

'comes to us all in this life: we set our hearts on things which it isn't God's will for us to have, and then we go on sorrowing. [...] And I desire for you, that while you are young you should seek your strength from the Heavenly Father, that you may have a support which will not fail you in the evil day' (205).<sup>91</sup>

Dinah's anthropomorphic conceptions make her a flawed character and, contrary to received wisdom which suggests that she is the idealised vehicle

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hermeneutic circle, only Hetty's is 'truly closed', for Dinah has the possibility of 'participating in an open circle capable of change and growth' (p. 214). U. C. Knoepfelmacher, while not explicitly considering the hermeneutic aspect, agrees that with Dinah there is the possibility of development, but that Hetty 'will remain blind'. Knoepfelmacher puts this down to Hetty and Arthur's being 'chained to the sensory world'. *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 119.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Adam's inability to interpret the sounds of his father attempting to enter the house on the night of his untimely death (chapter four, p. 93).

<sup>90</sup> M. Kischner, 'Spinozisms in Three Novels of George Eliot: *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Washington, 1976), p. 58. Cf. the drawing of lots in the Lantern Yard religion in *Silas Marner*. George Eliot, *Silas Marner*, ed. by Q. D. Leavis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), part 1, ch. 1, pp. 60-2.

<sup>91</sup> Dinah should have heeded Spinoza's advice in the *Ethics*, where he shows the 'falsity' of certain 'prejudices'; 'namely, that men commonly suppose all natural things to act, as they themselves do, for the sake of an end, and even regard it as certain that God himself directs everything to a particular end (for they saw that God made everything for the sake of man, and man that he might worship God)'. *Ethics*, Pt. 1, App., p. 34.

for Eliot's Feuerbachian religion of humanity, she actually receives very little narrative sympathy.<sup>92</sup>

A close study of her sermon reveals a similar condemnation of Dinah's bibliolatry to that meted out by Eliot to Dr Cumming in an early essay (see above, chapter one).<sup>93</sup> The sermon is ineffective, and fails to move the crowds (as Dinah tells Mr Irwine later), and shows an exploitative and judgmental side to the Methodist mission, as witnessed by the disturbing theological images with which Dinah warns Chad's Bess to repent:

'Poor child! poor child! He is beseeching you, and you don't listen to him. You think of earrings and fine gowns and caps, and you never think of the Saviour who died to save your precious soul. Your cheeks will be shrivelled one day, your hair will be grey, your body will be thin and tottering! Then you will begin to feel that your soul is not saved; then you will have to stand before God dressed in your sins, in your evil tempers and vain thoughts. And Jesus, who stands ready to help you now, won't help you then: because you won't have him to be your Saviour, he will be your judge. Now he looks at you with love and mercy, and says, "Come

<sup>92</sup> Though he thinks the characterisation of Dinah is ineffective, Albert J. Fyfe states baldly that Dinah 'is Feuerbach's principle of humanitarian love'. 'The Interpretation of *Adam Bede*,' p. 138. U. C. Knoepfelmacher reads *Adam Bede* as a Feuerbachian allegory, where 'the selflessness and sympathy of Dinah Morris clearly prevail over the animalism of Hetty Sorrel'. *Religious Humanism*, p. 54. However, this reading, while illuminating, is far too schematic, and does not attend to the subtle dynamics of the novel. In contrast, John Goode argues that Herbert Spencer's work, and in particular his *Social Statics* (1851), which both Eliot and George Henry Lewes read, has more obvious relevance than the work of Comte and Feuerbach. 'Adam Bede', pp. 26-30. Lewes wrote of *Social Statics*: 'We remember no work on ethics since that of Spinoza to be compared with it' (*Letters*, I, 364, cited by Goode, p. 41n.). George C. Creeger, in 'An Interpretation of *Adam Bede*', while accepting that *Adam Bede* is 'not merely fictionalised philosophy' (p. 225n), nonetheless finds the Feuerbachian reading irresistible. Dorothy J. Atkins argues that Feuerbach, who posits an individual system of ethics, is less attractive to Eliot than Spinoza, because Spinoza 'recognises a universal moral order on which human values may be based'. *George Eliot and Spinoza*, p. 12. Ian Gregor argues that for Dinah, 'George Eliot's moral purpose is more complex. This is chiefly because she serves as a moral norm to define the weakness of the other three' (Hetty, Adam, and Arthur). Ian Gregor, 'The Two Worlds of *Adam Bede*', in Ian Gregor and Brian Nicholas, *The Moral and the Story* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), 13-32, p. 23. While Gregor acknowledges that Dinah has faults and must grow and be humanised, I would go further and suggest that she is just as inadequate as the rest of them, and certainly more so than Adam. As we shall see below, his development is the favoured model of consciousness, to which Dinah must accommodate herself. Joan Bennett, normally a perceptive critic, states without qualification that 'Dinah is presented without a fault, but Adam is not'. *George Eliot: Her Mind and her Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948; 1962), p. 108.

<sup>93</sup> Kischner, 'Spinozisms', p. 80. He suggests that Dinah is 'deeply flawed'. Graham Hough believes that Dinah's sermon is 'one of the few sympathetic pictures of the early Methodist fervour'. 'George Eliot', p. 56. However, John Goode argues that 'the superbly structured sermon' actually reinforces the parallel with Hetty 'that both are alienated dreamers'. 'Adam Bede', pp. 38-39. George C. Creeger observes that the sermon 'scarcely touches the villagers'. 'An Interpretation of *Adam Bede*', p. 220.

to me that you may have life", then he will turn away from you, and say, "Depart from me into everlasting fire!" (74-5).

There is no doubt that from the narrator's perspective, and despite the irony reserved for those who would represent their own variety of religion as infallible, Dinah and Seth's theological notions are incorrect and have nothing to do with true religious feeling, which is not to be found in doctrine and exegesis. Even so, the narrator tells us that we must not be too hasty in our estimation of Methodism:

That would be a pity, for I cannot pretend that Seth and Dinah were anything else than Methodists—not indeed of that modern type which reads quarterly reviews and attends in chapels with pillared porticoes; but of a very old-fashioned kind. They believed in present miracles, in instantaneous conversions, in revelations by dreams and visions; they drew lots, and sought for Divine guidance by opening the Bible at hazard; having a literal way of interpreting the Scriptures, which is not at all sanctioned by approved commentators; and it is impossible for me to represent their diction as correct, or their instruction as liberal. Still—if I have read religious history aright—faith, hope, and charity have not always been found in relation to the three concords; and it is possible, thank Heaven! to have very erroneous theories and very sublime feelings (82).

Even during the meeting in the prison, Dinah is unable to understand Hetty, and to use language appropriate to her needs.<sup>94</sup> Dinah brings little comfort to Hetty, and while she may bring about a confession, it is in spite of rather than because of her rather chilling theological language:

'My poor Hetty, death is very dreadful to you. I know it's dreadful. But if you had a friend to take care of you after death—in that other world—someone whose love is greater than mine—who can do everything. [...] If God our father was your friend, and was willing to save you from sin and suffering, so you should never know wicked feelings nor pain again? If you could believe he loved you and would help you, as you believe he loved you and would help you, it wouldn't be so hard to die on Monday, would it?'

'But I can't know anything about it', Hetty said, with a sullen sadness (495).

Dinah and Hetty eventually commune, but only in the sense that they become each other: Dinah at last registers real human suffering, and Hetty in her

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<sup>94</sup> R. A. Foakes, 'Adam Bede Reconsidered', *English* 12 (1958-59), 173-6, p. 175.

suffering shows that perhaps she too can love.<sup>95</sup> But ultimately Dinah's theology, to which she still returns in silent prayer, is inadequate: Hetty must be sacrificed to the human god of the legal system and to the relentless logic of the hermeneutic.<sup>96</sup>

During all the defining moments of the book, except when she accepts Adam (thereby symbolically embracing the community and accepting her finitude), Dinah is either ineffective or absent completely (for example, she is in Leeds when Hetty disappears). Dinah misreads the Bible and consequently receives the wrong moral guidance, just as in a similar way Maggie, in *The Mill on the Floss*, misreads Thomas á Kempis.<sup>97</sup>

Mrs Poyser, who stands midway between the positions of Dinah and Hetty, and who, despite herself, is fascinated by one (Hetty) and critical of the other (Dinah), comes closest to achieving this synthesis, although 'like the other inhabitants, she has a double vision of the world which leads her into contradiction and self-defeat'.<sup>98</sup> Bartle Massey, who in his excessive rationality shares certain Spinozistic assumptions with Mrs Poyser, cannot even escape her criticism, and confirms that there is a gender aspect to the hermeneutic quest.<sup>99</sup> Mrs Poyser is a corrective to Hetty's materialism as well as Dinah's asceticism. She approaches the Bible Spinozistically,<sup>100</sup> that is, by

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<sup>95</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 99. John Goode writes: 'Only Dinah, with her limited and alienated way of coping with the world, is able to offer human contact. Both Hetty and Dinah live in a dream which questions the justice of the secular world, and it is a bitterly ironic commentary on the secular ideology which the novel celebrates that it is Dinah who humanizes Hetty, because, in the enforced confrontation with reality, she can offer another, more resilient, dream to replace the one which has been destroyed.' *Adam Bede*, p. 40.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Jenny Uglow, who writes: 'Poor Hetty! It makes us think of a sort of Christian cannibalism—Eliot's humanised love, like Christian salvation, cannot come about without that complex of guilt, rejection, remorse and compassion which make up the notion of 'sacrifice'—and in the disturbing plots of her early fiction the sacrificial victim is inevitably a woman.' *George Eliot* (London: Virago Press, 1987), p. 113.

<sup>97</sup> Kischner, 'Spinozisms', p. 144.

<sup>98</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, pp. 88-9. 'Poyser' is from the Old French 'peseor' or 'weigher', the official in charge of a weighing machine. P. H. Reaney, *A Dictionary of British Surnames* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 258.

<sup>99</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 93.

<sup>100</sup> Kischner, 'Spinozisms', p. 55.

the spirit and not the letter of the text, and by the light of natural knowledge.

For Spinoza:

God's eternal Word and covenant and true religious faith are divinely inscribed in men's hearts—that is, in men's minds—and that this is the true handwriting of God which he has sealed with his own seal, this seal being the idea of himself, the image of his own divinity.<sup>101</sup>

Mrs Poyser and Dinah engage in set-piece (and very one-sided) Socratic dialogues, where Dinah's interpretation of the Scriptures and spiritual life is seen to be contrary to logic, and against the spirit of the text, not to mention to feed her desire for martyrdom and social alienation:

'I never saw the like to you, Dinah', Mrs Poyser was saying, 'when you've once took anything into your head: there's no more moving you than the rooted tree. You may say what you like, but I don't believe that's religion: for what's the Sermon on the Mount about, as you're so fond of reading to the boys, but doing what other folks 'ud have you do? But if it was anything unreasonable they wanted you to do, like taking your coat off and giving it to 'em, or letting 'em slap you in the face, I dare say you'd be ready enough: it's only when one 'ud have you do what's plain common-sense and good for yourself, as you're obstinate the other way' (518).

Spinoza tells us in the *Tractatus* that the 'meaning', although not necessarily the 'letter', of the Divine Law, 'has come down to us uncorrupted':

For from Scripture itself we learn that its message, unclouded by any doubt or any ambiguity, is in essence this, to love God above all, and one's neighbour as oneself. There can be no adulteration here, nor can it have been written by a hasty and errant pen; for if doctrine differing from this is to be found anywhere in Scripture, all the rest of its teaching must also have been different. For this is the basis of the whole structure of religion; if it is removed, the entire fabric crashes to the ground.<sup>102</sup>

Accordingly, Mrs Poyser doesn't require that the Bible as a whole be divinely inspired, and can more rely on the standard books of the Anglican liturgy for her moral guidance, and which in terms of the *Tractatus* provide her with the fundamental moral precepts which ensure against the dissolution of society:

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<sup>101</sup> Spinoza, *Tractatus*, ch. 12, p. 205.

<sup>102</sup> Spinoza, *Tractatus*, ch. 12, pp. 205, 211.

'And all because you've got notions i' your head about religion more nor what's i' the Catechism and the Prayer-Book'.

But not more than what's in the Bible, aunt', said Dinah.

'Yes, and the Bible too for that matter', Mrs Poyser rejoined, rather sharply; 'else why shouldn't them as know best what's in the Bible—the parsons and people as have got nothing to do but learn it—do the same as you do? But, for the matter o' that, if everybody was to do like you, the world must come to a standstill; for if everybody tried to do without house and home, and with poor eating and drinking, and was always talking as if we must despise the things o' the world, as you say, I should like to know where the pick o' the stock, and the corn, and the best cheeses 'ud have to go? everybody 'ud be wanting bread made o' tail ends, and everybody 'ud be running after someone else to preach to 'em, instead o' bringing up their families, and laying by against a bad harvest. *It stands to sense as that can't be the right religion*' (my italics, 122).

Dinah is pleasantly surprised when she finally meets the local clergyman Mr Irwine. She is 'quite drawn out to speak to him; I hardly know how, for I had always thought of him as a worldly Sadducee' (139). Mrs Poyser however can recognise Mr Irwine's human and intersubjective capacities, and see beneath the surface of the different varieties of religion that the novel reveals:

'but for the matter o' that, it's the flesh and blood folks are made on as makes the difference. Some cheeses are made o' skimmed milk and some o' new milk, and it's no matter what you call 'em, you may tell which is which by the look and the smell' (139-40).

Mr Irwine also uses Spinozistic assumptions, particularly in his dialogues with Arthur. He represents a Spinozistic variant of determinism, the 'undeviating law of consequences', which far from negating human responsibility, makes it all the more necessary (see above, chapter one). Arthur, in bondage to the vacillations of the first kind of knowledge, and trying to understand his infatuation with Hetty (who constantly defies interpretation anyway), does not heed Irwine's Spinozistic 'prescription':<sup>103</sup>

'Why, yes, a man can't very well steal a bank-note unless the bank-note lies within convenient reach; but he won't make us think him an honest man because he begins to howl at the bank-note for falling in his way'.

'But surely you don't think a man who struggles against a temptation into which he falls at last, as bad as the man who never struggles at all?'

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<sup>103</sup> Atkins, *George Eliot and Spinoza*, p. 150.

'No, my boy, I pity him, in proportion to his struggles, for they foreshadow the inward suffering which is the worst form of Nemesis. Consequences are unpitying. Our deeds carry their terrible consequences, quite apart from any fluctuations that went before—consequences that are hardly ever confined to ourselves. And it is best to fix our minds on this certainty, rather instead of considering what may be the elements of excuse for us' (217-8).

But the force of these unyielding consequences are too strong, and Arthur is not developed enough to become more self-determining, so Irwine cannot help him, just as Dinah fails to help Hetty.<sup>104</sup> Arthur, who, tellingly, dismisses most of the *Lyrical Ballads* as 'twaddling stuff' (109),<sup>105</sup> is thereby at the same time dismissing his creator's post-Romantic project,<sup>106</sup> and though he is attracted by 'The Ancient Mariner', doesn't understand its relevance to his own destiny.<sup>107</sup> Adam, as Kischner points out, also represents a 'Spinozian brand of rationalism'.<sup>108</sup> His method of reading the Bible just as any other text, 'as a holiday book, serving him for history, biography, and poetry', and from which to glean the nuclear doctrines described earlier (see above, chapter two) is deemed far more effective than the literal interpretation and discursive treatment of Dinah and Seth. Adam even 'enjoyed the freedom of occasionally differing from an Apocryphal writer' (542).<sup>109</sup> He shows that his approach to the Scriptures is every bit as practical and oriented towards this world as Mrs Poyser's: "They that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of those that are weak, and not to please themselves." There's a text wants no

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<sup>104</sup> Knoepfmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 108.

<sup>105</sup> Goode, 'Adam Bede', p. 24.

<sup>106</sup> Knoepfmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 94.

<sup>107</sup> Stephen Gill reminds us that 'The Ancient Mariner' is 'about a man who commits a crime against Nature'. Explanatory notes to *Adam Bede*, p. 596n. Martin J. Svaglic writes that Eliot's emphasis on fellow-feeling 'connects her, for all her intellectualizing and realism, with her beloved Wordsworth and the Romantic Movement'. 'Religion in the Novels of George Eliot', p. 293.

<sup>108</sup> Kischner, 'Spinozisms', p. 32.

<sup>109</sup> And see *Tractatus*, ch. 14, pp. 225-6. Spinoza reflects that 'every man is in duty bound to adapt these religious dogmas to his own understanding and to interpret them for himself in whatever way makes him feel that he can the more readily accept them with full confidence and conviction'. According to Spinoza, 'faith demands piety rather than truth; faith is pious and saving only by reason of the obedience it inspires, and consequently nobody is faithful except by reason of his obedience. Therefore the best faith is not necessarily manifested by him who displays the best arguments, but by him who displays the best works of justice and charity'.

candle to show 't: it shines by its own light' (93). In fact, Adam's method is picked up by Lisbeth, who frequently holds theological discussions with Seth which parallel those of Mrs Poyser and Dinah:

'An' when the Bible's such a big book, an' thee canst read all thro 't, an' ha' the pick o' the texes, I canna think why thee dostna pick words as donna mean so much more than they say. Adam doesna pick a that 'n; I can understan' the tex as he's allays a-sayin', "God helps them as helps theirsens"'.<sup>110</sup>

'Nay, mother,' said Seth, 'that's no text o' the Bible. It comes out of a book as Adam picked up at the stall at Treddles'on. It was wrote by a knowing man, but overworldly, I doubt. However, that saying's partly true; for the Bible tells us we must be workers together with God'.

'Well, how'm I to know? It sounds like a tex' (90).

Again, this shows the importance of accepting other sources of knowledge and inspiration than that of the Bible; and this is dramatised on a larger scale when Dinah marries Adam and gives up the preaching, thereby implicitly rejecting the Bible as the only source of guidance.<sup>110</sup> Carroll points out that 'Adam's moral universe consists essentially of God and his own conscience, both of which are defined by his carpentry'.<sup>111</sup> He 'asserts the claims of God over the gospel, and the claims of conscience over the unhealthy spirituality of the Methodists'.<sup>112</sup> Adam articulates a Spinozistic 'realism and rationalism',<sup>113</sup> which predicates his moral sense on the truths of mathematics:

'There's nothing but what's bearable as long as a man can work,' he said to himself: 'the natur o' things doesn't change, though it seems as if one's own life was nothing but change. The square o' four is sixteen, and you must lengthen your lever in proportion to your weight, is as true when a man's miserable as when he's happy; and the best o' working is, it gives you a grip hold o' things outside your own lot' (160).

Adam's demonstration of proportionality is similar to that in the *Ethics*, where Spinoza explains the three kinds of knowledge with the example of

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<sup>110</sup> Kischner, 'Spinozisms', p. 62.

<sup>111</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 83.

<sup>112</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 92.

<sup>113</sup> Kischner, 'Spinozisms', p. 38.



finding a fourth proportional (see below, chapter one). Adam demonstrates his grasp of this by virtue of the second kind of knowledge, referring to a universal rule based on 'the ground of a common property of proportionals', and not by the vagaries of the first kind of knowledge, with its 'confused, unordered manner'; that is, 'cognition from vague experience'.<sup>114</sup> But Adam clearly still has a lot to learn, even in terms of the Spinozistic model, because the third kind of knowledge which eludes him is 'capable of containing the claims of knowledge and feeling',<sup>115</sup> of which the latter quality he is shown to be peculiarly lacking for most of the novel. This is seen particularly in relation to his father, whose narrative function seems to be to throw light on Adam's development, from moral 'hardness' to a position which goes beyond the Spinozistic and recognises the claims of sympathy and intersubjectivity.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, it is only at the death of his father that he begins to learn the 'alphabet' of this language, which must first learn to recognise the 'inward suffering' of others:<sup>117</sup>

Whenever Adam was strongly convinced of any proposition, it took the form of a principle in his mind: it was a knowledge to be acted on, as much as the knowledge that damp will cause rust. Perhaps here lay the secret of the hardness he had accused himself of: he had too little fellow-feeling with the weakness that errs in spite of foreseen consequences. Without this fellow-feeling, how are we to get enough patience and charity towards our stumbling, falling companions in the long and changeable journey? And there is but one way in which a strong determined soul can learn it—by getting his heart-strings bound by the weak and erring, so that he must share not only in the outward consequence of their error, but their inward suffering. That is a long and hard lesson, and Adam had at present only learnt the alphabet of it in his father's sudden death, which, by annihilating in an instant all that had stimulated his indignation, had sent a sudden rush of thought and memory over what had claimed his pity and tenderness (255-6).

Adam is equally as deceived by Hetty as Arthur is, and while coming from different moral perspectives, both men's inability to understand Hetty,

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<sup>114</sup> *Ethics*, Pt. I, Prop. XL, Schol. 2. Cf. Tom's use of Euclid in *The Mill on the Floss*, ch. 2.

<sup>115</sup> Kischner, 'Spinozisms', p. 39.

<sup>116</sup> Creeger, 'An Interpretation of *Adam Bede*', p. 232.

<sup>117</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 92.

and to read the language of her soul, or rather the narrowness of her imagination and her lack of a moral and aesthetic sense, is continually juxtaposed. We are left in no doubt as to the difficulty of the hermeneutic process:

After all, I believe the wisest of us must be beguiled in this way sometimes, and must think both better and worse of people than they deserve. Nature has her language, and she is not unveracious; but we don't know all the intricacies of her syntax just yet, and in a hasty reading we may happen to extract the very opposite of her real meaning. Long dark eyelashes, now: what could be more exquisite? I find it impossible not to expect some depth of soul behind a deep grey eye with a long dark eyelash, in spite of an experience which shows to me that they may go along with deceit, speculation, and stupidity. But if, in the reaction of disgust, I have betaken myself of a fishy eye, there is a surprising similarity of result. One begins to suspect at length that there is no direct correlation between eyelashes and morals; or else, that the eyelashes expresses the disposition of the fair one's grandmother, which is on the whole less important to us (198-9).

Even though he is mistaken about Hetty's character, and his own love for her, there is something about Adam's 'aesthetic appreciation' of Hetty that 'enables him to see beyond her material reality to a higher order'.<sup>118</sup> The narrator cannot describe this beauty, preferring to compare it to music:

For the beauty of a lovely woman is like music: what can one say more? Beauty has an expression beyond and far above the one woman's soul it clothes, as the words of genius have a wider meaning than the thought that prompted them (400).

Adam, too, has 'no fine words into which he could put his feeling for Hetty' (p. 400). The 'schism' between the concrete and the abstract, and the inability of language to bridge this gap thus 'emphasise the ineffability of the experience'. And it is Adam's inability to articulate these feelings, that brings him, paradoxically, closer to 'the truth of feeling'.<sup>119</sup>

The symbolic regeneration of Adam begins when he renounces his previous hardness, and agrees to go to the courthouse for Hetty's trial.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Kenny Marotta, 'Adam Bede as a Pastoral', *Genre* 9 (1976), 59-72, p. 69.

<sup>119</sup> Marotta, 'Adam Bede', p. 65. Marotta argues that this is a Wordsworthian trait of Eliot's. He also suggests that 'the higher order in Adam's life, of which he cannot be aware, is his participation in the literary work' (p. 70).

<sup>120</sup> And a trial is, of course, a retelling (and interpretation) of a narrative.

Adam shares the bread and wine, the sacramental resonances of which are meant to be obvious, and finally begins to accept the claims of sympathy and intersubjectivity:

'Mr Massey,' he said at last, pushing the hair off his forehead, 'I'll go back with you. I'll go into court. It's cowardly of me to keep away. I'll stand by her—I'll own her for all she's been deceitful. They oughtn't to cast her off—her own flesh and blood. We hand folks over to God's mercy, and show none ourselves. I used to be hard sometimes: I'll never be hard again. I'll go with you, Mr Massey—I'll go with you.'

This acceptance of moral hardness is further reinforced by Adam's second meeting in the wood with Arthur, where Adam is now is not only able to master his emotions and commune with the other man, but also learn the language of suffering:<sup>121</sup>

There was silence for several minutes, for the struggle in Adam's mind was not easily decided. Facile natures, whose emotions have little permanence, can hardly understand how much inward resistance he overcame before he rose from his seat and turned towards Arthur. Arthur heard the movement, and turning round, met the sad but softened look with which Adam said,

'It's true what you say, sir: I'm hard—it's in my nature. I was too hard with my father for doing wrong. I've been a bit hard to everybody but *her*. I felt as if nobody pitied her enough—her suffering cut into me so! and when I thought the folks at the Farm were too hard with her, I said I'd never be hard to anybody myself again' (514).

Adam's sense of sorrow and suffering gradually transmute into submission and sympathy, and allow him to commune with Dinah, not however through theology or divine grace, but through imperceptible 'signs' of sympathy and intersubjectivity. These intuitive, unspeakable 'signs' demonstrate the incapacity of words, but paradoxically at the same time demonstrate the inescapability of narrative and the pressing need for human 'divination' and true understanding. This tentative way out of the 'infinite regress' of the hermeneutic circle has a 'musical' aspect, disrupting semantic logic, and demanding meaning not by the relation of signifier to signified, but

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<sup>121</sup> Dorothy J. Atkins reads this as a Spinozistic overcoming of bondage to the passions. See *George Eliot and Spinoza*, p. 118.

by its own internal coherence and the ability in the aesthetic act to represent the unrepresentable:<sup>122</sup>

Those slight looks and touches are part of the soul's language; and the finest language, I believe, is chiefly made up of unimposing words, such as 'light,' 'sound,' 'stars,' 'music'—words really not worth looking at, or hearing, in themselves, any more than 'chips' or 'sawdust': it is only that they happen to be signs of something unspeakably great and beautiful. I am of the opinion that love is a great and beautiful thing too; and if you agree with me, the smallest signs of it will not be chips and sawdust to you: they will rather be like those little words, 'light' and 'music,' stirring the long-winding fibres of your memory, and enriching your present with your most precious past (537).

Indeed, Adam's love for Dinah has 'a new sacredness' precisely because it had 'grown out of that past: it was the noon of that morning' (546). It is often overlooked that it is Adam who persuades Dinah to embrace the community and to dismiss the competing claims of dogmatic theology, and not Dinah whose ideality beckons Adam to enter her state of Feuerbachian grace. In the midst of Dinah's prevarication and struggle with the bondage of temptation, Adam's arguments—which the narrator and the reader know he could not have made at the 'start' of the narrative—centre on the claims of feeling and intersubjectivity:

'Yes, Dinah,' said Adam, sadly, 'I'll never be the man t' urge you against your conscience. But I can't give up hope that you may come to see different. I don't believe your loving me could shut up your heart; it's only adding to what you've been before, not taking away from it; for it seems to me it's the same with love and happiness as with sorrow—the more we know of it the better we can feel what other people's lives are or might be, and so we shall only be more tender to 'em, and wishful to help 'em. The more knowledge a man has the better he'll do 's work; and feeling's a sort of knowledge' (553).

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<sup>122</sup> Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, p. 184. I should stress that I am merely drawing on Bowie's discussion of Romantic aesthetics, and that Bowie himself is not writing in relation to Eliot. The importance of music for Eliot will be discussed below (chapter four). Eliot writes (*Letters*, I, 247): 'I agree with you [John Sibree, Hegel scholar] as to the inherent superiority of music—as that questionable woman the Countess Hahn-Hahn says, painting and sculpture are but an idealizing of our actual existence. Music arches over this existence with another and a diviner.'

Eliot, in a much later notebook, confirms the relationship between feeling and knowledge, using as the title of the note exactly the same phrase as Adam's:

'Feeling is a sort of knowledge'.

What seems eminently wanted is a closer comparison between the knowledge we call rational and the experience we call emotional. The sequences which are forced upon us by perception, which establish fundamental associations, & are classed as knowledge are accompanied in varying degrees by satisfaction, and denial or suffering, to the organism in proportion as the established sequences are affirmed or disturbed. What is the difference with the sequences which are the subject matter of ethics? Only that the satisfaction or suffering is something more deeply organic, dependent on the primary vital movements, the first seeds of dread & desire, which in some cases grow to a convulsive force, & are ready to fasten their companionship on ideas & acts which are usually regarded as impersonal and indifferent.<sup>123</sup>

Dinah, in considering Adam's arguments, now uses as her guide not the Bible, but 'the ultimate guiding voice from within' (572). And as Adam waits for Dinah's decision, the narrator reminds us that the hermeneutic process is inextricably bound up with narrative, which shapes the future from an imaginative recasting of the past:

But no story is the same to us after a lapse of time; or rather, we who read it are no longer the same interpreters; and Adam this morning brought with him new thoughts through that grey country—thoughts which gave an altered significance to the story of the past (573).

Adam's love for Dinah is different from his love for Hetty, because 'it was the outgrowth of that fuller life which had come to him through acquaintance with deep sorrow'. This 'higher feeling' is a sort of freedom, a 'liberty', which nonetheless demands selflessness and the awareness of the bonds of

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<sup>123</sup> MS HM 12993, held at the Huntingdon Library. See Thomas Pinney, 'More Leaves from George Eliot's Notebook', *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 29 (1966), 353-76, p. 364. This notebook can be dated from between 1872 and 1879, and, apart from its intrinsic interest, helps strengthen the view that Eliot's ideas did not change significantly in substance throughout her whole career.

community and intersubjectivity.<sup>124</sup> The imperatives of the narrative of his life make a return to his earlier narrowness and moral hardness impossible:

The growth of higher feeling within us is like the growth of faculty, bringing with it a sense of added strength: we can no more wish to return to a narrower sympathy, than a painter or a musician can wish to return to his crude manner, or a philosopher to his less complete formula (574).<sup>125</sup>

Adam now calls Dinah down from the mountain, ending her 'spiritual isolation' and drawing her 'into the human community of Hayslope'.<sup>126</sup> That they should marry at the expense of Hetty and Arthur is not only artistically valid, but a narrative and ethical necessity. And far from being a narrative contrivance, it dramatises a partial, albeit provisional reconciliation of the different world-views in the novel, as well as registering the suffering that lies uneasily and darkly with love and sympathy at the root of the hermeneutic quest.<sup>127</sup>

Adam is the only character that is treated in such a comprehensively temporal fashion, as is confirmed by chapter seventeen, 'When the Story Pauses a Little', where the elderly Adam compares the doctrinal Mr Ryde with Mr Irwine. This chapter is usually noted for little other than Eliot's famous discussion of realism, but it is surely just as important in the sense of revealing an open-ended narrative continuum. Adam now fully accepts the claims of feeling:

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<sup>124</sup> David Carroll observes that Adam and Dinah complete the 'final phase of the transformation of pain into sympathy'. Adam becomes 'selfless', while Dinah becomes 'self-conscious'. *George Eliot*, p. 103.

<sup>125</sup> Dorothy J. Atkins argues that Adam grows in knowledge and self-determination (which is freedom in a Spinozistic sense) as a result of his ordeal, and starts to be 'truly free'. *George Eliot and Spinoza*, p. 116.

<sup>126</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 104.

<sup>127</sup> Henry James thought that *Adam Bede* should have finished before Adam's marriage, as Hetty is the 'central figure' of the novel. See Haight, ed., *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, p. 47. Both Ian Gregor and V. S. Pritchett object to the marriage, either the fact or the manner of it, and F. R. Leavis agrees with Henry James that the marriage is an 'artistic weakness'. Ian Gregor, 'The Two Worlds of *Adam Bede*', p. 29; V. S. Pritchett, *The Living Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), p. 83; F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Penguin Books, 1948), p. 51. R. A. Foakes, however, takes issue with Leavis, and argues that whether or not the marriage is convincing, it 'fulfils its place in the pattern of the novel, in restoring the unity of that fine community which has been disrupted by Hetty and Arthur'. *Adam Bede*, p. 176.

‘But’, said Adam, ‘I’ve seen pretty clear, ever since I was a young un, as religion’s something else beside notions. It isn’t notions sets people doing the right thing—it’s feelings. It’s the same with the notions in religion as it is with math’matics,—a man may be able to work problems straight off in’s head as he sits by the fire and smokes his pipe; but if he has to make a machine or a building, he must have a will and a resolution, and love something else better than his own ease’ (226).

While Adam sustains the Spinozian relationship between ethics and mathematics, he seems also to reflect the ‘mystical’ side of Spinoza, accepting intuitive knowledge and acknowledging the limitations of the geometric method:

‘I know there’s a deal in a man’s inward life as you can’t measure by the square, and say, “do this and that ‘ll follow,” and, “do that and this ‘ll follow”. There’s things go on in the soul, and times when feelings come into you like the rushing mighty wind, as the Scripture says, and part your life in two a’most, so as you look back on yourself as if you was somebody else’ (227).

Adam’s development seems to provide the favoured model of consciousness in his move beyond Kantianism to a reformulated Spinozistic position which is beyond the ethical *law*. The fact that we see his ethics in this temporal way is itself significant and part of Eliot’s stress on both intersubjectivity and narrative.<sup>128</sup> These ideas are related: we become ethical through others and we know others through the temporal projection of life stories. In this sense, Eliot goes beyond both Spinoza and Kant. Eliot’s anti-Kantianism seems to lie in the fact that she sees the possibility of critical self-reflection as inextricably social,<sup>129</sup> while her Spinozism lies in her move—through Adam—‘beyond good and evil’ in Deleuze’s sense, where ethics is defined relationally—and of course this is linked to the importance of others.

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<sup>128</sup> W. J. Harvey, in an excellent analysis of the novel’s temporal structure, argues that ‘the relationship of the part to the whole is governed by its sequential position so that what the story means is largely determined by the way in which it unfolds in time’. He points out that ‘temporal processes’ are part of the ‘moral and aesthetic structure’ of the novel. ‘The Treatment of Time in *Adam Bede*’, *Anglia* 75 (1957), 429–40, in Haight, ed., *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, 298–306, pp. 300–301.

<sup>129</sup> Jürgen Habermas’s reflections on Kant and Fichte are relevant here. See his ‘Reason and Interest: Retrospect on Kant and Fichte’, in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. by Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Heinemann, 1972), 191–213.

Spinoza adumbrates an 'ethics' as opposed to a 'morality', where 'evil' does not exist save as a necessary human fiction, defined solely in relation to circumstances, and where 'there are no such things as the moral sanctions of a divine Judge, no punishments or rewards, but only the natural consequences of our existence'.<sup>130</sup>

Spinoza describes this concept in Part 4 of the *Ethics*:

As to *good* and *evil*, they also indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves, and are simply modes of thought or notions which we form from a comparison of individuals. For one and the same thing can be at the same time good, evil and indifferent. For example, music is good to the melancholy, evil to those who are in deep distress, and to the deaf neither good nor evil (*Ethics*, Pt. I, Preface).

This concept is dramatised in Arthur's prevarication and self-deception regarding the consequences of his actions towards Hetty:

Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds; and until we know what has been or what will be the peculiar combination of outward with inward facts, which constitutes a man's critical actions, it will be better not to think ourselves wise about his character. There is a terrible coercion in our deeds which may first turn the honest man into a deceiver, and then reconcile him to the change; for this reason—that the second wrong presents itself to him as a practicable right. The action which before commission has been seen with that blended common-sense and fresh untarnished feeling which is the healthy eye of the soul, is looked afterwards with the lens of apologetic ingenuity, through which all things that men call beautiful and ugly are seen to be made up of textures very much alike (359).

Arthur finally learns from Adam, retold much later by Adam in a phrase tinged with their shared suffering: "But you told me the truth when you said to me once, 'There's a sort o' wrong that can never be made up for'" (584).

Kenny Marotta, in discussing Eliot's use of pastoral, argues that 'the novel's nostalgic descriptions only reiterate Nature's opacity, and that the intimations of meaning only reveal the human need to create such fictions'. What Eliot offers us is not the 'consolations' of religion or nostalgia, 'but the

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<sup>130</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), pp. 248, 257, 319.



temporary and acknowledged consolations of art'. Marotta goes on to claim that the novel

obviates the question of 'realism', as Eliot does herself by her metaphor of the defective mirror—a mirror the faintness or blurring of whose reflection says as much about itself as about what is reflected.<sup>131</sup>

The pastoral genre in Eliot's hands becomes 'a genre for expressing doubts about any order higher than that of the artist's work, and any ordering consciousness more comprehensive than the individual mind'.<sup>132</sup> Adam's relation to his work is that of an artist: in the aesthetic act he gains freedom and self-consciousness, and unmasks a reworked third kind of knowledge which subtly figures the sublime through art in its self-production, yet still points towards the demands of feeling and intersubjectivity:

The sound of tools to a clever workman who loves his work, is like the tentative sounds of the orchestra to the violinist who has to bear his part in the overture: the strong fibres begin their accustomed thrill, and what was a moment before joy, vexation, or ambition, begins its change into energy. All passion becomes strength when it has an outlet from the narrow limits of our personal lot in the labour of our right arm, the cunning of our right hand, or the still, creative activity of our thought (257).

We are thus led to the conclusion that Eliot is close to the early Romantic project which uses the literary as a metaphor for subjective self-production. The key work here in this difficult area is Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's *The Literary Absolute*,<sup>133</sup> which itself draws on Maurice Blanchot's study of the *Athenaeum*,<sup>134</sup> the journal from which the Jena group, in the aftermath of the Kantian 'crisis', articulated their theories which posited literature as a 'higher' discourse than both philosophy and religion:

In literature, i.e., in the productive unity of creative formation and critical reflection, the formative power or *bildende Kraft* of the artist extends beyond a presentation of the sensible (beyond the

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<sup>131</sup> Marotta, 'Adam Bede', p. 71.

<sup>132</sup> Marotta, 'Adam Bede', pp. 71-72.

<sup>133</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, trans. by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

<sup>134</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'The Athenaeum', trans. by Deborah Esch and Ian Balfour, *Studies in Romanticism* 22 (1983), 163-172.

level of representation), and, recalling Kant's concept of the sublime, accomplishes a presentation of what in Kant remained unrepresentable.<sup>135</sup>

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's approach is Kantian in the sense that it focuses on the negativity of the sublime and the limits of representation; and it continues the basic premises of German subject philosophy, i.e., that the subject is always 'hyperbolic', other than, in excess of any representation:

The Process of absolutization or infinitization, the Process as such, exceeds—in every way—the general theoretical (or philosophical) power of which it is nonetheless the completion. The 'auto' movement, so to speak—auto-formation, auto-organisation, auto-dissolution, and so on—is perpetually in excess in relation to itself.<sup>136</sup>

The authors then go on to cite *Athenaeum* fragment 116, which seems to confirm the infinite and forever incomplete nature of the romantic project:

the romantic kind of poetry is still becoming; that is its real essence, that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. No theory can exhaust it, and only a divinatory criticism would dare to characterise its ideal.<sup>137</sup>

Indeed, it is Kant's assertion of finitude—of the transcendental horizon that can never itself be experienced—which enables Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's reading of Romanticism. Kant's drawing of a limit is also a perception of that which draws the limit. In this reading, the subject, for the Jena Romantics, exists, but only in its perceived negation, and in its necessary failure to be adequately represented as a positivity. Maurice Blanchot recognises the 'ambiguity' at the heart of Romanticism:

And it is, indeed, often unproductive—for it is the work of the absence of the work, poetry affirmed in the purity of the poetic act, affirmation without duration, freedom without realization, power that is exalted as it disappears, in no way discredited if it leaves no traces, for this was its goal: to make poetry shine, not as nature, nor even as artwork, but as pure, instantaneous consciousness.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, 'Translators' Introduction, p. ix.

<sup>136</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 92.

<sup>137</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 92.

<sup>138</sup> Blanchot, 'The Athenaeum', pp. 164-65.

While all we have are particular stories, literature shows us the production/*Bildung* of the story as originary (quasi-transcendental):

The narrator conceives of his fulfilment or perfection by analogy to the perfection of the work of art, but a work of art that could behold itself. In his fulfilment, he would become both work of art and artist; as the product of *Bildung*, he would become both a completed *Bild*, or picture, and his own beholder. [...] In short, he would become what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy call the 'subject work', the paradigmatic model of the romantic subject's auto-production in the (literary) work of art. [...] Engaged as he is in the task of auto-production, the narrator's disposition as the subject work is *fragmentary* in nature; that is, it assumes and continually points towards a perfection and completion that lie beyond it, yet also underlie its self-productive activity.<sup>139</sup>

Blanchot recognises further the creative possibilities inherent in the theory of literature as outlined in the *Athenaeum*:

Literature (understood as the totality of forms of expression, including forms of dissolution as well) suddenly becomes conscious of itself, manifests itself and in this manifestation has no other task nor trait than to declare itself. In short, literature announces that it is taking power.<sup>140</sup>

In its manifestation, literature is nothing and everything: it is 'nothing other than its manifestation', but also the 'totality', 'the all that acts invisibly and mysteriously in everything'. This is the ambiguity of Romanticism, an ambiguity through which 'the absolute subject of all revelation comes into play, the 'I' in its freedom [...] in the totality which it is free'.<sup>141</sup> Moreover, Romantic art is 'free' not despite of but because of its provisional and never-ending nature:

Romantic creative art is still in the process of becoming, and it is even in its very essence never to be able to attain perfection, to be forever and eternally new; it cannot be exhausted by any theory; it alone is infinite, as it alone is free.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, Translators' Introduction, pp. xi-xii. Stephen Prickett notes the connection between *Bildung* and hermeneutics in *Origins of Narrative*, p. 197.

<sup>140</sup> Blanchot, 'The Athenaeum', pp. 166-67.

<sup>141</sup> Blanchot, 'The Athenaeum', p. 168.

<sup>142</sup> Part of Athenaeum Fragment no. 116, cited by Blanchot, 'The Athenaeum', p. 168 (see below, chapter four).

This freedom is the result of the act of creation, not the work itself, for it is only this activity which gives true freedom to the subject.<sup>143</sup>

Stephen Prickett observes that the work of literature which became paradigmatic for Schlegel and Schleiermacher during the last few months of the short-lived Jena circle is the Bible; indeed, it becomes 'the central and organising metaphor' for the *Ideas*, Jena's final set of fragments.<sup>144</sup> The Bible is 'the ultimate anthology from which we constantly shape and re-shape our understanding'. As a collection of fragments, it 'can hint at unrealisable sublimity and infinite wholes'. Its most essential requirement will be that it 'contains its own critical theory, by which it must be read and understood'.<sup>145</sup> The Bible became the paradigm for the Romantic's appropriation of the novel as the genre *par excellence*, which alone was capable of articulating the constant series of contradictions, of questions rather than responses, which constitutes Romanticism (see below, chapter four). Schlegel and Novalis insisted that:

romantic art, which concentrates creative truth in the freedom of the subject, also formulates the ambition of a total book, a sort of perpetually growing Bible that will not represent, but rather replace, the real: for the whole would only be able to affirm itself in the unobjective sphere of the work. The novel, according to all the great Romantics, would be that Book.<sup>146</sup>

None of the Jena Romantics managed that 'total book', and their ambition was soon to dissolve into the fragment as the only way of allowing their utterances to approach the 'absolute'. As Blanchot observes, however, the contradiction which lies at the heart of romanticism which recognises itself as all and nothing, always already contains the seeds of its own destruction.<sup>147</sup>

Clifford J. Marks points out that the reader of *Adam Bede* is made constantly aware of two texts: the first is, of course, the Bible, but the second

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<sup>143</sup> Blanchot, 'The Athenaeum', p. 170.

<sup>144</sup> Prickett, *Origins of Narrative*, pp. 202-3.

<sup>145</sup> Prickett, *Origins of Narrative*, p. 203.

<sup>146</sup> Blanchot, 'The Athenaeum', p. 170-71.

<sup>147</sup> Blanchot, 'The Athenaeum', p. 168.

is Eliot's story itself.<sup>148</sup> Marks sees literature as a 'connective thread' between the Romantics and the Victorians, positing literature as 'an active ethical force at the heart of linguistic representation'. Although Marks does not situate this formulation of the function of literature in the context of the post-Kantian crisis, he usefully sees it as an attempt to 'transcend' the chaos and the turmoil of the nineteenth-century with an ethical possibility situated in language. He claims that Eliot and Shelley recognised 'a split between spirit and body', and that 'each tries to recuperate this schism through their recognition of the ethical nature of language', which in turn provides 'the possibility of provisionally uniting individuals despite cultural fragmentation'.<sup>149</sup> Once again we are brought to the essentially intersubjective nature of language, which relates to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's notion of writing, forming, and the literary as a primary communality/dialogue. And further, this approach through the possibilities of language and literature is in sharp contradistinction to the ethical logic of the Kantian categorical imperative.

The idea that there could be an ethical aspect in the act of reading itself is explored by J. Hillis Miller in *The Ethics of Reading*. Miller turns his attention to Eliot's theory of realism as proposed in chapter seventeen of *Adam Bede*, 'In Which the Story Pauses a Little'. Miller finds that, for all its ostensible affirmation of realistic narration, and by extension a 'rejection of the aesthetics of the sublime', the way the characters 'live out' an alternative theory of language elsewhere in the book, 'plays ironically against the notion of a referential language affirmed in chapter seventeen for the narrator's truth-telling'.<sup>150</sup> Miller reveals that the chapter itself relies, not on *referential*

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<sup>148</sup> Clifford J. Marks, 'Dynamic Representations: A Theory of Ethical Transcendence in the Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Eliot' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1992), p. 211.

<sup>149</sup> Marks, 'Dynamic Representations', Abstract.

<sup>150</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 70-71.

language at all, but on *figurative* language of a special kind. Miller explains that this language is '*catachresis*, the use of terms borrowed from another realm to name what has no literal language of its own. Only such language can perform into existence feelings, a will, a resolution'.<sup>151</sup> Adam seems well aware of the inadequacy of language to describe these feelings:

'I look at it as if the doctrines was like finding names for your feelings, so as you can talk of 'em when you've never known 'em, just as a man may talk o' tools when he knows their names, though he's never so much as seen 'em, still less handled 'em' (227-8).

The language of catachresis (here the language of Dutch painting) genuinely performs an action, causing 'a break in the chain of cause and effect which ordinarily operates, for Eliot, both in the physical and social worlds and in the internal world of self'. This operation allows something new to happen 'in the "real" world', allows us to love our ugly neighbour as Eliot is urging, because it causes a semantic shift and 'redirects those words to unheard of meanings'. For Miller, the language of realism itself is catachresis, and the most elaborate catachresis of them all is the use of 'God':<sup>152</sup>

'And they're poor foolish questions after all; for what have we got either inside or outside of us but what comes from God? If we've got a resolution to do right, He gave it to us, I reckon, first or last; but I see plain enough we shall never do it without a resolution, and that's enough for me' (228).

The reader knows that 'God' in this case is simply a name for human feelings, but it is in these 'performative catachreses' that changes are made in the world that can transform people in a way that other types of language—'literal, conceptual, notional or doctrinal'—cannot. These figures or 'analogies' are based on analogy itself, giving them a power—despite the ostensible claim of the chapter only to be dealing with 'reality'—to bring 'groundless novelty into the social world'—namely, the ability 'to love my ugly neighbour'. However, because these performatives are grounded in

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<sup>151</sup> Miller, *Ethics*, p. 73.

<sup>152</sup> Miller, *Ethics*, pp. 73-4.

language, they are 'fundamentally ambiguous', and as the last paragraph of the chapter shows, in the end are groundless, admitting of no difference between the evaluation of ugly people by 'idealists' and 'cynics' alike:<sup>153</sup>

For example, I have often heard Mr Gedge, the landlord of the Royal Oak, who used to turn a bloodshot eye on his neighbours in the village of Shepperton, sum up his opinion of the people in his own parish—and they were the only people he knew—in these emphatic words: 'Ay, sir, I've said it often, and I'll say it again, they're a poor lot i' this parish—a poor lot, sir, big and little'. I think he had a dim idea that if he could migrate to a distant parish, he might find neighbours worthy of him, and indeed he did subsequently transfer himself to the Saracen's Head, which was doing a thriving business in the back street of a neighbouring market-town. But, oddly enough, he has found the people up that back street of precisely the same stamp as the inhabitants of Shepperton—'a poor lot, sir, big and little, and them as comes for a go o' gin are not better than them as comes for a pint o' twopenny—a poor lot' (229-30).

Yet the effect of the narrator's insistence on a 'positive' gloss on the issue of ugly people is crucial: it is 'the difference between the maintenance and the dissolution of society'. The very 'cement of society is the fiction that my ugly neighbour is loveable'.<sup>154</sup>

Miller also offers a deconstructive reading of Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and observes that the only way that Kant can explain the categorical imperative is by means of an example in a footnote in the form of 'as if'. The problem for the reader of this section of the *Metaphysic* is that according to Kant, the only way to act in a particular situation is by having recourse to the universal law, which however does not apply directly to any particular ethical situation. Kant's solution to this seeming paradox is through narrative, so that one may imagine 'as if' the rule applied to everybody. Miller points out that this universalising of a particular maxim is 'an act of imagination, like writing a novel'. This imaginative act illustrates 'the necessity of narrative' even in such an austere system as Kant's. This process acts as 'the bridge without which there would be no connection between the

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<sup>153</sup> Miller, *Ethics*, pp. 77-8.

<sup>154</sup> Miller, *Ethics*, p. 80.

law as such and any particular ethical rule of behaviour'. The function of this narrative is much the same as that of art in the *Critique of Judgement*, which acts to bridge the gap between pure and practical reason.<sup>155</sup> For Miller:

there is no theory of ethics, no theory of the moral law and of its irresistible, stringent imperative, its 'Thou shalt' and 'Thou shalt not', without storytelling and the temporalization (in several senses of the word) which is an intrinsic feature of narrative. [...] Narrative, like analogy, is inserted into that blank place where the presumed purely conceptual language of philosophy fails or is missing.<sup>156</sup>

Miller's formulation reminds us once again of the singularity of the putting-into-work emphasised in *The Literary Absolute*. Even the universality of pure form is only ever given as effected, or 'forming' form, in the Art Work:

In the romantic theory of literature and art, what is perceived as both the dead end and the most formidable challenge of the Kantian model of presentation is transformed into a model of art as the aesthetic activity of production and formation in which the absolute might be experienced in an unmediated, immediate fashion. [...] Art realises an adequate conception of the Idea, or in other words accomplishes a sensible actualisation of the Idea in the realm of the aesthetic. This conception of literature, by virtue of its ability to perform this operation, comes to be situated as more basic than or superior to the realm of philosophy from which it has drawn its founding concepts.<sup>157</sup>

Martha Nussbaum, in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, develops (from a broadly Aristotelian basis) the idea of the limitations of philosophical discourse, arguing that literary form is 'more complex, more allusive,' and is 'more attentive to particulars'. This form 'is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth'.<sup>158</sup> She claims that we find in a literary text 'an organic connection between its form and its

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<sup>155</sup> Miller, *Ethics*, p. 28.

<sup>156</sup> Miller, *Ethics*, p. 23. However, see below (chapter four), where I critique Miller's formalism.

<sup>157</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, Translators' Introduction, p. ix. Also see Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>158</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 3.



content', and indeed we find that 'certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms of the narrative artist'.<sup>159</sup> Nussbaum advocates a 'transcendence [...] of an internal and human sort'. This is not to suggest a 'religious' or 'otherworldly' transcendence, but a 'positive' transcendence which, while it recognises human frailties and limitations, has the unique quality of concentrating on the particular and intersubjective.<sup>160</sup> 'Internal' transcendence, is thus to be distinguished from the 'external' variety, but is supplemented by a 'transcendence of creation', whereby one satisfies 'the seeming necessity to push towards the outer limits of human capabilities'.<sup>161</sup>

Nussbaum seems to be advocating the novel as the genre of immanence par excellence; but usefully for our thesis it is a modified immanence, capable of expression beyond the mundane, but still circumscribed by the limitations of our human finitude. For Nussbaum, narratives

speak to the humanness of their readers, they immerse them in the characteristic movements of human time and the adventures of human finitude—in a form of life in which it is natural to love particular people and to have concern for the concrete events which happen to them. They cultivate the forms of vision and concern that inhabit the human form of life generally, and would be unavailable to the beasts, uninteresting to gods.<sup>162</sup>

This great gulf between the world and the world of language, just like the gulf between Kant's phenomenal and the noumenal, can only be filled—albeit provisionally—by narrative. In the end, while Kant accepts human finitude, Eliot embraces it. Her intimation of what lies behind the immediately

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<sup>159</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>160</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, pp. 379-80.

<sup>161</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 381.

<sup>162</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, Endnote. It is surprising that Nussbaum dismisses Eliot's novels as inappropriate for this ethical task, on account of her use of the omniscient narrator, which to Nussbaum's mind is 'a falsification of our human position' (p. 45). This is difficult to sustain, as Eliot's use of the omniscient narrator is much more sophisticated than Nussbaum appears to credit her with, and certainly does not assume a god-like position. Nussbaum champions James and Proust as being particularly suited to this ethical task. Both of these novelists were warm admirers of Eliot (albeit not uncritically in James's case), and it is difficult to imagine that this would be the case if Eliot's novels were completely contrary to these novelists' ethical impulses.

given—an intimation which for Kant can only be regulatory—lies in intersubjectivity. She rejects, like Kant, any metaphysics which is disembodied, Platonic, transcendental, or eternal. But she does, like Spinoza, and unlike Kant, embrace a 'sensible transcendental' (the phrase is Irigaray's) which issues in the form of Other and community.<sup>163</sup> Her sublime, then, unlike Kant's is social and positive, and seems to be influenced by the 'mysticism' of Spinoza, the semi-religious transcendental naturalism best exemplified by the third kind of knowledge. For Eliot, what lies beyond reason and finitude is not just a negative—'critical' in the Kantian sense—perception of limits but a reformulated 'third kind of knowledge'. Using this type of knowledge we can get a sense of the possible experience of something beyond the time and space world. At the same time, though, this sublime also seems irreducibly intersubjective, social, and sensible—connected to beauty, other persons, simplicity and fiction—and not a Kantian abstraction or inference from these forms of human finitude.

It could be said that Kant and Spinoza sometimes occupy the same terrain (on immanence for example) and are sometimes diametrically opposed (on the possibility of metaphysical knowledge). What seems clear though, is that Eliot is introducing a factor that neither thinker works through—the power of narrative and social experience. While George Eliot agrees with Kant that what lies beyond the knowable and intuitable can have a regulatory function only, she takes up the challenge of the third *Critique* and uses the sublime to inform her ethical criticism—one which posits *the other person* as that lies beyond comprehension, presentability, and interpretability.

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<sup>163</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: Athlone Press, 1993), p. 129. Irigaray does not use this term in relation to Eliot.

## Part Two: *The Mill on the Floss and Narrative Pity*

### IV George Eliot and the Early Romantics

In this chapter I shall take up a major theme from the first part of this study, and continue to situate George Eliot within a post-Romantic framework, in particular discussing how her work interacts with the literary theory of the early Romantics. If the key question raised by Kantianism is the relation between the faculties—knowledge, ethics, art—then Eliot's work as a novelist could be seen to be unifying in a very rich sense. We shall see that by redefining ethics in relation to reason, she not only formulates a new aesthetic, but can be seen to be occupying a position of striking modernity.

Andrew Bowie, in *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, gives an excellent account of the relationship between the literary theory of the Jena Romantics—the Schlegels, Novalis, and Schleiermacher—and the contemporary phenomenon we know as 'literary theory'. He argues that the roots of deconstruction already lie in the reaction of the early German Romantics to Kant and Jacobi, and that an understanding of this not only helps bridge the gap between 'traditional' and 'theoretical' ways of looking at literature, but also offers literary theory a way out of its current methodological crisis.<sup>1</sup> This crisis has been brought about, Bowie argues, because Derrida and other theorists have misread the project of the early Romantics, ignoring their urgent concern for truth, art, and meaning; and, following a certain interpretation of Nietzsche, have been reduced to 'nihilism', 'meaninglessness', and a potentially dangerous relativism, once the

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<sup>1</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, p. 2. From Bowie's perspective, this is a 'crisis' because of the absence of foundations. As we shall see, the point will be that in the absence of foundations we are compelled to decide *freely*—and hence the importance of openness and narrative.

consolations and epistemological underpinning of theology could no longer be taken for granted.<sup>2</sup> Bowie wishes not only to curb the excesses of post-structuralism, but also to point out a direction in which 'traditional' literary criticism may now orient itself. He does not question the 'partial validity' of both broad approaches; however, he shows that in certain crucial respects both positions end up collapsing into each another, because of the refusal of post-structuralist theorists to admit the notion of the 'literary', and the inability of the practitioners of traditional literary criticism to defend an *adequate* notion of it. Bowie refuses to reject the notion of the 'literary', which not only can be defended but becomes inescapable when one considers the history of modern philosophy in the light of the development of aesthetics, a project that the early Romantics, following Kant, were so vigorous in pursuing.<sup>3</sup>

Bowie also offers the possibility of a rapprochement between the hermeneutic and the analytic traditions of philosophy. Even though the story he tells is mainly concerned with a certain tradition of German hermeneutic philosophy, he draws some remarkable parallels with some of the preoccupations of both post-structuralism and contemporary analytical philosophy, enabling the early Romantics to be seen as the originators of a

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<sup>2</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, pp. 7, 27. See also Bowie's entry on the 'Aesthetics of Music' in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, forthcoming. It perhaps should be mentioned in passing that contrary to the received interpretation, Nietzsche was not a nihilist; he in fact demonstrated the difficulty of sustaining nihilism. Nietzsche simply considered the question of values and made any appeal to a value precisely the issue of concern (and not a thing to be naively assumed or dismissed). Far from dismissing notions of truth, deconstruction is overtly concerned with its unavoidability, so its practitioners therefore are able to provide a more subtle reading of Nietzsche and problematise the ethical impulse towards a notion of truth. See Azade Seyhan, *Representation and Its Discontents: The Critical Legacy of German Romanticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 153. Described in these terms, deconstruction is really a radicalised Kantianism: in the absence of any given foundation we must assume the burden of justification, a position for which truth remains as an infinite regulative idea (in the Kantian sense). As we shall see below, however, Eliot will place the ethical beyond the question of truth and truth conditions.

<sup>3</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, pp. 11, 12.

long tradition of philosophical reflection on meaning, truth, and art, and not as an isolated literary and philosophical phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

Though Bowie's response to deconstruction is important and forceful, the significance of his work for this project is the relationship that he maintains, following the early Romantics, between philosophy and literature and its ethical significance. The point of Bowie's turn to the Romantics is to describe a general critique of representation. This is held to be necessary, because on a non-representational view, art would not be a 'picture' of the real, but an event in the real itself.<sup>5</sup> Bowie argues that post-structuralism leads to a linguistic monism or narcissism, precisely because the post-structuralists overplay the difference between experience and meaning. Bowie therefore appeals to the early Romantics to overcome the perceived Kantian subjectivism in post-structuralism. Bowie offers ethical reasons for this return to the Romantics. The anxiety about linguistic narcissism rests on a fear that to 'lose' the world is to lose ethical foundations or philosophical grounding. Philosophy has become a separated formalism, and therefore art and literature would provide a form of immediacy, a way of life, and an ethical and philosophical grounding that would be able to think truth non-cognitively.<sup>6</sup>

Ernst Behler also claims a crucial place for the early Romantics in the history of modernity, and argues that their distinctive blend of poetry, philosophy, art, and literary self-consciousness, became the model for future emanations of literary modernity insofar as it consisted in a 'pluralistic movement of counteractive and interactive principles that seem to oppose, but

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<sup>4</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> The critique of 'picture' theory goes back to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, where he argues that thought is always more than a simple picture of the world. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), § 58, p. 35. This conception can have two consequences: Bowie and others wish to pursue the possibility of an art that is unifying and grounding; while the post-structuralists want to emphasise the gap or distance between the actual and the virtual.

<sup>6</sup> Bowie's work is typical of a general anxiety about 'theory'. If all we have is 'text', then we are placed in a dangerous relativism. But if we redefine literature as a *relation to the world*, then we are given some way of grounding our own language games.

in their interaction actually generate and maintain each other'.<sup>7</sup> Behler suggests that early Romantic theory has a direct link with contemporary criticism through thinkers as diverse as Adorno, Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, and Paul de Man.<sup>8</sup> Although some commentators claim that it is stretching the point to suggest that German Romanticism was the actual 'origin' of modern approaches to criticism,<sup>9</sup> it is clear that the German tradition of philosophical and theoretical reflections on art and truth that we are considering constitute the 'condition of possibility' of the discipline that we understand to be 'literary theory', and in particular the work of Foucault, Derrida, and Paul de Man.<sup>10</sup>

In discussing the legacy of German Romanticism, Azade Seyhan suggests that it was the work of the Jena Romantics, and in particular Schlegel and Novalis, that 'has found forceful expression in contemporary literary theory', because of their interest in 'the problem of representation'. Seyhan sees early Romanticism as the start of our own modernity, and in particular the fragments produced for the *Athenaeum*, in that they exhibit 'an unresolved critical tension', because of 'the awareness of the impossibility of representing the absolute'. He suggests that in 'positioning themselves against the representational conceit of philosophy and the noncontradiction rules of logic, the Romantics demonstrate that the critical adventure of art and literature thrives on moments of discontinuity, rupture, and reversal'. Neither science nor philosophy is equal to the task of representing the absolute, which 'can only be indirectly understood through artistic representation'. Romanticism, then, becomes an aesthetic and historical exercise, and 'constitutes the first

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<sup>7</sup> Ernst Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Behler, *Literary Theory*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Kathleen M. Wheeler, ed., *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: The Romantic Ironists and Goethe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. ix.

<sup>10</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, p. 3.

modern challenge to philosophy's denial of its textual and ultimately metaphorical condition'.<sup>11</sup>

Another way of outlining what is at stake here is to suggest that there are two ways of responding to Hegel's argument that philosophy is the achievement of absolute knowledge. The first would be hermeneutic: against philosophy and its claims to knowledge we would assert the arts of interpretation and understanding (this is the 'hermeneutic' tradition appealed to by Bowie). The second approach would be post-structuralist, a tradition that regards both philosophy and literature as making foundational claims that are always impeded by the textual condition.

The advantage of what we may call the 'hermeneutic' approach is that it avoids the textual indeterminacy of Derrida and the epistemological 'pragmatism' of Richard Rorty,<sup>12</sup> but also does not lose sight of essential post-Kantian insights of which we are indeed reminded by post-structuralism. Knowledge cannot adequately be 'grounded' in the manner attempted by Western philosophy before Kant, and any attempt to find such a ground will inevitably come up against the 'circular' nature of our understanding.<sup>13</sup> This is in some ways the alternative story of philosophy after Kant: the attempt to escape Jacobi's 'infinite regress' (see below) which will directly result in the early Romantics' interest in aesthetics, and more specifically the notion that the autonomous work of art is able to articulate aspects of the world which are not able to be disclosed through the logocentric medium of traditional philosophy or the empirical sciences.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Seyhan, *Representation*, pp. 1, 3, 12, 17.

<sup>12</sup> See his *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> Post-structuralism, like Hegel, affirms this circularity, while another tradition of Romanticism argues that art will find a way out of this closure.

<sup>14</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, pp. 18, 39, 40, 42, 50. The logocentric nature of philosophy and science is the idea that what *is* can be given logically; that is, in terms of a present category, system or logic known in advance.

The dispute between post-structuralists who claim that no text can have a pure pre-textual foundation and 'hermeneutic' scholars who believe there is some meaning that underlies a text is now a familiar one. But this opposition between being caught up in the limits of knowledge and the desire (or presupposition) for some foundation for knowledge was familiar both to the pre-Romantic philosophy of Kant and the post-Romantic philosophy of Eliot's generation. The issue is conducted around the question of art. Is art purely formal, a manifestation that all our experience is mediated (Kant)? Or, is art mimetic, helping us to relate to our world (Aristotle)? Eliot, like so many post-Romantics, wants to unify both possibilities.

Novalis is a good example of the ambivalent approach to modernity by the early Romantics, which advances a Modern 'semiotic critique of philosophy' (anticipating Derrida), but at the same time 'remain[s] squarely within a philosophy of being'.<sup>15</sup> Novalis offers a promising approach because it makes for a more subtle reading of the problems of modernity and the position of the early Romantics, in which we find them in a 'precarious' position, 'on the cusp of Classical and Modern thought'.<sup>16</sup> Novalis is typical of this alternative story of modernity that we are advancing, one in which the inability of language to be 'self-grounding' is taken for granted. At the same time, however, we do not need as a necessary consequence of this to deny that the subject might not be fully transparent to itself.<sup>17</sup> This broad approach to modernity will present a different and much less narrow conception of philosophy, one which, although it rejects as misguided the expectation of finding an ultimate ground of consciousness, or of representing the Absolute, finds in this very failure a source of meaning.<sup>18</sup> Romantic philosophy can be

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<sup>15</sup> Wm. Arctander O'Brien, *Novalis: Signs of Revolution* (Durham, N. C: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 6, 86.

<sup>16</sup> O'Brien, *Novalis*, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Bowie, 'Music, Language and Modernity', in Andrew Benjamin, ed., *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin* (London: Routledge, 1989), 67-85, pp. 75, 77.

<sup>18</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, pp. 79, 87.



characterised as an infinite search for truth (not 'Truth') via two related 'imperatives', which Bowie calls respectively the 'aesthetic' and the 'hermeneutic'. This quest is always unfinished, but it is precisely that openness which enables the philosophy of the early Romantics to be seen as a 'positive' response to the negativity of the Kantian formulation, one which allows art and literature to articulate truths and generate meanings which cannot otherwise be conceptually determined.<sup>19</sup>

While it is post-structuralism that reminds us of the problem of grounding a philosophical system, it is certainly not one of its insights; for that we need to go back to the work of Jacobi, and his influential critiques of Kant and Spinoza during the Pantheism Controversy (see above, chapter one). In a way it could be said that Jacobi minus his theology plus aesthetics equals early Romanticism. This formulation is not much of an exaggeration when we consider that it was Jacobi's critiques both of Spinoza's deterministic system, and also of Kant's response to the problem of the 'infinite regress' which led Jacobi, crucially for the direction that the early Romantics would take, to reject the very notion of philosophy as being adequate 'to make being intelligible'.<sup>20</sup> Bowie provides a useful account of the problem:

The world of the laws of nature for Kant is a world of 'conditions', in which the explanation of something depends upon seeking its prior condition, such that *z* is conditioned by *y* is conditioned by *x*, etc. This leads to a regress, because any particular judgment will be reliant on a potentially infinite series of prior conditions.<sup>21</sup>

Kant's solution to this problem saw him separate the world of appearances and the noumenal world, with the result being that our 'knowledge' is only of appearances, so that we must *postulate* the existence of the 'unconditioned condition' to necessarily complete the series of conditions. A further consequence of this is that as our knowledge is limited, and we can

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<sup>19</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, pp. 84-6, 88.

<sup>20</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, pp. 33, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, p. 33.

thus have no immediate access to the noumenal world. A system such as Spinoza's, which tries to construct a totality of conditions predicated on the nature of 'God', is rendered illegitimate and unintelligible, because we could never *know* that the totality existed.<sup>22</sup> Like Kant, George Henry Lewes, even though he admired Spinoza's 'consistency' in trying to build a complete system, thought that his 'fundamental error' was the doctrine:

that the correct definition of a thing expresses the nature of that thing, and nothing but its nature. We cannot but admire the consistency of this; he grapples boldly with the very difficulty of the science he is endeavoring to establish. It is obvious that, to know things which are *beyond* appearances, which transcend the sphere of sense—we must know them as they *are*, [...] and not as they are *under the conditions of sense*. Spinoza at once pronounces that we can so know them. He says: whatever I clearly know is true; true not merely in reference to my conception of it, but in reference to the thing known. In other words, the mind is a mirror reflecting things as they are. [...] Now this doctrine, forced upon Des Cartes [sic] and Spinoza, and implied in the very nature of their enquiries [...] mistakes a relative truth for an universal one. There can be no doubt that—as regards myself—consciousness is the clear and articulate voice of truth; but it by no means follows, therefore, that—as regards not-self—consciousness is a perfect mirror reflecting what is, *as it is*. To suppose the mind such a mirror, is obviously to take a metaphor for a fact. 'The human understanding' as one of the great thinkers finely said 'is like an *unequal* mirror to the rays of things, which, *mixing its own nature with the nature of things, distorts and perverts them*'.<sup>23</sup>

Lewes shared Jacobi's fear that the ultimate consequence of Spinoza's philosophy was 'fatalism' or 'nihilism', because a necessary consequence of Spinoza's system was that nothing could have happened other than how it did happen, which for both Kant and Jacobi, would have the intolerable consequence of making human freedom and responsibility a chimera.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, pp. 33-4.

<sup>23</sup> 'Spinoza's Life and Works', pp. 398-9. Lewes refers to Novalis, whose *Monologue* (cited below) is important in relation to my discussion of Eliot's 'realism' (see below).

<sup>24</sup> Lewes posed the ultimate question for the future of metaphysics: 'Spinozism or Scepticism?' *Biographical History of Philosophy*, p. 415.

However, even Kant could not entirely escape Jacobi's charge of nihilism, because of his separation of appearances and things-in-themselves. In order to establish the truth of his system, Kant would somehow have to 'transcend' the realm of appearances, the possibility which his system is logically committed to denying. Jacobi is only able to 'solve' the problem by recourse to theology, a 'leap of faith' which at once absolves reason of the impossible task of seeking knowledge of anything which transcends the world of conditions. However, the important aspect for this alternative story of modernity is not the recourse to theology, but the fact that for Jacobi, this faith is a type of intuitive 'non-knowledge', which precisely because it is logically prior to 'knowledge', is able to insist on a distinctive notion of 'the true'. This conception circumvents the infinite regress, and grounds our knowledge of the world of appearances, while avoiding the nihilism of Spinoza, and what he terms the 'inverted Spinozism' of Fichte. Fichte's answer to the problem of the infinite regress lay in the spontaneous activity of the 'I', which provided the ground in the sense that the 'I' did not require a ground by virtue of the fact of its spontaneity. This led Jacobi to point out that in a sense the two positions—Fichte's 'I' and Spinoza's substance—mirror each other: they both grounded themselves on the identity of subject and object, and became self-perpetuating systems, 'fully transparent' to themselves. For Jacobi, both positions have an illegitimate concept of truth, where meaning is determined either by an absolute origin or by some sort of systematic totality. These sort of objections have been echoed throughout the subsequent history of modernity, and it is no surprise that literary theory has been rehearsing forms of the arguments ever since.<sup>25</sup>

The Romantics, of course, would not accept either alternative, preferring to balance these competing claims in a characteristic movement between

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<sup>25</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, pp. 36, 39-40, 42, 48.

'relativism' and 'absolutism'.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, while Fichte's conception of the 'I' as the 'absolute ground' for his philosophical system was not accepted completely by the Romantics, they were attracted by its 'subjective' nature, leading them to conceive of the 'I' in aesthetic and creative terms, which would be of utmost importance for the literary and philosophical ferment that would follow.<sup>27</sup> Spinoza, as we saw in the previous chapters, will be a crucial figure in this 'new mythology', not because of his drive to system, which for the Romantics can by definition never be completed, but more importantly because the Romantics were attracted by the 'poetical' side of his imagination, which they distinguished from the 'realism' of his monistic philosophy of immanence.<sup>28</sup> In this 'new mythology', Shakespeare, the 'romantic' poet *par excellence*, and Plato, whose philosophy, despite itself, heralds the triumph of art over philosophy, would together 'reunite poetry and philosophy'; and in a similar synthesis, the Romantics would 'reunite art and religion', using the model of Greek tragedy as their inspiration.<sup>29</sup>

The story begins around the middle of the eighteenth century, which witnessed a new approach to language developed in the work of Rousseau, Hamman, and Herder, and which signaled a move away from a view of language merely as representation (re-presentation) of a pre-given reality, a reality predicated on a theological world view which was being increasingly undermined by the more naturalistic conceptions characteristic of modernity.<sup>30</sup> Two texts are crucial here. The first is Hamman's 'Metacritique

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<sup>26</sup> Wheeler, *Literary Criticism*, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, p. 42.

<sup>28</sup> Behler, *Literary Theory*, p. 163. And see F. Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. by Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), pp. 84-7.

<sup>29</sup> Wheeler, *Literary Criticism*, p. 26. Shakespeare and Plato were celebrated for their impersonality. We therefore need to signal at this juncture that this is contrary to Eliot's ultimate commitment to point of view and the location of knowledge in the 'givenness' of the world.

<sup>30</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, p. 21. Eliot's German reading (from as early as 1840) was extensive, and included Goethe, Richter, Schiller, Herder, Lessing, Novalis, and probably

on the Purism of Reason' (1784), a critique of Kant's 'autonomous' view of human reason. Hamman sought to place language within its historical and cultural specificity, in tension with the notion of a 'general philosophical language', subservient and subsequent to reason.<sup>31</sup> The second work is Herder's 'Essay on the Origin of Language' (1770), which explains language as a 'human phenomenon', rejecting both the 'divine' and the 'natural' (biological) explanations for the origin of language, preferring to think of 'human being and language as coexistent'. For Herder, the origin of language (and, importantly, poetry) is 'reflection', a spontaneous 'inner urge, like the push of a foetus towards birth at the moment of maturity'.<sup>32</sup> In this conception, language 'arises for its own sake', and 'is not bound to representation'.<sup>33</sup> Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, famously locates this paradigm shift—where 'words cease to intersect with representations'—at the turn of the nineteenth century,<sup>34</sup> but it should already be clear that a new conception of language (a 'linguistic revolution')<sup>35</sup> was already emerging during the second half of the eighteenth century, especially when the work of Rousseau, Kant, Jacobi and the early Romantics is considered.

Novalis, in his famous *Monologue* of 1798, provides a striking example of this approach to language, and it is worth quoting in full:

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Schleiermacher and Hegel. Also, Eliot knew Henry Crabb Robinson (1775-1867), who studied at Jena University from 1802-5, and met Goethe, Schiller, and Herder, among others. See Edward Anthony McCobb, 'George Eliot's Knowledge of German Life and Letters' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Hull, 1977); and see Robinson's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1897), pp. 15-7. Eliot's journals and diaries, which have recently been published in full for the first time, show fully the extent of Eliot's absorption in German letters and culture. See *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, pp. 146-7; Bowie, *Romanticism*, p. 60. Bowie points out that although Hamman still 'held a thoroughly theological (and Locke-influenced) conception of language, [...] his important claim in this context was that the multiplicity of languages could not be reduced to a common language by philosophy' (p. 311n.).

<sup>32</sup> Behler, *Literary Theory*, p. 265-8.

<sup>33</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock, 1970), p. 304, cited by Bowie, *Romanticism*, p. 21.

<sup>35</sup> Behler, *Literary Theory*, p. 300.

Speaking and writing is a crazy state of affairs really; true conversation is just a game with words. It is amazing, the absurd error people make of imagining they are speaking for the sake of things; no one knows the essential thing about language, that it is concerned only with itself. That is why it is such a marvellous and fruitful mystery—for if someone merely speaks for the sake of speaking, he utters the most splendid, original truths. But if he wants to talk about something definite, the whims of language make him say the most ridiculous false stuff. Hence the hatred that so many serious people have for language. They notice its waywardness, but they do not notice that the babbling they scorn is the infinitely serious side of language. If it were only possible to make people understand that it is the same with language as it is with mathematical formulae—they constitute a world in itself—their play is self-sufficient, they express nothing but their own marvellous nature, and this is the very reason why they are so expressive, why they are the mirror to the strange play of relationship among things. Only their freedom makes them members of nature, only in their free movements does the world-soul express itself and make of them a delicate measure and a ground-plan of things. And it is so with language—the man who has a fine feeling for its tempo, its fingering, its musical spirit, who can hear with his inward ear the fine effects of its inner nature and raises his voice or hand accordingly, he shall surely be a prophet; on the other hand the man who knows how to write truths like this, but lacks a feeling and an ear for language, will find language making a mockery of him, and will become a mockery to men, as Cassandra was to the Trojans. And though I believe that with these words I have delineated the nature and office of poetry as clearly as I can, all the same I know that no one can understand it, and what I have said is quite foolish because I wanted to say it, and that is no way for poetry to come about. But what if we were compelled to speak? what if this urge to speak were the mark of the inspiration of language, the working of language within me? and my will only wanted to do what I had to do? Could this in the end, without my knowing or believing, be poetry? Could it make a mystery comprehensible to language? If so, would I be a writer by vocation, for after all, a writer is only someone inspired by language?<sup>36</sup>

The most immediate aspect to notice is how far, even accounting for the irony and the hyperbole (which of course is an essential part of its content),

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<sup>36</sup> Wheeler, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 92-3.

Novalis has gone from a representational conception of language. Rather, language is a historical and cultural phenomenon, no longer unproblematically reflecting a pre-given reality, but a means of replaying the infinite relationships among things which, together with the spontaneous, creative genius of the artist, throws up truths of a different order from those established by way of a correspondence to something existing in the 'ready-made world'.<sup>37</sup> This conception of truth is more like a 'coherence' theory of truth that one associates with the 'pragmatism' of Richard Rorty (see below), as opposed to a theory that locates truth in the correspondence of propositions to a pre-given reality. The early Romantic conception is already looking thoroughly modern, but the distinctiveness of this position, is that it while it renounces determinate truths, it doesn't renounce the possibility of establishing meaning via a 'holistic' notion of the 'true', which locates meaning in the forever renewable articulations of context-dependent propositions.<sup>38</sup>

This relates to the early Romantics' conception of the Absolute, which is neither a mystical realm, nor the perspective of 'objective knowledge' which would make legitimate the findings of the natural sciences, but is that which makes knowledge relative, an ironic position which presupposes the freedom and autonomy of the subject from the operation of the causal world. The Absolute is a 'regulative idea', a conception not able to be described in discursive or philosophical terms, but a theoretical space which renders truth relative, 'experienced in the failure of the attempt to get beyond the relativity'.<sup>39</sup> This recognition of the distance of the Absolute is not however mere 'relativism', but a serious quest for truth and value, a positive source of meaning in the ironic knowledge of the necessary failure of philosophical

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<sup>37</sup> This is Hilary Putman's term. See his *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>38</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, pp. 70-3.

<sup>39</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, pp. 75, 77, 79.

systems even as we ineluctably attempt to construct them. This Romantic 'irony' is not a negative phenomenon; it is 'positive' in that while it recognises the constant failure of the representation of the Absolute, it finds in this 'creative tension' something that is life-affirming and active as opposed to the passive delusion of a final resolution.<sup>40</sup> It goes without saying that the approach of the early Romantics we have been considering will need to retain a conception of 'literature', which will be the locus of this ineluctable but necessarily incomplete attempt to transcend the Kantian categories, an attempt which need not accept 'relativism'. It will at the same time use and develop Kant's insights into aesthetics and the intrinsic dignity of the other person to form a distinctive ethical and hermeneutic programme which will open up possibilities for intersubjectivity.<sup>41</sup>

Friedrich Schlegel, in his *Athenaeum* Fragment 116, describes this ironic view of literature:

Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry. [...] It embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest systems of art, containing within themselves still further systems, to the sigh, the kiss that the poetizing child breathes forth in artless song. It can so lose itself in what it describes that one might believe it exists only to characterise poetical individuals of all sorts; and yet there is no form so fit for expressing the entire spirit of an author: so that many artists who started out to write only a novel ended up by providing us with a portrait of themselves. It alone can become, like the epic, a mirror of the whole circumambient world, an image of the age. [...] Romantic poetry is in the arts what wit is in philosophy, and what society and sociability, friendship and love are in life. Other kinds of poetry are finished and are now capable of being fully analysed. The Romantic kind of poetry is still in a state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterise its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free; and it recognises as its first commandment that the will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself. The romantic kind of poetry is the only

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<sup>40</sup> Wheeler, *Literary Criticism*, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, p. 88.



one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic.<sup>42</sup>

It should be obvious that the main target of the Romantics was *mimesis*, that is, they rejected the Platonic and Aristotelian conception of literature as a representation of a pre-given reality, in favour of a creative relationship between subject and object from which emerges the 'poetic experience of the world'. However, it would be a mistake to assume that this constituted an attack on 'classicism as such'. Rather, the Romantics subsumed these historical terms ('modernism', 'classicism') into a more comprehensive notion of mutually interacting positions which undercut established notions of historical 'progress', in favour of a 'progressive, universal poetry' (Schlegel) characterised by 'infinite perfectibility'. The Romantics' historical interrogation of literature not only reflects on the losses of time but also joyfully affirms the limits of the human condition.<sup>43</sup>

It would also be a mistake to consider that the early Romantics rejected reason and sought to diminish the claims of the natural sciences. One should bear in mind that the mystical and pietistic *Storm and Stress* movement preceded the Romantics, and that the early Romantics saw themselves as opposed to that movement's promotion of feeling at the expense of reason. As far as the Romantics were concerned, their search for the infinite in the finite was rational, as Kant had taught them.<sup>44</sup> Schlegel, Schleiermacher, and Schelling insisted on a synthesis of feeling and reason, not a rejection of

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<sup>42</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde' and the Fragments*, trans. by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), pp. 175-6.

<sup>43</sup> Behler, *Literary Theory*, pp. 3, 301-3. See also Scyhan, *Representation*, pp. 159, 167. George Henry Lewes thought that Augustus Schlegel's classification of art into 'classic' and 'romantic' to be 'meaningless', preferring 'objective' and 'subjective' as more appropriate appellations. See his 'Augustus Wilhelm Schlegel', *Foreign Quarterly Review* 32, 63 (October, 1843), 160-81. Lewes obviously had a very low opinion of this Schlegel brother at this time, calling him 'a foppish *petit maître*', and contrasting him to 'the masculine intellect of a Lessing, whom he regards as 'clear as crystal and solid' (p. 174).

<sup>44</sup> For Kant had defined reason—against the rationalists—not as a closed system, but as a capacity to strive for pure concepts of reason.

reason. Where they went beyond Kant was in the recognition that a necessary adjunct to reason was moral and aesthetic education.<sup>45</sup>

Even though it is legitimate to indicate a paradigm shift in the conception of literature at this historical juncture of Romanticism and the Enlightenment, it needs to be stressed that historically the notion of *mimesis* has always been fluid. After all, Plato thought that the poets were 'poor' imitators, and Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, when he stresses that every narrative should have a beginning, middle, and end, is implicitly suggesting that the imitation of 'reality' is not a straightforward process, but one which needs to be filtered through and structured by the imagination of the artist.<sup>46</sup> It is obvious that Eliot was particularly aware of the problematical nature of representation, and in her 'Notes on Form in Art', she makes a statement that has puzzled critics who want to insist on a rigid division between her 'realism' and her more 'symbolical' or 'poetical' treatments, and between the 'referential' and 'expressive' aspects of language:

In Poetry—which has this superiority over all the other arts, that its medium, language, is the least imitative, & is in the most complex relation with what it expresses—Form begins in the choice of rhythms & images as signs of a mental state, for this is a process of grouping or association of a less spontaneous & more conscious order than the grouping or association which constitutes the very growth & natural history of mind.<sup>47</sup>

In his headnote to this essay, Thomas Pinney assumes that when Eliot refers to 'Poetry', she means 'verse rather than prose'. The reasons he advances for this are that in 1868, Eliot was writing *The Spanish Gypsy*, that her apparent views are inconsistent with the 'doctrines of imaginative realism' that informed her novel writing, and that she 'distinguished sharply between the limits of prose and verse'.<sup>48</sup> Evidence for this conclusion is Eliot's letter

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<sup>45</sup> Wheeler, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>46</sup> Behler, *Literary Theory*, pp. 301-2.

<sup>47</sup> *Essays*, p. 435.

<sup>48</sup> *Essays*, p. 431.

to her publisher regarding her choice of literary mode for *Silas Marner*: 'I have felt all through as if the story would have lent itself best to metrical rather than prose fiction, [...] but, as my mind dwelt on the subject, I became inclined to a more realistic treatment'.<sup>49</sup> However, this statement implies anything but a rigid distinction between verse and prose; Eliot's initial indecision, and the phrase 'more realistic treatment' surely implies a fluid distinction between 'realistic' and 'symbolic' treatment, and a continuum between the prose and verse modes. Apart from anything else, *Silas Marner* itself as a Wordsworthian prose-poem is enough to convince one of the limits of the usefulness of the distinction between prose and poetry, a distinction that Eliot consciously stretched in her Wordsworthian shaping of realistic and symbolic elements in the story. To be fair to Pinney, he does suggest that it is possible that Eliot is including the novel in this definition of poetry, and that this would indicate that her views underwent considerable modification from 'her earlier conceptions of realism in fiction, which emphasise imitation, and insist upon "truth" not merely to the feelings of the artist but to the external world'. He further suggests that Eliot's later conception of fiction is not 'irreconcilable' with her earlier realism, in the sense that both these modes of representation insist on 'the communication of feeling'.<sup>50</sup> This last suggestion is certainly true, but Pinney need not try so hard to reconcile Eliot's 'early' and 'late' theories of fiction. Eliot consistently explores both the potential and the *limits* of realism, and her fiction is always an imaginative recasting of elements which can be reconciled by placing her in a post-Romantic framework that moves away from representational approaches to literature. At the same time, however, this formulation does not collapse the ultimate distinction between subject and object, and is predicated on (or at least 'regulated' by) the postulate of an external reality that exists independently of

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<sup>49</sup> *Letters*, III, 382.

<sup>50</sup> *Essays*, pp. 431-2.

our perceptions of it, and of a higher 'unity' which is the locus of this non-determinate conception of artistic 'truth' that presents itself.

Indeed, even a cursory look at *The Mill on the Floss* reveals that the sort of criticism leveled at nineteenth-century realism by critics such as Belsey and MacCabe is as wide of the mark as it is impoverished.<sup>51</sup> This most poetical of all Eliot's novels, quite apart from being told through the medium of a dream, is constantly exploring the connections between language and meaning; and far from being an ideologically suspect work of seemingly unselfconscious transparency, is manifestly concerned with its own form and mode of expression, rendering critical assertions of a tension between 'realism' and 'symbolism' somewhat shallow and misplaced.

Maggie and Tom's differing conceptions of language are constantly juxtaposed—Tom's literalism is compared to Maggie's conception of language which reveals 'no singular relationship between words and things':<sup>52</sup>

'I know what Latin is very well', said Maggie, confidently. Latin's a language. There are Latin words in the Dictionary. There's bonus, a gift',

'Now, you're just wrong there, Miss Maggie!', said Tom, secretly astonished. 'You think you're very wise! But "bonus" means "good", as it happens—bonus, bona, bonum'.

'Well, that's no reason why it shouldn't mean "gift,"' said Maggie, stoutly. 'It may mean several things. Almost every word does. There's "lawn"—it means the grass plot, as well as the stuff pocket-handkerchiefs are made of.'<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See especially Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980). Penny Bounelha has a similar complaint about Belsey's critique of 'classic realism'. See her excellent 'George Eliot and the End of Realism', in Sue Roe, ed., *Women Reading Women's Writing* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), 13-35, pp. 19-20.

<sup>52</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 120.

<sup>53</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by A. S. Byatt (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 214. Hereafter, references will be given in the text.

Maggie's 'linguistic discovery' is 'sadly confirmed by the narrator', who however, unlike Aristotle, will not unequivocally praise metaphorical speech:<sup>54</sup>

O Aristotle! if you had the advantage of being 'the freshest modern' instead of the greatest ancient, would you not have mingled your praise of metaphorical speech as a sign of high intelligence, with a lamentation that intelligence so rarely shows itself in a speech without metaphor,—that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else? (209)

Mr Tulliver is puzzled by the non-representational approach to language that has been bequeathed by modernity, and wants Tom's education to equip him to master this aspect of the world, a hermeneutic task that Tulliver himself is uniquely unqualified to perform:

'Not but what, if the world had been left as God made it, I could ha' seen my way and held my own wi' the best of 'em; but things have got so twisted round and wrapped up i' unreasonable words, as arn't a bit like 'em, as I'm clean at fault, often an' often. Everything winds about so—the more straightfoward you are, the more you're puzzled'. (69)

Tom, significantly, inherits his literalism from his mother, who is not able to discern that her husband might be speaking figuratively when he suggests that she would "want me not to hire a good waggoner, 'cause he'd got a mole on his face" (57). Mr Tulliver "meant it to stand for summat else; but never mind—it's puzzling work, talking is" (58). Tom, similarly, cannot comprehend anything of a metaphorical or non-literal nature, and in a crucial scene from their childhood days, contemptuously and in patriarchal fashion dismisses Maggie's attempts at providing an imaginary historical narrative for the toad and Mrs Earwig:

Still Lucy wished Maggie to enjoy the spectacle also, especially as she would doubtless find a name for the toad and say what had been its past history; for Lucy had a delighted semi-belief in Maggie's stories about the live things they came upon by

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<sup>54</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 120.

accident—how Mrs Earwig had a wash at home, and one of her children had fallen into the hot copper, for which reason, she was running so fast to fetch the doctor. Tom had a profound contempt for this nonsense of Maggie's, smashing the earwig at once as a superfluous yet easy means of proving the entire unreality of such a story (161).

Indeed, Eliot everywhere problematises the whole notion of representation, and in her essay 'Notes on Form in Art', distances herself from the 'mere imitation' of poetry as opposed to 'poetic form', which makes it clear that for Eliot, 'truth' is concerned with formal qualities such as the ability of the art work to throw up new combinations of existing elements. These elements find their coherence in their relation to one another, rather than in their reference to what we termed the 'ready-made world':

Artistic form, as distinguished from mere imitation, begins in sculpture & painting with composition or the selection of attitudes & the formation of groups, let the objects be of what order they may. In music it begins with the adjustment of tones & rhythm to a climax, apart from any direct imitation. But my concern here is chiefly with poetry which I take in its wider sense as including all literary production of which it is the prerogative & not the reproach that the choice & sequence of images & ideas—that is, of relations & groups of relations—are more or less not only determined by emotion but intended to express it. [...] Sometimes the wider signification of poetry is taken to be fiction or invention as opposed to ascertained external fact or discovery. But what is fiction other than an arrangement of events or feigned correspondences according to predominant feeling? We find what destiny pleases; we make what pleases us—or what we think will please others.<sup>55</sup>

E. S. Dallas, one of the most perceptive of Eliot's contemporary critics, wrote in his *Poetics* that despite Plato's 'mimetic' theory of forms, 'art is much more than a mirror; it is creative'. To Dallas, even though modern dramatic art is essentially 'imitative', it is no contradiction to call it creative, because 'in the sympathy and appropriation of a dramatist [...] freedom is

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<sup>55</sup> *Essays*, p. 434.

implied'. This 'freedom' is nothing but the 'power to originate'.<sup>56</sup> This is related to Eliot's own views about 'artistic power', the ability of the artist in his or her individual freedom, to wrest out truths from ever renewable combinations of elements, which mark out the special genius of the artist:

Artistic power seems to me to resemble dramatic power—to be an intuitive perception of the varied states of which the human mind is susceptible with ability to give them out anew in intensified expression.<sup>57</sup>

When Dallas claimed for the artist the 'power to originate', it seems clear that he had in mind the novel above all genres of artistic expression. For the Romantics before him, the novel was the genre *par excellence*, mainly because it was a 'mixed' genre, fragmentary but unified, one that contained all the various disciplines and genres, and was thus a philosophical 'tendency' and not a 'genre'.<sup>58</sup> It was also the only mode of expression that came to represent for the Romantics the 'spirit of modernity', in its own characteristic way on a level of greatness with the towering works of the Greek tragedians.<sup>59</sup>

This new conception of language and modernity that we are investigating, which found a voice in the novel, cannot be completely understood unless we take into account the contemporaneous rise in the status of that most non-representational of all art forms, music, and specifically the

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<sup>56</sup> E. S. Dallas, *Poetics* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1852), p. 257. Dallas wrote some of the most powerful (and favorable) reviews of Eliot's novels, and they became good friends. I have not been able to establish whether Eliot read the *Poetics*, but I think it is almost certain that she would have been familiar with his ideas. The *Poetics* is a fascinating and little-known work, indebted both to Kant and the early Romantics, especially Schlegel. The book is dedicated to one of Dallas's teachers, Sir William Hamilton, Professor of Logic and Metaphysics in the University of Edinburgh. Hamilton, one of the Scottish 'common-sense' philosophers, was deeply influenced by Aristotle and also German philosophy, especially Kant, and had a controversy with George Combe over phrenology. It is interesting to note that Herbert Spencer attributed his own agnosticism to Hamilton's influence. See the entry on Hamilton in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1890), p. 231.

<sup>57</sup> *Letters*, I, 247.

<sup>58</sup> Wheeler, *Literary Criticism*, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Böhler, *Literary Theory*, p. 167.

instrumental compositions of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert.<sup>60</sup> E. T. A. Hoffman's 1810 review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony reveals this new approach to music as a very special kind of non-determinate (but not meaningless) language:

Music opens up an unknown realm to man; a world that has nothing in common with the surrounding external world of the senses and in which he leaves behind all feelings which are determinable by concepts in order to devote himself to the unsayable.<sup>61</sup>

This concept of the 'unsayable' is related to those aspects of the world that cannot be expressed determinately, and hence the importance of music as a model for the opacity of language and its *resistance* to determinate meaning: music does not 'represent' anything in the sense that language does, and is meaningful in purely relational terms. This in turn leads to the idea of the 'literary', that is, the idea that language itself—even the most purely 'referential language'—has a 'musical' aspect, an autonomy and freedom which resists 'universalisation', which is connected with the notion that language is 'expressive' in origin, growing spontaneously and creatively out of its cultural medium, and revealing aspects of the world by virtue of its non-determinate nature.<sup>62</sup> This idea of the musical, together with her view of the impossibility and undesirability of a 'universal language', was expressed by Eliot in her essay 'The Natural History of Life':

Suppose, then, that the effort which has been again and again made to construct a universal language on a rational basis has at length succeeded, and that you have a language which has no uncertainty, no whims of idiom, no cumbrous forms, no fitful shimmer of many-hued significance, no hoary archaisms 'familiar with forgotten years'<sup>63</sup>—a patent de-odorized and non resonant language, which effects the purpose of communication as perfectly

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<sup>60</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, pp. 19, 62.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, p. 184.

<sup>62</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, p. 60.

<sup>63</sup> Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, I, 276.



and rapidly as algebraic signs. Your language may be a perfect medium of expression to science, but it will never express *life*, which is a great deal more than science. With the anomalies and inconveniences of historical language, you will have parted with its music and its passion, with its vital qualities as an expression of individual character, with its subtle capabilities of wit, with everything that gives it power over the imagination.<sup>64</sup>

Eliot's writings on poetry confirm the close relationship of 'the literary' and music:

Though the rhythmic elements of fine verse cannot throughout their whole range be paralleled with the structure of fine music, because language is another and more complex medium than notes; yet, in their fundamental principles they are analogous.<sup>65</sup>

This idea of the 'expressive' origin of language, and of the close relationship between music and language was articulated as early as 1762 by Rousseau, in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*.<sup>66</sup> Rousseau's assertion that music was the basis of all language, and that language did not have a 'divine' origin, was a precursor of Kant's attempt, which the early Romantics continued, to locate the freedom of the subject in the spontaneous ability of the genius to make new rules, at the same time somehow extending the categories and provisionally reconciling the phenomenal and noumenal worlds. Similarly, Eliot's organic theory of poetry and art sees the source of the 'valid rules' of poetry and art as having a non-divine origin, being as they are founded on 'a firmly established sense of relations which is not natural

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<sup>64</sup> *Essays*, pp. 287-8.

<sup>65</sup> 'Versification', in Wiesenfarth, ed., *Uncollected Writings*, p. 287

<sup>66</sup> Rousseau was an enduring influence on Eliot. She once said that it was her reading of the *Confessions* that 'wakened her into deep reflection' (*Letters*, I, 271n.). This was related to Mrs Cash by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who claimed that Carlyle told him of a similar debt to Rousseau. It was not, however, Rousseau's beliefs which necessarily attracted Eliot. She writes: 'It is simply that the rushing mighty wind of his inspiration has so quickened my faculties that I have been able to shape more definitely for myself ideas which had previously dwelt as dim "ahnungen" in my soul—the fire of his genius has so fused together old thoughts and prejudices that I have been ready to make new combinations' (*Letters*, I, 277).

merely but permanently human'.<sup>67</sup> Music's seeming ability to 'say the unsayable' is analogous to our ineluctable striving to transcend the limitations of our knowledge, to apprehend that which defines our relativity, the Absolute.<sup>68</sup> Eliot seemed to be referring to this effect when writing in her Journal after visiting a church in Germany where mass was being celebrated:

How the music that stirs all one's devout emotions blends everything into harmony—makes one feel part of one whole, which one loves all alike, losing the sense of a separate self.<sup>69</sup>

In an early letter, Eliot introduces music as a kind of Absolute, but significantly never dwells on the 'mystical' aspect of the experience, always insisting that what lies outside the subject is approached *through another subject*, and not, as in the early Romantics, by the location of ethics in a pre-semantic Absolute. The Absolute of course has an ethical value, but for Eliot it is *given* through others and by aesthetic experience. Despite her Spinozistic sense of the Absolute and a striving for a totality, Eliot always asks the *critical*, Kantian question as to how the Absolute might be given:

It is necessary to me, not simply to *be* but to *utter*, and I require utterance of my friends. What is it to me that I think the same thoughts? I think them in somewhat different fashion. No mind that has any *real* life is a mere echo of another. If the perfect unison comes occasionally, as in music, it enhances the harmonies. It is like a diffusion or expansion of one's own life to be assured that its vibrations are repeated in another, and words are the media of those vibrations.<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, a short passage entitled 'Dear Religious Love' among 'Leaves from a Note-Book' confirms the fragmentary and relative nature of our knowledge of the Absolute, which is here rendered as 'perfect Love' for another subject:

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<sup>67</sup> Wiesenfarth, ed., *Uncollected Writings*, p. 288.

<sup>68</sup> Bowie, 'Aesthetics of Music'. Derrida would argue that 'to say the unsayable' is the aim of *all* concepts.

<sup>69</sup> Haight, p. 256.

<sup>70</sup> *Letters*, I, 255.

We get our knowledge of perfect Love by glimpses and in fragments chiefly—the rarest only among us knowing what it is to worship and caress, reverence and cherish, divide our bread and mingle our thoughts at one and the same time, under inspiration of the same object. Finest aromas will so often leave the fruits to which they are native and cling elsewhere, leaving the fruit empty of all but its coarser structure!<sup>71</sup>

As many critics have pointed out, music is crucial to an understanding of Eliot's fiction, both in terms of narrative and character.<sup>72</sup> However, most critics have neglected the philosophical implications of music, factors which enable Eliot to be placed within a post-Romantic framework, and help flesh out the alternative history of modernity that we have been considering (see above). For Novalis, for example, the novel as the poetic genre *par excellence*, was best illustrated by the special language of music.<sup>73</sup> For him, 'the musician takes the essence of his art from himself—not even the slightest suspicion of imitation can be incurred by him'.<sup>74</sup> Wackenroder, a marginal figure in the Jena circle who, together with Tieck, introduced art and music to the early Romantics, described the special language of music in his posthumous contributions to Tieck's *Fantasies on Art for Friends of Art* (1799). For Wackenroder, music 'dares to speak of heavenly things in a strange,

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<sup>71</sup> *Essays*, p. 448.

<sup>72</sup> See especially, Beryl Gray, *George Eliot and Music* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); Patricia Ann Gately, 'A Transmutation of Self: George Eliot and the Music of Narrative' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Notre Dame, 1985); William J. Sullivan, 'Music and Musical Allusion in *The Mill on the Floss*', *Criticism* 16 (1974), 232-46; and G. S. Haight, 'The Mill on the Floss', in Haight, ed., *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, 339-48.

<sup>73</sup> Behler, *Literary Theory*, pp. 202, 206.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Behler, *Literary Theory*, p. 203. It is interesting to note how far the Romantics have diverged from the Ancients in this respect. A. E. Taylor points out that despite their different views as to the desirability of music, Aristotle and Plato considered it to be 'the most imitative of all the arts', given that music imitates various emotional states and moods. By the time of the Romantics, however, music (and specifically instrumental music) becomes much more important by virtue of its being conceptless and *non-imitative*. See A. E. Taylor, *Aristotle* (London: Dover, 1955), p. 108.

untranslatable language, with a bold resonance, a vigorous movement and a harmonious union of a whole group of living beings'.<sup>75</sup>

While it is clear from what I have said above that Eliot would not subscribe fully to the Romantic hyperbole of Novalis, Tieck and Wackenroder, music is still crucially important for Eliot, because it is analogous to the poetical and non-representational aspects of language, following the notion that music can be said to be 'conceptless', or at any rate resistant to 'conceptual determination'.<sup>76</sup> As I said above, this conception of music is contemporaneous with the rise of 'absolute music' towards the end of the eighteenth century, which gave music a special status as a language which insists on the 'individual component in the production of all meaning'. It also provides a key element in what may be called 'a counter discourse of modernity', one which strives to salvage some notion of the individuality of the subject in the face of an alienating modernity which threatens to engulf the subject under the rules and codes of various systems which cannot ultimately be philosophically grounded.<sup>77</sup>

Maggie's susceptibility to music has often been observed, and her emotional development together with the ebb and flow of her fortunes throughout the novel are constantly related to her musical sensibilities. The descriptions of music in the novel seem to resist discursive treatment:

There was no music for her any more—no piano, no harmonized voices, no delicious stringed instruments with their passionate cries of imprisoned spirits sending a strange vibration through her frame (378).

Philip shares Maggie's susceptibility to music, which defies description yet is somehow connected to feeling, pity, and sympathy:

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<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Behler, *Literary Theory*, p. 246.

<sup>76</sup> Bowie, 'Music, Language and Modernity', p. 81.

<sup>77</sup> Bowie, 'Music, Language and Modernity', pp. 79, 82-4.

‘Certain strains of music affect me so strangely—I can never hear them without their changing my whole attitude of mind for a time, and if the effect would last I might be capable of heroisms’.

‘Ah! I know what you mean about music—*I feel so*’, said Maggie, clasping her hands with her old impetuosity. ‘At least’, she added, in a saddened tone, ‘I used to feel so when I had any music: I never have any now, except the organ at church’.

‘And you long for it, Maggie?’ said Philip, looking at her with affectionate pity (400-1).

Music even seems to transcend political allegiances:

In the provinces, too, where music was so scarce in that remote time, how could the musical people avoid falling in love with one another? Even political principle must have been in danger of relaxation under such circumstances; and a violin faithful to rotten boroughs must have been tempted to fraternise in a demoralising way with a reforming violincello (474-5).

And when Maggie, seemingly against her will, goes away with Stephen, the most fundamental element of music, rhythm, is invoked to characterise the pre-semantic, amoral world of the lovers, where memory is ‘excluded’, and where meaning is achieved through looks and sounds, elements that are resistant to conceptual determination:

They glided rapidly along, to Stephen’s rowing, helped by the backward-flowing tide, past the Tofton trees and houses—on between the silent, sunny fields and pastures which seemed filled with a natural joy that had no reproach for theirs. The breath of the young, unwearied day, the delicious rhythmic dip of the oars, the fragmentary song of a passing bird heard now and then as if it were only the overflowing of brim-ful gladness, the sweet solitude of a two-fold consciousness that was mingled into one by that grave untiring gaze which need not be averted—what else could there be in their minds for the first hour? Some low, subdued, languid exclamation of love came from Stephen from time to time, as he went on rowing idly, half automatically: otherwise, they spoke no word; for what could words have been, but an inlet to thought? and thought did not belong to that enchanted haze in which they were enveloped—it belonged to the past and the future that lay outside the haze (589).

In fact, the idea of music as 'conceptless' means that instead of being necessarily associated with words or concepts, it can come to be 'rooted in responsiveness to the sounds that are associated with the growth of awareness'.<sup>78</sup> E. S. Dallas considered hearing 'to be the most poetical' of the senses:

We do not simply listen to sounds, but whether they be articulate or inarticulate, we are constantly translating them into the language of sight, with which we are better acquainted; and this is a work of the imagination.<sup>79</sup>

It is interesting to note that this conception of music which we may attribute to Eliot, is in contradistinction to Herbert Spencer's views as expressed in an article with which Eliot would almost certainly have been familiar, 'The Origin and Function of Music'.<sup>80</sup> Spencer locates the 'origin' of music in physiological changes in the body as a result of emotional states; for Spencer, music is 'the idealised language of emotion', and thus merely imitates and heightens emotion. Characteristically, he dismisses the 'music' of the 'savages', and implies that Western art music is the highest manifestation of this process.<sup>81</sup> As for the 'function' of music, Spencer argues that it exists for the 'happiness' and 'mutual advancement' of mankind, and is the principal medium of 'sympathy'.<sup>82</sup> Although this last viewpoint would have struck a chord with Eliot, she would have disagreed with Spencer's physiological and pseudo-scientific bias. Eliot made her views known in a major essay, 'Liszt, Wagner, and Weimar', and a close study of this essay reveals that, far from

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<sup>78</sup> Gray, *George Eliot and Music*, p. 6. Gillian Beer argues that because music by its nature is non-imitative, 'it is free of the debate between idealisation and realism which preoccupied George Eliot, like many of her contemporaries, in her criticism and in her own art'. See the précis of her 1973 George Eliot Memorial Lecture, 'Music and the Visual Arts in the Novels of George Eliot', private copy held by The George Eliot Fellowship.

<sup>79</sup> Dallas, *Poetics*, p. 55.

<sup>80</sup> Gray, *George Eliot and Music*, pp. 6-7. Spencer's article appeared in *Fraser's Magazine* 56, 334 (October, 1857), 396-408.

<sup>81</sup> Spencer, 'Origin and Function of Music', p. 405.

<sup>82</sup> Spencer, 'Origin and Function of Music', p. 406.

being merely an enthusiastic amateur, Eliot had a deep interest in the philosophical and cultural significance of music, in contrast to Spencer's shallow and materialist formulation.

Eliot's essay is important in terms of its assessment of Wagner's music. While not being naturally drawn to the music itself, Eliot nonetheless approves of Wagner's theories of organic unity in opera:

In his operas there is a gradual unfolding and elaboration of that fundamental contrast of emotions, that collision of forces, which is the germ of tragedy; just as the leaf of the plant is successively elaborated into branching stem and compact bud and radiant corolla. The artifice, however, of making certain contrasted strains of melody run like coloured threads through the woof of an opera, and also the other dramatic device of using a particular melody or musical phrase as a sort of *Ahnung* or prognostication of the approach or action of a particular character, are not altogether peculiar to Wagner, though he lays especial stress on them as his own.<sup>83</sup>

Notwithstanding this appreciation of the evolutionary nature of Wagner's music, Eliot considered that Wagner had not 'the highest creative genius in music', since 'his musical inspiration is not sufficiently predominant over his thinking and poetical power'. Which is to say, that:

the highest degree of musical inspiration must overmaster all other conceptions in the mind of the musical genius; and music will be great and ultimately triumphant over men's ears and souls in proportion as it is less a studied than an involuntary symbol. Of course in composing an oratorio or an opera, there is a prior conception of a theme; but while the composer in whom other mental elements outweigh his musical power will be preoccupied with the idea, the *meaning* he has to convey, the composer who is pre-eminently a musical genius, on the slightest hint of a passion or an action, will have all other modes of conception merged in the creation of music, which is for him the supreme language, the highest order of representation.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Essays*, p. 104.

<sup>84</sup> *Essays*, pp. 103-4.

Delia da Sousa Correa, in an essay on *Daniel Deronda*, reads the musician Klesmer as a powerful representative of German Romantic aesthetics.<sup>85</sup> She points out that Klesmer's ideas are those of Liszt, whom Eliot knew well from her visits to Weimar, and who with the pianist Rubinstein (also a possible inspiration for the character), was responsible for promoting the music of Wagner. Da Sousa Correa also observes that when Klesmer condemns Gwendolen's choice of a Bellini aria, he does so in terms which constitute a virtual 'manifesto of Romanticism', as well as referring to the connection between musical and social evolution referred to in Eliot's essay.<sup>86</sup>

'But you produce your notes badly; and that music which you sing is beneath you. It is a form of melody which expresses a puerile state of culture—a dangling, canting, see-saw kind of stuff—the passion and thought of people without any breadth of horizon. There is a sort of self-satisfied folly about every phrase of such melody: no cries of deep, mysterious passion—no conflict—no sense of the universal. It makes men small as they listen to it'.<sup>87</sup>

While it is true that Klesmer's role in narrative and thematic terms represents a sustained attack on the state of English culture, and that he makes a powerful case for Romantic aesthetics, it is clear that he is also presented as a slightly ridiculous figure, and not without a shade of irony. (Even the fact that the only position Klesmer is able to find is with a provincial family makes the comparison to the highly successful and cosmopolitan Mendelssohn a double-edged compliment.) I believe that this irony is also present in Eliot's famous response to Wagner's operas, which for Eliot, with the notable exceptions of *Fliegender Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*, are 'deficient in melodic inspiration':

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<sup>85</sup> Delia da Sousa Correa, 'George Eliot and the Germanic "Musical Magus"', in John Rignall, ed., *George Eliot and Europe* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1997), 98-112, pp. 98-100.

<sup>86</sup> da Sousa Correa, 'George Eliot', pp. 102-3.

<sup>87</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. by Barbara Hardy (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 79. Interestingly enough, even Wagner admired Bellini's *Norma*, on account of its unceasingly beautiful melodies.



As to melody—who knows? It is just possible that melody, as we can conceive it, is only a transitory phase of music, and that the musicians of the future may read the airs of Mozart and Beethoven and Rossini as scholars read the *Stabreim* and assonance of early poetry. We are but in ‘the morning of the times’,<sup>88</sup> and must learn to think of ourselves as tadpoles unperceptive of the future frog. Still the tadpole is limited to tadpole pleasures; and so, in our state of development, we are swayed by melody. When, a little while after hearing *Lohengrin*, we happened to come to a party of musicians who were playing exquisitely a quartette of Beethoven’s, it was like returning to the pregnant speech of men after a sojourn among glums and gowries.<sup>89</sup>

Eliot is not being disingenuous when she states her preference for Beethoven; indeed, from what we have discussed above, it can be no surprise that Eliot should value the music of Beethoven above all else, just as it is no coincidence that Eliot should place wordless, instrumental music produced at the time of the early Romantics above the later productions of Romanticism, Wagner included. George Henry Lewes was never in any doubt as to the superiority of Beethoven, and was writing as early as 1843 on what he considered to be Beethoven’s unique genius: the fusion of Italian (southern)

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<sup>88</sup> Tennyson, ‘The Day Dream, L’Envoi’.

<sup>89</sup> *Essays*, pp. 102-3. It is interesting to note that Eliot, though she was friendly with Wagner and his disciples, was uncomfortable with his anti-Semitism, and tried to influence his views on this matter through her correspondence with his wife, Cosima. Cosima’s father was Franz Liszt, whom the Leweses had met in Weimar in 1854. Though Cosima and Eliot seemingly had a lot in common (Cosima had scandalised society by leaving her husband and living with Wagner while carrying his child), Cosima must have known that the Leweses did not greatly care for Wagner’s music, and in addition, according to her diaries disapproved of Lewes’s detailed account of Goethe’s indiscretions in his famous biography of the author, which Cosima had read just at the time she left her husband for Wagner. For her part, Eliot would not have been impressed by Wagner’s pamphlet *Judaism in Music*, which was reprinted in 1869. Geoffrey Skelton recounts an anecdote which appeared in Francis Hueffer’s *Half a Century of Music in England* (1837-87), which, if true, sheds an interesting light on Eliot’s willingness to defend Jewish culture: “‘Your husband,’ remarked George Eliot with that straightforwardness which was so conspicuous and so loveable in her character, ‘does not like Jews; my husband is a Jew.’” Despite the inauspicious start to the relationship, Cosima and Eliot apparently got on well, and Eliot wrote of her that she was ‘a rare person, worthy to see the best things, having her father’s (Liszt’s) quickness and breadth of comprehension’ (*Letters*, VI, 368). See ‘George Eliot and Cosima Wagner: A Newly Discovered Letter From George Henry Lewes’, *The George Eliot Fellowship Review* 13 (1982), 26-30.

melody and sensuousness and German (northern) reflectiveness. For Lewes, the music of Beethoven constitutes both 'feeling and thought':

Beethoven's music, though trembling with feeling, and piercing the heart with plaints of melody more tender and intense than ever burst from any other muse, has yet a constant presence of Titanic thought which lifts the spirit upward on the soaring wings of imagination.<sup>90</sup>

This understanding of music is related to Eliot's idea of the 'truth to feeling'. Ludwig Feuerbach, with whose ideas Eliot once professed to be in complete agreement,<sup>91</sup> held that music, and specifically melody, is analogous to feeling:

Who has not experienced the overwhelming power of melody? And what else is the power of melody but the power of feeling? Music is the language of feeling; melody is audible feeling—feeling communicating itself.<sup>92</sup>

For Eliot, feeling and sympathy, though they may not be translatable in discursive terms, are yet central to her moral world, and hence the importance of music as an analogue to the ethical and literary encounter with the world.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, while it has become a critical commonplace to characterise Eliot's mode of what might be called 'imaginative realism' in terms of 'truth to feeling', it needs to be recognised as having a philosophical basis and an epistemological underpinning for her theory of the novel, and not just as a vague literary principle which supposedly demonstrates Eliot's reluctance or inability to engage with philosophy.

But where can Eliot be placed in philosophical terms? We may be now in a position further to flesh out an answer to this question, but it shall occupy the rest of this chapter, and will require another examination of the philosophical traditions of Kant and Spinoza that have occasioned in Eliot's

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<sup>90</sup> [G. H. Lewes], 'Augustus Wilhelm Schlegel', p. 168.

<sup>91</sup> *Letters*, II, 153. Eliot adds, however, that she would 'alter the phraseology considerably'.

<sup>92</sup> Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p. 3.

<sup>93</sup> Patricia Ann Gately, 'A Transmutation of Self', p. 6.

fiction a unique response. This response, though it speaks through the novel, is just as penetrating in its own way as the seemingly more coherent products of these competing philosophical traditions themselves.

Onora O'Neill argues that the categorical imperative is the basis of Kant's philosophy in general. This is because it rejects all particularity and claims for human knowledge to know anything outside of its own possibilities of experience. Both ethics and the sublime are only known negatively. With Kant's 'Copernican' turn we recognise that experience has certain epistemic conditions. Certainty is given only through the limit of the subject.<sup>94</sup> Although Kant was reacting in part against the 'psychologism' of the British empiricist tradition, this aspect of his thought could be seen to invite a 'transcendental psychologism' of a similar kind.<sup>95</sup> However, Henry Allison argues that in his subtle psychology and 'dual conception of human subjectivity', Kant can arguably be considered to have avoided the problem, one which nonetheless has preoccupied all post-Kantian philosophy.<sup>96</sup> We saw in chapter three that Schleiermacher also sought to avoid the problem, through his hermeneutic programme and his emphasis on intersubjectivity. This formulation is important insofar as any given person's experience must be the condition for all, although Schleiermacher's Kantian schema is implicitly challenged by Eliot's dislocation of the categories from the subject in general to social dialogue (see below). Significantly, for Kant, it will be the aesthetic which posits such universal agreement, thus prompting the early Romantics to valorise 'literature' as a mode of expression superior to the arcane and theoretical productions of the philosophers.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 20-4.

<sup>95</sup> Henry Allison, 'Kant's Transcendental Humanism', *The Monist* 55 (April, 1971), 182-207, p. 182.

<sup>96</sup> Allison, 'Kant's Transcendental Humanism', p. 183.

<sup>97</sup> John R. Harris points out the link between Kant's categorical imperative and his writings on religion and aesthetics. The categorical imperative 'validates' the concept of the 'ultimate goodness towards which all actions tend', which however continually frustrates in

Novalis led the way, and beginning with his pioneering *Fichte Studies*, rejected the pretensions of philosophy to 'truthful presentation', and instead turned to poetry and fiction, both in terms of his literary theory and in practice.<sup>98</sup> This rejection of the universalising pretensions of philosophy became a feature of the novel from the Romantic period onwards, and is the unifying feature of the novel genre as a whole, which from the first resisted the separate and rigidly defined conventions imposed on the so-called 'realist' novel by later critics. All novels are 'realist' in the sense that they reject generalities and universals, and attempt to concentrate on the particularities of experience as it is given; and whether that treatment tends toward 'subjectivity' or 'objectivity', ultimately the protagonists in the novel genre are placed in some relation to a presupposed external temporal world (see below).<sup>99</sup>

Eliot's novels are no exception: everywhere they insist on the particularity of experience, and on the irrelevance and dangers of theories and philosophical abstractions.<sup>100</sup> Eliot brought this out very strongly in her literary criticism. In a review of Charles Kingsley's *Westward Ho!*, she acknowledges Kingsley's rare gift, but berates him for his tendency to moralise and philosophise:

Poet and artist in a rare degree, his passionate impetuosity and theological prepossessions inexorably forbid that he should ever be

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its inability to be grasped. Any reflection of this kind necessarily requires an imaginative leap, which is also of course an ethical and aesthetic movement. 'Kant, Christianity, and Literary Criticism', *Literature and Belief* 9 (1989), 72-9, p. 73.

<sup>98</sup> O'Brien, *Novalis*, pp. 89, 106-7. O'Brien's subtle thesis locates Novalis in-between Kant's postulation of the 'thing-in-itself' and Fichte's absolute idealism. According to O'Brien, Novalis's main contribution to philosophy lies in his complex and at times strikingly modern semiotic theory. See also Novalis's *Monologue* (cited above).

<sup>99</sup> Ian Watt, 'Realism and the Novel', in S. P. Rosenbaum, ed., *English Literature and British Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 65-85, pp. 69-72. Watt argues that the language of the novel, as distinct from poetry, is mainly 'referential', and this 'explains why historical and literary commentary are so much less necessary for its appreciation: the novel must supply its own footnotes' (p. 82).

<sup>100</sup> McCobb, 'George Eliot's Knowledge of German Life and Letters', p. 84.

a philosopher; he sees, feels, and paints vividly, but he theorizes illogically and moralizes absurdly. If he would confine himself to his true sphere, he might be a teacher in the sense in which every great artist is a teacher—namely, by giving us his higher sensibility as a medium, a delicate acoustic or optical instrument, bringing home to our coarser senses what would otherwise be unperceived by us.<sup>101</sup>

Kingsley is immediately compared to Carlyle, who despite all his faults, has 'that piercing insight which every now and then flashes to the depths of things', and an 'awful sense of the mystery of existence', which colour even his most satirical and rhetorical writings.<sup>102</sup> Rather paradoxically, as it turns out, the mode of expression of the prose artist is seen as gesturing towards the same metaphysical heights that the Romantics considered had eluded the metaphysical efforts of traditional philosophy.

Eliot's response through fiction to Kant's 'Copernican' turn, which seemingly renders non-finite knowledge impossible, is crucial in 'placing' Eliot philosophically and ethically. The Copernican turn can be read as a critical manoeuvre that points out that what a thing *is* cannot be grasped independent of its way of being known: the very idea of knowledge as receptivity demands that we consider the reception of the thing. Therefore it makes no sense to speak of that which lies outside knowledge in the speculative manner of Spinoza (and Kant had what he would call the 'metaphysical' pretensions of Spinoza specifically in mind). Reason might have a striving towards the infinite but this striving can only remain an Idea, because it is invalid to aim to know what lies beyond the conditions of knowledge. Having said that, we might want to consider that Kant's definition of experience as knowledge (in the form of judgements) imposes formal structures and logical judgements on experience in general and therefore in a sense narrows the limits of experience. This of course led Kant to posit an

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<sup>101</sup> *Essays*, p. 126.

<sup>102</sup> *Essays*, p. 127.

outside to experience, and which resulted in the constant aporia that is found where Romanticism interrogates Kantian philosophy; that is, the relationship between our knowledge and the thing-in-itself, which although it cannot be knowable or described in discursive terms, must nonetheless be posited to allow being to ground itself.<sup>103</sup>

Notwithstanding the above, it seems to me that Eliot expands the limits that Kant puts on experience, through pity, sociality, and narrative. Her response to Kant's formal structures and categorical imperative is brought out forcefully in her essay on the poet Young:

The action of faculty is imperious, and excludes the reflection *why* it should act. In the same way, in proportion as morality is emotional, i.e., has affinity with Art, it will exhibit itself in direct sympathetic feeling and action, and not as the recognition of a rule. Love does not say, 'I ought to love'—it loves. Pity does not say, 'It is right to be pitiful'—it pities. Justice does not say, 'I am bound to be just'—it feels justly.<sup>104</sup>

One of the *Athenaeum* Fragments that Schleiermacher was known to have written, significantly tries to bridge the Kantian abyss between knowledge and the thing-in-itself not with art, as might have been Schlegel's inclination, but the other subject. Schleiermacher is declaring that the recognition of the other person is at once an aesthetic as well as a hermeneutic process:<sup>105</sup>

A human being should be like a work of art which, though openly exhibited and freely accessible, can nevertheless be enjoyed and understood only by those who bring feeling and study to it.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> O'Brien, *Novalis*, pp. 86-9. The Romantics' use of symbol over allegory is relevant here. Because the symbol 'both signifies and also vitally participates in the idea which it represents', it means that the art work, while like nature being 'necessarily incomplete', can nonetheless become 'a true part or a living fragment of the experience or idea it seeks to represent'. Wheeler, *Literary Criticism*, p. 10.

<sup>104</sup> *Essays*, p. 379.

<sup>105</sup> Prickett, *Origins of Narrative*, p. 190.

<sup>106</sup> [Athenaeum] Fragment 336, Schlegel, 'Lucinde' and *The Fragments*, p. 213.

This hermeneutic process is intrinsically linked with history, which in some ways from the Romantics onwards replaces theology at least in the foreground of any search for origins or meaning. Hence all the various disciplines from anthropology to biology will ultimately be concerned with history, and any provisional answers will therefore need to be realised in narrative terms, to as it were validate their alternative story of origins.<sup>107</sup>

This idea of an ineluctable striving for finality and totality through narrative can help place Eliot between Kant, whose position we can characterise very reductively as the critical limitation of experience as knowledge, and Spinoza, the speculative assertion of what lies beyond knowledge.<sup>108</sup> Deleuze's interpretation of Kant is very helpful. *The Critique of Judgement*, which Deleuze hails as the 'foundation of Romanticism':

gives us a new theory of finality, which corresponds to the transcendental point of view and fits perfectly with the idea of legislation. This task is fulfilled in so far as *finality no longer has a theological principle, but rather, theology has a 'final' human foundation*. From this derives the importance of the two theses of the *Critique of Judgement*: that the final accord of the faculties is the object of a special genesis; and that the final relationship between Nature and man is the result of a *human* practical activity.<sup>109</sup>

Kant's aim is to establish some sort of 'free accord' between the various faculties—knowledge, ethics, art—which would legitimate the role of the subject as legislator, and thereby find some sort of harmony in the fact that

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<sup>107</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 5-6.

<sup>108</sup> Kant's transcendental idealism needs to be distinguished from the 'absolute' idealism of Hegel. Hegel rejected Kant's 'objective' noumena, and 'regarded the phenomenal as an embodiment of the pure rationality of the noumenal'. See John Cobb, *Living Options in Protestant Theology*, pp. 28-9.

<sup>109</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone Press, 1984), pp. xii, 69. Deleuze interprets Kant to conform to his own philosophy of immanence very neatly: 'We know that there are two types of legislation, thus two *domains* corresponding to nature and freedom, to sensible nature and to suprasensible nature. But there is only a single *terrain*, that of experience' (p. 40). See also Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 119-21, 201-3.

nature seems to be in accord with our subjective and autonomous determinations.<sup>110</sup> This idea of harmony is not however able to 'ground' itself, as the upshot of this would be the very 'dogmatic' metaphysics that Kant has already rejected in respect of Spinoza and others.<sup>111</sup> Eliot responds to this challenge by dislocating the Kantian categories and formal structures from the individual subject, and negotiates what lies outside the subject through other persons. She does this by the immediacy and non-cognitive 'grounding' of narrative:

But the consideration of molecular physics is not the direct ground of human love and moral action, any more than it is the direct means of composing a noble picture or of enjoying great music. One might as well hope to dissect one's own body and be merry doing it, as take molecular physics (in which you must banish from your field of view what is specifically human) to be your dominant guide, your determiner of motives, in what is solely human. That every study has its bearing on every other is true; but pain and relief, love and sorrow, have their peculiar history which make an experience and knowledge above the swing of atoms.<sup>112</sup>

Both Kant and Spinoza attempt to think of totality as the condition for being, whereas the 'totality' of Eliot's narrative striving is the lived whole of the social. Rather than seeing this totality in cognitive terms, as in the philosophical paradigm, Eliot's is an *affective* totality. In relation to Spinoza, Eliot and Schlegel respond in differing ways to the philosophical paradigm, and the comparison is suggestive. Schlegel's takes up Spinoza's philosophy, but ignores his geometric demonstrations, and concentrates on his imaginative, pantheistic view of the world where every particular stands in relation to the whole.<sup>113</sup> Eliot, by contrast, while she too is attracted by the 'poetic' side of Spinoza's imagination, ultimately cannot countenance any

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<sup>110</sup> Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, p. 69.

<sup>111</sup> Bowie, *Romanticism*, p. 60.

<sup>112</sup> *Letters*, VI, 98-9.

<sup>113</sup> Behler, *Literary Theory*, p. 163. See also Friedrich Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, pp. 84-7.



viewpoint which attempts to think or postulate a totality from the aspect of eternity as the condition for being, as this conflicts with her humanism which is intersubjective, social and affective:

I do not find my temple in Pantheism, which, whatever might be its value speculatively, could not yield a practical religion, since it is an attempt to look at the universe from outside of our relations to it (that universe) as human beings. As healthy, sane human beings we must love and hate—love is what is good for mankind, hate is what is evil for mankind. For years of my youth I dwelt in dreams of a pantheistic sort, falsely supposing that I was enlarging my sympathy. But I have travelled far away from that time.<sup>114</sup>

We may continue to place Eliot in relation to the early Romantics with the suggestion that the early Romantics do not transgress the Kantian critical limit in the way that Eliot does, in her intimation of what lies beyond knowledge and reason. A letter of 1841, written just after Eliot's 'conversion' to agnosticism, demonstrates the idea of an ineluctable striving for a totality which however can only be 'known' fleetingly and provisionally:

I fully participate in the belief that the only heaven here or hereafter is to be found in conformity with the will of the Supreme; a continual aiming at the attainment of that perfect ideal, the true Logos that dwells in the bosom of the One Father. [...] Goodbye, and blessings on you, as they will infallibly be on the children of peace and virtue.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> *Letters*, V, 31. Heine's response to Spinozism is not without interest. Somewhat dubiously, he names Kant, Fichte, and Hegel as Spinozists, and claims that all his contemporaries, 'perhaps without knowing it, are looking through the eyeglasses that Baruch Spinoza polished'. Heine tried to synthesise Hegel and Spinoza, and thought of Goethe as 'the Spinoza of poetry'. He wrote that 'the early philosophy of Spinoza has shed its mathematical shell and now flutters about in Goethe's poetry'. It is interesting to note that Heine pronounced God to be dead well before Nietzsche, preferring to feel that divinity resides in man. See Yirmiyahu Yovel, 'Heinrich Heine and the Message of Pantheism', *Jerusalem Quarterly* 35 (Spring 1985), 101-11, p. 106. Heine's influence on Eliot is beyond the scope of this study, but it definitely warrants further investigation.

<sup>115</sup> *Letters*, I, 125-6. The religious language should not, I think, be taken literally. The 'Supreme' and 'Father' and other anthropomorphic terms are more than likely metaphors for undeviating deterministic sequence, on which Charles Bray based his *The Philosophy of Necessity*. Given that the letter was written to Mrs Pears, who was Bray's sister, it seems likely that Eliot would use Bray's terminology. Howard R. Murphy argues that Bray's book and Charles Hennell's *Inquiry Concerning the Origins of Christianity* (London, 1838) were

This intimation beyond knowledge and reason is invariably connected to other persons: 'Speculative truth begins to appear but a shadow of individual minds, agreement between intellects seems unattainable, and we turn to the *truth of feeling* as the only universal bond of union.'<sup>116</sup> And while any glimpse of truth or awareness of the absolute will perforce be fragmentary and provisional, it will be similarly predicated on intersubjectivity and social experience:

Poor hints and sketches of souls as we are—with some slight transient vision of the perfect and the true—we had need help each other to gaze at the blessed heavens instead of peering into each other's eyes to find out the moths there.<sup>117</sup>

Jacobi, in his reaction to Kant and Fichte, attempted a way out of the 'infinite regress' (see above) by stressing the circularity involved in all claims to knowledge, but at the same time admitting the possibility of ungrounded 'truth'. *The Mill on the Floss* continually problematises this notion of truth. On the one hand, Maggie is patently ignorant of the deterministic processes that underpin the narrator's ethical ideas, being

unhappily quite without that knowledge of the irreversible laws within and without her which, governing the habits, becomes morality, and, developing the feelings of submission and dependence, becomes religion (381).<sup>118</sup>

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indeed influential on Eliot, but rather than causing an instant conversion, they merely 'stimulated her to verbalise doubts that had been maturing in her for several years'. 'The Ethical Revolt Against Christian Orthodoxy', p. 814. And see also, E. S. Shaffer, 'Kubla Khan', p. 230.

<sup>116</sup> *Letters*, I, 162.

<sup>117</sup> *Letters*, I, 276. For Feuerbach, the absolute is nothing other 'than the essence of human nature itself'. Further, he regards it as an historical inevitability that man will one day confess 'that the consciousness of God is nothing else than the consciousness of the species'. *The Essence of Christianity*, p. 270. In the light of such passages, it is no surprise that the left-Hegelians (Feuerbach and Strauss particularly, both of whom Eliot translated) influenced Marx to such a degree.

<sup>118</sup> This is very close to Schleiermacher's idea of religion as a 'feeling of absolute dependence' (see above, chapter three).

On the other hand, even knowledge of these 'irreversible laws' form part of 'that complex, fragmentary, doubt-provoking knowledge which we call truth' (579), which seems to undercut the consolatory tone of the conclusion of the novel (see below, chapter five).<sup>119</sup>

The notion of the possibility of ungrounded truth was developed by the early Romantics, and their particular focus was the work of art, which they claimed could generate truths that are ontologically prior to the 'grounded' claims of science and philosophy. Novalis and Schlegel sought nothing less than a union of poetry and philosophy, because for them, philosophy is not 'free' while it seeks a 'ground' and is divorced from poetry.<sup>120</sup> Schleiermacher's negotiation of Kant and Spinoza, as we saw in the last chapter, is particularly interesting, because his work can be seen as an attempt at a reconciliation of these two competing traditions, which has important implications for the philosophical placing of Eliot. Schleiermacher's use of the faculty of intuition (*Anschauung*)—a key Kantian term, as well as having resonances for Spinoza's third kind of knowledge—provided him with the theoretical apparatus tentatively to bridge the gap between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds. Where Schleiermacher differs from the other Romantics, though, is in his emphasis on the intersubjective nature of this facility, which brings the religious, hermeneutic and aesthetic realms into close correlation.<sup>121</sup>

It should be noticed in passing that the theory of art and philosophy that we have been discussing applies not only to the early German Romantics but to Coleridge and Wordsworth as well, and is related to the idea of poetry as a recognition of an anteriority that has affect but resists cognition.<sup>122</sup> Eliot

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<sup>119</sup> John Rignall, 'Metaphor, Truth and the Mobile Imagination in *The Mill on the Floss*', *The George Eliot Review* 24 (1993), 36-40, p. 37.

<sup>120</sup> Behler, *Literary Theory*, p. 194.

<sup>121</sup> Prickett, *Origins of Narrative*, pp. 195-6.

<sup>122</sup> As is well known, Wordsworth had a continuing profound influence on Eliot. John Beer argues that Wordsworth's conceptions of duty and affection 'offered a point of stability' as

herself seems to express this idea in her response to Goethe, as well as to Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, which is so central to the ethics of *The Mill on the Floss*:

I am writing to your dear Husband as well as to you, and in answer to his question about Goethe, I must say, for my part, that I think he had a strain of mysticism in his soul,—of so much mysticism as I think inevitably belongs to a full poetic nature—I mean the delighted bathing of the soul in emotions which overpass the outlines of definite thought. I should take the 'Imitation' as a type (it is one which your husband also mentions), but perhaps I might differ from him in my attempt to interpret the unchangeable and universal meanings of that great book.<sup>123</sup>

This idea of poetry as anteriority that resists cognition is particularly suggestive for the Romantics, given that this anteriority is known only from its loss, or *ex post facto*. Where Eliot differs though, from early Romanticism in general, is over the question of community and intersubjectivity.<sup>124</sup> This would explain her preference for the novel form rather than the lyric. The novel became the genre of modernity, it being no accident that Schlegel used the word itself in the original French, *roman*, to name the Romantic movement itself.<sup>125</sup> As far as Eliot is concerned, this also means that it is not art in general—as an intimation of the forming of form—but art that addresses history, community and the social which becomes important:

A Form being once started must by & by cease to be purely spontaneous: the form itself becomes the object and material of emotion, & is sought after, amplified and elaborated by

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Eliot rejected orthodox Christianity. Through Wordsworth, Eliot was able to reconcile a Kantian emphasis on duty with 'her own ideal of sympathy'. *Providence and Love: Studies in Wordsworth, Channing, Myers, George Eliot, and Ruskin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 189-90. Coleridge was an early influence, although Eliot somewhat lost interest in him as a thinker later on, possibly due to Lewes's suspicion of Coleridge's plagiarisms. See McCobb, 'George Eliot's Knowledge of German Life and Letters', p. 63.

<sup>123</sup> *Letters*, VI, 89.

<sup>124</sup> Although the early Romantics did have the notion of 'Gesellschaft', which is a kind of intersubjectivity, a shared cultural background that connects the reader with the artist. See Wheeler, *Literary Criticism*, p. 26.

<sup>125</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, '*Lucinde*' and the *Fragments*, Translator's Introduction, p. 19.

discrimination of its elements till at last by the abuse of its refinement it preoccupies the room of emotional thinking; & poetry, from being the fullest expression of the human soul, is starved into an ingenious pattern-work, in which tricks with vocables take the place of living words fed with the blood of relevant meaning, & made musical by the continual intercommunication of sensibility & thought.<sup>126</sup>

The early Romantics' notion of the literary has important resonances for Eliot's thought, not least their predilection for fragments, which by definition resist closure and reflect the striving for a totality that can never be realised. In this sense they constituted an important preparatory exercise for the novel to come.<sup>127</sup> However, I am suggesting that Eliot goes beyond the Kantian critical limit and is *positive*, by stressing feeling, narrative, and intersubjectivity, which combine to give force to the peculiar mode of the novel.<sup>128</sup>

As we saw earlier, there was a potential way out of Jacobi's 'infinite regress', involving the notion of literature and particularly music 'saying the unsayable'. Jacobi invoked a non-discursive concept of 'truth', albeit as a regulative idea, which connected to the early Romantics' non-representational approach to language. However, despite this approach, the early Romantics were not extreme epistemological relativists: they were *positive* in their holistic and hermeneutic approach to the impossibility of a final ground. The quest for truth is ever renewable, and has for the early Romantics an *ethical*

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<sup>126</sup> 'Notes on Form in Art', *Essays*, p. 436.

<sup>127</sup> Wheeler, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 8-9. One of the early results was F. Schlegel's *Lucinde* (1799), which, in its seeming incompleteness and resistance to a single interpretation, could be said to contain its own literary theory.

<sup>128</sup> Raymond Williams's conception of the novel as striving for totality, and his mobilisation of Eliot's novels, is relevant here. See 'George Eliot', in his classic *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), 75-94. Where Eliot may part company with the early Romantics is in her irony. Although her use of irony can be usefully compared to the self-deprecating, 'Socratic' irony of the Romantics, she stops short of making the whole world ironic. This is because she feels she must ultimately take a decision of Kantian responsibility, and recognise that there is a hierarchy of philosophical positions, and that not all viewpoints are equal and non-differentiated. As we shall see below, at some point irony must stop.

rather than an *epistemological* focus, which as we saw is where the importance of Schleiermacher lies for Eliot. In this respect, Eliot's novels, with their constant dynamic between philosophy and literature, are right in line with the early Romantic project.

This is an appropriate juncture to signal how Lacoue-Labarthe negotiates the Kantian sublime. Because Lacoue-Labarthe sees writing as a form of origin, the sublime is an intimation of the unlimited or Absolute only ever given through the limit. Therefore he is, in this sense, hyper-Kantian.<sup>129</sup> But Kant himself referred extensively to the soul (albeit negatively), and pre-Kantian ethics concerned itself with the feeling which surpassed the limit. This feeling was not just negative, and the same could easily be said of Eliot. It is not just through critical procedure that ethics is given but has to do with cultivation of *feeling*. She transgresses the Kantian critical limit by positing an intimation beyond knowledge and reason (which as we saw is related to Schleiermacher's conception of *Gefühl*).<sup>130</sup> While the Romantics tend to accept the Kantian limit and posit the sublime as beyond representation, Eliot has a more Spinozistic sense that whatever limit or condition there is would also be included within the totality, it would not be radically anterior. A

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<sup>129</sup> See Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Subject of Philosophy*, ed. by Thomas Trezise (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Although Lacoue-Labarthe's Kantian antecedents are unmistakable, Thomas Trezise argues that Lacoue-Labarthe is the latest in a tradition of deconstructors (Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger) who suggest that 'meaning [...] does not lie in a *principium*, such as the principle of negation or identity, by which one could assure in advance the closure of interpretation'. Lacoue-Labarthe is 'one of the very few philosophers of our or any day for whom the alternatives of knowledge and its frustration or power does not form the ultimate horizon of thinking—one of the few who affirm the "failure" of philosophy as the very possibility of thought' (editor's introduction, pp. xiv, xvii). Similarly, Derrida does not regard Lacoue-Labarthe's programme as necessarily negative. He writes: 'Lacoue-Labarthe does something entirely different. He does not propose to restore, rehabilitate, or reinstall "the subject"; rather, he proposes to think its desistance by taking into account *both* a deconstruction of the Heideggerian type *and* that about which he thinks Heidegger maintained a silence.' This 'silence [...] is not without relation to the ineluctable'. Jacques Derrida, 'Desistance', trans. by Christopher Fynsk, introduction to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. by Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 17, 22.

<sup>130</sup> See Prickett, *Origins of Narrative*, pp. 188-90.

further consequence of this approach is that there would now be different modes of limit; that is, ways of relation between the self and the world. Eliot is thus, through narrative, staking out a position in-between the sublime as liminal and the organicism of the Spinozistic totality. Seen in this way, Eliot's novels are a positive response to the impasse that can be recognised in the Romantic location of ethics in the non-cognitive, pre-semantic absolute, and hence the importance Eliot places on narrative, sociality, and pity.

Henry Allison's distinction between Kant's empirical realism, in which one experiences the empirical world as real and lived; and transcendental idealism, which asks how the real is given as real is relevant here.<sup>131</sup> This is useful because it allows us to reconcile the 'transcendental' and Kantian aspects that we have been discussing, with the 'natural history' flavour and the 'realism' of Eliot's early novels.<sup>132</sup> Her well documented views (following Ruskin) on the desirability of 'real and concrete' as opposed to 'ideal and eclectic' art,<sup>133</sup> which are everywhere articulated in her essays and earlier letters, can be assimilated, and we find that, contrary to received wisdom, there is no necessary tension between these polarities.<sup>134</sup> As we shall see below (chapter five), *The Mill on the Floss* relies heavily on Darwinian ideas and on nineteenth-century science, and it needs to be stressed that Eliot insists on a world existing independent of our perception of it, even as she problematises the whole notion of representation.<sup>135</sup> In this sense, the fact that Eliot asserts the *givenness* of the world of appearances thus makes her a 'naive realist', philosophically speaking.

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<sup>131</sup> Henry Allison, 'Kant's Transcendental Humanism', pp. 203-7.

<sup>132</sup> By this I mean that we can accept that we experience a world outside us (empirical realism), and that this experience has subjective conditions (transcendental idealism).

<sup>133</sup> *Letters*, II, 362.

<sup>134</sup> See K. K. Collins, 'Questions of Method: Some Unpublished Late Essays', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35 (1980), 385-405, p. 385.

<sup>135</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, 'Critical Commentary', *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by Sally Shuttleworth (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 490.

One modern critic who seems to be trapped in what may be termed a 'linguistic monism' is J. Hillis Miller, who in a characteristic turn of phrase, claims that 'we make things what they are by naming them', meaning that words ('signs') do not represent objects in the external world, but are somehow constitutive of the very things themselves.<sup>136</sup> This in itself is unremarkable, but Miller goes too far when he ascribes this poststructuralist position to Eliot, adducing, one presumes, the following passage from Eliot's *Journal* as proof of this tendency:

I never before longed so much to know the names of things as during this visit to Ilfracombe. The desire is part of the tendency that is now constantly growing in me to escape from all vagueness and inaccuracy into the daylight of distinct, vivid ideas. The mere fact of naming an object tends to give definiteness to our conception of it—we have then a sign that at once calls up in our minds the distinctive qualities which mark out for us that particular object from all others.<sup>137</sup>

It seems to me that Miller is stretching Eliot's prose to the limit here, presumably for his own ideological purposes. Surely, *pace* Miller, Eliot is referring to a world and within it objects which are presumed to exist independent of our perception or representation of them. Eliot's letter was written while on a botanic expedition with Lewes, before she wrote her early 'natural' histories, *The Mill on the Floss* included.<sup>138</sup> Eliot's attention to meaning (her *givenness*) is far different from, and much richer than, Miller's rigorous but ultimately empty formalism. Her Spinozism demands a wonder and attention to the world, together with a semiotic firstness: the world is not blank substance there to be represented, but (in almost Peircean fashion)

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<sup>136</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*', in *George Eliot*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 99-110, p. 109.

<sup>137</sup> *Letters*, II, 251.

<sup>138</sup> Lewes was researching his *Sea-Side Studies: Ilfracombe, Tenby, Scilly Isles, and Jersey* (Edinburgh, 1858). See Haight, p. 207. To be fair, however, Miller's so-called ethics of reading is about reading and narrative *per se*, and strictly speaking not about any specific text. Miller's formalism dictates that the task of interpretation is to render every text open.



demands its own representation or 'narrativises' itself.<sup>139</sup> This is the ironic limit of Eliot's narrative—the fate that eludes narrative projection and order. Here at the limits of representation is also the sublime in the non-Kantian sense.<sup>140</sup>

The modern (and we would have to say Kantian and Derridean) definition of Enlightenment is the freedom from any positive or empirical determination of the self in the recognition of the self's ethical autonomy. Seen in this manner, ethics is purely *formal* and cannot be derived from any given law, but is always the freedom of law-giving and decision. I have been suggesting that Eliot doesn't want to go this far, because she does not see the self as being of a different order from that of worldly givenness. This explains her emphasis on social formation, narrative development, pity, and what exceeds self-knowledge. We can identify this with a post-Kantian Spinozism, a refusal to see the self as epistemologically autonomous, an insistence that there is no 'Copernican' turn which locates knowledge within the subject. Because Eliot rejects Kant's Copernican turn, and refuses to see the self as epistemologically autonomous, she is 'positive' in that she posits a domain *beyond* knowledge that may be intuitable by the self, in contrast to the negativity of the Kantian formulation.

Kant describes his own project of transcendental *idealism* as opposed to transcendental *realism*. Against Spinoza and others he insists that the conditions for experience are ideal and could not be perceived in the world. He criticises both Spinoza and pantheism in the *Critique of Pure Reason* by

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<sup>139</sup> I refer to C. S. Peirce (1839-1914), the American 'pragmatic' philosopher.

<sup>140</sup> See also Rosemarie Bodenheimer's fascinating study of Eliot's letters and fiction. Bodenheimer argues that Eliot's narrators 'provide, within the controlled representations of fiction, the human yet larger-than-human perspective that can give voice to a multiplicity of interpretations within a single discourse. [...] This refusal of singleness, which makes almost every critical interpretation a story of lesser complexity than the one George Eliot tells, is her primary mode of depicting a world where "true representation" is impossible'. *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1994), p.101.

arguing for the necessary limits of perception, thus establishing a noumenal realm which one cannot experience.<sup>141</sup> At the same time, Kant regards the immanence of Spinoza's system as illegitimate.<sup>142</sup> However, for Eliot, it may well be the case that knowledge is of the world as it appears, but there is also a domain 'beyond' knowledge which conditions knowledge, which the self may feel or intuit. Eliot—through narrative and the connection between the *literary* and ethics—wishes to reduce the ontological distance between humanity and divinity (as in Spinoza). But at the same time she recognises that any *philosophical* way of knowing would merely belie the character of that divinity (as in Kant). Unlike both Spinoza and Kant, she is perhaps trying to reduce the *epistemological* distance as well. This is achieved with an emphasis on others, community, and ethics through human experience—not of supra-human absolutes. For Eliot, divinity already resides in other persons. Literature is the forum or mode of human sympathy, and this explains why reason drops out of her thinking. Kant's anti-anthropologism means that he refuses to give human nature or reason a determinate or concrete character. Reason is self-determining and regulative, or critical. Eliot's critique of Kant—as we saw when we discussed *Scenes of Clerical Life*—is targeted most squarely at the emptiness and individualism of his formulation. In contrast, Eliot emphasises the *positivity* of human being and experience, as least as a medium for ethics if not its final cause.

Eliot, then, like Spinoza, and unlike Kant, can be characterised as a transcendental realist, but of a different form. This would mean that the transcendental conditions for experience are not just within the subject (as Ideal), but can be experienced as real (through others). For Eliot it is through narrative that we see the world, selves and others through their *forming*...

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<sup>141</sup> Allison, 'Kant's Transcendental Humanism', p. 207.

<sup>142</sup> See *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant*, ed. by Peter Ferves (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), for Kant's critique of metaphysics and eschatology.

rather than as given forms. Unlike Lacoue-Labarthe's approach, this forming is social, collective and narratorial rather than formal and poetic. This 'forming' is related to *Bildung* (see below, chapter five). For Kant the world is given according to the categories of the transcendental subject. On the usual reading of the aesthetic in German idealism, art is seen as the way in which the subject can reflect upon these forms/categories that form the world. Art is a way of seeing the conditions of experience in their conditioning, forming, *Bildung*. But this assumed that there are transcendental conditions or a logic. But what if, for George Eliot, the way the world was formed did not have to do with a subject but with intersubjective socially and historically formed modes? Then the way the world is given would not be due to transcendental categories but the historical sedimentation of art and narrative.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Gillian Beer makes a similar point when she argues that in *The Mill on the Floss* Eliot rejects the usual *Bildungsroman* conventions. *George Eliot* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), pp. 98-9.

## V

### *Bildung*, Hermeneutics, and Darwinism

In this chapter I shall discuss the idea of *The Mill on the Floss* as a *Bildungsroman*, or development novel, which was an important genre for the early Romantics, especially in terms of their response to the perceived classicism of Goethe. What George Eliot does with the genre, and how ultimately it is found inadequate for her needs will be linked to Eliot's notion of a non-teleological idea of evolution and a non-linear notion of history, which will establish connections between *Bildung*, hermeneutics, and Darwinism. Eliot's response to Darwinism, and her understated but significant contribution to the intense debate about whether natural selection is the mechanism for evolution, together with her critique of Herbert Spencer's positivist interpretation of evolution, will be connected with her turning from science and philosophy to art, fiction, and history, and the ideas of the Jena Romantics.

In a letter written during the composition of *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot insisted:

that at present my mind works with the most freedom and the keenest sense of poetry in my remotest past, and there are many strata to be worked through before I can begin to use *artistically* any material I may gather in the present.<sup>1</sup>

Many critics have observed the strong autobiographical element of *The Mill on the Floss*, and read the work as a type of *Bildungsroman*, variously discussing the ways in which Eliot departed from the traditional conventions of the genre.<sup>2</sup> Few critics, however, have explored what drew Eliot to the

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<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, III, 128-9.

<sup>2</sup> That the novel is self-consciously autobiographical is clear, especially when one considers that Tom and Maggie were born in the same years as Eliot and her brother Isaac. See Haight, p. 5. Beryl Gray argues that Maggie's sensibilities to music are Eliot's own, and that the novel 'offers George Eliot's most directly personal revelation of her own musicality'.

genre in the first place, notwithstanding the fact that ultimately she found it unsuited to her needs. Any discussion of the *Bildungsroman* must start with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, with which Eliot was very familiar, and indeed it is probable that she contributed some of the literary criticism to Lewes's justly famous (and still extremely readable) *Life of Goethe* (1855).<sup>3</sup> One such passage may well have been Lewes's discussion of *Wilhelm Meister*, in which he defends the 'vacillations' of the main character, on account of Goethe's aim of 'showing how some characters change, obedient to every external influence':

The metamorphoses of Wilhelm would have been impossible with a character such as Egmont. This seems so obvious, that one is surprised to find critics objecting to the vacillating character of Wilhelm, as if it were a fault in art. It would be as reasonable to object to the vacillations of Hamlet.<sup>4</sup>

Lewes goes on to suggest that *Wilhelm Meister*, though it describes 'a world in which we see no trace of the preacher, not even a glimpse of his surplice', is an extremely *moral* work, one which depends on the 'insight and experience' of the reader, as much as on any final moral to which one may be 'pointed'.<sup>5</sup>

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*George Eliot and Music*, p. 13. However, in her edition of the novel, Beryl Gray warns that the autobiographical elements are still shaped by Eliot the mature and successful novelist, and should thus be approached with caution. *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by Beryl Gray (London: Everyman, 1996), p. xxiv.

<sup>3</sup> E. A. McCobb points out that many of the works that Eliot lists as having read during her stay in Berlin (while Lewes was researching his book) are 'precisely those which Lewes had not previously treated in his earlier articles on Goethe'. Interestingly enough, one of Lewes's obscure works is entitled *The Apprenticeship of Life* (London, 1850), and is obviously influenced by Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. 'George Eliot's Knowledge of German Life and Letters', p. 33. *The Apprenticeship of Life* was published only in serial form in *The Leader*, commencing in 1850. Rosemary Ashton observes that Lewes 'had not the heart to carry beyond eleven uneven chapters', and quotes a modern critic who describes the work as 'a collapsed *Wilhelm Meister*'. *G. H. Lewes: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 73, 75.

<sup>4</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Life and Works of Goethe* (London, 1855), p. 206-7.

<sup>5</sup> Lewes, *Goethe*, pp. 211-2. Lewes was responding to Novalis's description of the work as 'artistic Atheism' (Novalis, *Schriften*, II, 367).

This discussion has a remarkable similarity to Eliot's own essay on the novel, although she characteristically adds her own doctrine of sympathy:<sup>6</sup>

Everywhere he brings us into the presence of the living, generous humanity—mixed and erring, and self-deluding, but saved from utter corruption by the salt of some noble impulse, some disinterested effort, some beam of good nature, even though grotesque or homely. And his mode of treatment seems to us precisely that which is really moral in its influence. It is without exaggeration; he is in no haste to alarm readers into virtue by melodramatic consequences; he quietly follows the stream of fact and of life; and waits patiently for the moral processes of nature as we all do for the material processes.<sup>7</sup>

For Eliot, *Bildung* is broadly 'culture', and the 'subtlest essence' of culture is 'sympathy'.<sup>8</sup> This idea of personal development and culture, which had attracted the Victorians of the previous generation, and which had been stimulated by the effects of the Industrial Revolution, would have been deeply resonant for Eliot.<sup>9</sup> Also, Eliot would have noted the subtle shift in Goethe's conception of the *Bildungsroman* in the two parts of *Wilhelm Meister*. The first part (*Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*) is more representative of the usual model, following the young Wilhelm's personal development as he tries to interpret the world through life and art. The second part (*Wilhelm Meister's Wanderjahre*), while still conforming to the organic model, is more concerned with man in his relation to the rest of society, and the processes of history and intersubjectivity. It is at this juncture that Goethe's debt to Rousseau is fully revealed.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Pinney, Headnote to 'The Morality of *Wilhelm Meister*', *Essays*, pp. 143-4.

<sup>7</sup> *Essays*, pp. 146-7.

<sup>8</sup> *Essays*, p. 317.

<sup>9</sup> W. H. Bruford, *The German Concept of Self-Cultivation: 'Bildung' from Humboldt to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. viii. E. S. Shaffer complains that 'the neglect, the dismissal, of Goethe's overarching achievement in *Wilhelm Meister* and its influence on the English novel is one of the scandals of our criticism'. 'Kubla Khan', pp. 12-3.

<sup>10</sup> Bruford, *Bildung*, pp. 40, 98, 104.

The first part of *Wilhelm Meister* features a discussion of the distinction between novel and tragedy: in the novel, Chance has an important role to play, although it must only be invoked in accordance with the dispositions of the characters; in tragedy there is only place for Fate, which alone can create tragic situations.<sup>11</sup> A. S. Byatt argues that in *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot, 'not with complete success', combines the Goethean epic novel (Byatt is thinking of *Elective Affinities*)<sup>12</sup> with Greek tragedy. Byatt goes on to argue that there is a qualitative difference between the early 'natural histories' up to and including *The Mill on the Floss*, and the later books such as *Middlemarch*, which are as it were, 'more "interior"'. This is true, but it is only a difference of degree, and, as Byatt points out, *The Mill on the Floss* is formally different from both the later, arguably greater works, and also *Adam Bede*, which preceded it. Byatt recognises the novel's poetry and 'fortuitous freedom', which compensate for its seeming lack of formal unity.<sup>13</sup> Eliot however, while she accepted that she was so 'beguiled' by the childhood chapters that the tragedy was not 'adequately prepared',<sup>14</sup> never gave any indication that she ever felt the novel lacked unity as such. Indeed, seen in the light of the early Romantic conception of the novel as a mixed genre, the achievement of *The Mill on the Floss* is not in spite of, but because of its formal anomalies.

Schlegel hailed Goethe, along with Dante and Shakespeare, as 'the great triple chord of modern poetry',<sup>15</sup> and in his influential review of *Wilhelm Meister*, proclaimed that by virtue of Goethe's novel, the genre had now

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<sup>11</sup> Carlyle's translation, 2 vols. (London, 1858), bk. 5, ch. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971). Book six, chapter six of *The Mill on the Floss*, 'Illustrating the Laws of Attraction', is a reference to Goethe's novel, which Eliot 'read and admired'. Eliot also admired the novels in a similar 'Goethean' vein by George Sand, *Jacques* (1834), and *Consuelo* (1842). See Rosemary Ashton's excellent biography, *George Eliot: A Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996), p. 236.

<sup>13</sup> A. S. Byatt, Editor's Introduction, pp. 36-40.

<sup>14</sup> *Letters*, III, 317.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Behler, *Literary Theory*, p. 168.

become once more a *poetic* one, despite its prosaic and realistic manner of presentation. This was due to its 'narrative rhythm', its 'hermeneutic inexhaustibility' and its 'special kind of unity', a quality that had been missing since Cervantes.<sup>16</sup> And of the novel genre, the *Bildungsroman* has the special quality among novels of being the most 'realist' as well as most 'self-conscious', given that the object of their representations is nothing other than the 'self-positing consciousness of the human'.<sup>17</sup> Thus the *Bildungsroman* is aware of 'the experiential framework of practical reality', but also 'the creative potential of the human imagination and reflectivity'.<sup>18</sup> And further, it reveals not only the *Bildung* or self-forming of the hero (and it is normally a *male* protagonist) of the tale, but also fosters the development of the reader who is engaged with the hermeneutic demands of the text.<sup>19</sup>

However, the early Romantics had an ambivalent response to Goethe, and although they recognised the 'romantic' qualities of *Wilhelm Meister*, in line with their fluid definition of modern ('romantic') literature, they also perceived an eighteenth-century classicism which, despite the novel's poetry and irony, could not ultimately be subsumed under their concept of absolute poetry.<sup>20</sup> Novalis and Schlegel continued the development of the genre, and

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<sup>16</sup> Behler, *Literary Theory*, pp. 169-7, 174. Behler writes: 'From a formal point of view, this progressive unfolding manifests itself in Goethe's innovative technique of narration, which operates with foreshadowings of the events, correspondences, mirroring of characters and contrasting figures, and thereby creates a type of poetic unity which is never fully present and resides in a constant progression' (p. 171). The focus of this unity is, as Schlegel says in his review, 'the irony which hovers over the entire work'. F. Schlegel, 'On Goethe's *Meister*', quoted in Behler, *Literary Theory*, p. 172.

<sup>17</sup> Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the 'Bildungsroman'* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 5, cited in Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Prickett, 'Fictions and Metafictions: *Phantasies*, *Wilhelm Meister* and the Idea of the *Bildungsroman*', in William Reaper, ed., *The Gold Thread: Essays on George MacDonald* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 109-25, pp. 116-7. Prickett also points out that this anticipates modern reader-response theories.

<sup>20</sup> Behler, *Literary Theory*, p. 178. Stephen Prickett notes that, somewhat paradoxically, *Wilhelm Meister* is considered by modern readers to be a Romantic novel. *Origins of Narrative*, p. 191.



both produced 'romantic' novels, respectively, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (published posthumously in 1802) and *Lucinde* (1799). Although both novels ostensibly follow the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, they were written partly in response to the perceived classicism of *Wilhelm Meister*, and differ sharply in certain respects from the model that Goethe's novel provided, even though they were written with the consciousness of the enormity of Goethe's achievement in mind. Schlegel wanted *Lucinde* to reflect his romantic theory of the novel, but he went back to the original Greek definition of theory (*theoria*), which means 'intellectual intuition'. Thus, for the reader to have an 'intellectual intuition' of the 'theory' of the novel, it would not be 'theory' as such, but the totality of the novel itself that would enable this to be represented.<sup>21</sup> The central section of *Lucinde* is entitled 'Apprenticeship for Manhood', and in this sense the novel starts in the middle (appropriately enough for Romantic philosophy). The end of the novel 'dissolves into nothingness'<sup>22</sup> as though to insist on the impossibility of final interpretation, or at any rate, the novel's resistance to determinate meaning.<sup>23</sup> Thus *Lucinde* is at most variance with the model of the *Bildungsroman* and perhaps in this sense the novel provides a more appropriate model for Eliot's reformulation of the genre in *The Mill on the Floss* than *Wilhelm Meister*.

So in what way did Eliot differ from the model offered by the *Bildungsroman*? One of the distinctive features of the genre is its emphasis on the main protagonist's gradual development over time. It should be no surprise, then, that the philosophical and scientific concept of determinism, which was still a relatively new idea in Eliot's time, should find resonances in

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<sup>21</sup> Behler, *Literary Theory*, p. 290.

<sup>22</sup> Hans Eichner, 'Lucinde', in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, 24 vols. (München: Schöningh, 1958-), V, xvii-lxx, quoted in Behler, *Literary Theory*, p. 293.

<sup>23</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer argues that *The Mill on the Floss* attracts a proliferation of readings 'because the text offers not only a story about a divided character but a narrative divided against itself'. *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans*, p. 287n.

the organic and developmental form of the *Bildungsroman*.<sup>24</sup> Eliot could be said to move 'beyond' determinism in her use of the genre, even as she subscribes to the doctrine, in the sense that in the case of Maggie the usual developmental scheme is 'reversed': at the end, Maggie is 'rescued' from the uncompromising 'realities' of determinism, and allowed a freedom (albeit only in death) which Eliot denied her other heroines, from Dinah to Dorothea.<sup>25</sup> Eliot rejects Novalis's aphorism, 'character is destiny', insisting that human beings are also causal agents, and that because of life's contingencies, each of our personal histories 'is hardly to be predicted, even from the completest knowledge of characteristics':

For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. 'Character'—says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms—'character is destiny'. But not the whole of our destiny. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, was speculative and irresolute, and we have a great tragedy in consequence. But if his father had lived to a good old age, and his uncle had died an early death, we can conceive Hamlet's having married Ophelia and got through life with a reputation of sanity notwithstanding many soliloquies, and some moody sarcasms towards the fair daughter of Polonius, to say nothing of the frankest incivility to his father-in-law (514).

Thus Maggie's 'destiny' is 'hidden, and we must wait for it to reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river: we only know that the river is full and rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home' (514-5). However, Maggie's destiny hardly unfolds in a smooth developmental trajectory: for all the 'apparent' *Bildung*, Maggie's character is surprisingly 'static'; Maggie is 'sunk in the inchoate eddies of living', and does not progress in the manner of the *Bildungsroman* hero, either morally or in character terms. This paradoxically is a source of the novel's 'truthfulness',

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<sup>24</sup> Gillian Beer, 'Beyond Determinism: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf', in Mary Jacobus, ed., *Women Writing and Writing About Women* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 80-99, pp. 81, 87. Beer points out that the word 'determinism' first appears in the OED as late as 1846.

<sup>25</sup> Beer, 'Beyond Determinism', pp. 87-8.

which ultimately refuses in spite of itself to contradict Novalis's warning about the 'unchanging nature of human character'.<sup>26</sup>

However, Eliot's novel does insist that despite 'character', external constraints and social conventions are powerful forces which can shape individual destinies. This is in contrast to the usual form of the *Bildungsroman* with its individualistic concentration on the unfolding of character.<sup>27</sup> Thus environmental and social factors are shown in their effect on Maggie. But not just Maggie; Tom also is shown to be just as much the product of social and gender stereotypes. Tom represents a similarly inverted model of the *Bildungsroman*: his 'concentration of purpose' is a long suicide, just as Maggie's 'increasing instability and oscillation' become her suicide. Thus the masculine and feminine versions of the *Bildungsroman* 'constitute' the novel, 'even as they deconstruct each another'.<sup>28</sup> But the main focus (and one which has enabled the diversity of feminist approaches to the text) is on Maggie, who not only cannot escape the conventions of St. Ogg's, but with her choice towards the end of the novel ('marriage or death') brings the reader up against the very limits of realism. There is no 'meaningful future' for Maggie, and thus the failure of 'realism' necessitates that its conventions, along with Maggie herself, are swept away by the flood.<sup>29</sup> In a sense this can be the only 'conclusion' to a novel which questions the progressive, linear structure of the

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<sup>26</sup> Barbara Hardy, *Particularities: Readings in George Eliot* (London: Peter Owen, 1982), pp. 69-74.

<sup>27</sup> Boumelha, 'George Eliot and the End of Realism', p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 121.

<sup>29</sup> Boumelha, 'George Eliot and the End of Realism', pp. 28-9. Susan Fraiman makes a similar point when she discusses 'the novel of development [...] in terms of conflict and uncertainty, of dissenting narratives, that break away and stray beyond the bounds' of traditional formulations of the genre. She notes that our understanding of the genre is largely derived from Carlyle's appropriation of Goethe. *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 6. See also Shuttleworth, 'Critical Commentary', p. 493. David Carroll, in much the most intelligent discussion of the problematical ending of the novel, observes that Maggie is 'at this point disentangled from the complications of the web-like circumstances of George Eliot's fictional realism'. *George Eliot*, p. 138.

realist novel, together with its emphasis on the unified, ordering psyche which unproblematically interprets the world.<sup>30</sup>

Such things could have no perceptible effect on a thoroughly well-balanced young lady with a perfectly balanced mind, who had had all the advantages of fortune, training and refined society. But if Maggie had been that young lady, you would probably have known nothing about her; her life would have had so few vicissitudes that it could hardly have been written; for the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history (494).

Eliot's conception of history, while still (reluctantly, and with more than a shade of irony) acknowledging the imperatives of progress, is cyclical rather than linear in its insistence on the particular suffering and loss which belongs to 'martyr or victim' at every given historical period, who while reacting against the narrowness and limited conceptions of their forebears, are nonetheless rooted in the past which ineluctably shapes their present lives.<sup>31</sup>

I share with you this sense of narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie—how it has acted on young natures in many generations, that in the onward tendency of human things have risen above the mental level of the generation before them, to which they have been tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts. The suffering, whether of martyr or victim, which belongs to every historical advance of mankind, is represented in this way in every town and by hundreds of obscure hearths (363).

Eliot's non-linear notion of history characteristically deals with the particular and the concrete, and dismisses as irrelevant such abstract notions as geological time, when compared to the intersubjective experience of what is to be human:

As to duration, and the way in which it affects your views of the human history, what is really the difference to your

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<sup>30</sup> Shuttleworth, 'Critical Commentary', p. 495.

<sup>31</sup> O'Brien observes a similar conception of history in Novalis: 'Sheer progress is a narrative fiction: it results from the necessity of temporal succession (which moves forward only in great circles) within the constraint of linear narration.' Time 'moves cyclically, with an oscillation of "growth and decline"'. *Novalis*, p. 233.

imagination between Infinitude and billions, when you have to consider the value of human experience? Will you say that since your life has a term of threescore years and ten, it was really a matter of indifference whether you were a cripple with a wretched skin disease or an active creature with a mind at large for the enjoyment of knowledge and with a nature which has attracted others to you?

Difficulties of thought and acceptance of what is without full comprehension belong to every system of thinking. The question is to find the least incomplete.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps we could tentatively characterise Eliot's conception of *Bildung* and history as being interactive and dialogic rather than individualist—a self-self *Bildung* as opposed to the typical self-world that is displayed in *Wilhelm Meister*. Eliot explores this notion in a letter responding to a request from Emily Davies for support in the founding of Girton College, which incidentally reflects her ambivalent and seemingly contradictory attitude to the 'Women Question'.<sup>33</sup>

We can no more afford to part with that exquisite type of gentleness, tenderness, possible maternity suffusing a woman's being with affectionateness, which makes what we mean by the feminine character, than we can afford to part with the human love, the mutual subjection of soul between a man and a woman—which is also a growth and a revelation beginning before all history.<sup>34</sup>

This conception of *Bildung* relates to Eliot's overcoming of the subjectivism of Romanticism and Kantianism. Maggie demonstrates a particular modality of becoming (Spinozistic), where each character does not just develop towards itself, but has its own particular *Verhalten*; that is, the intellectual, social, emotional, artistic and metaphysical forms of expression,

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<sup>32</sup> *Letters*, VI, 100.

<sup>33</sup> Eliot's complex exploration of gender in *The Mill on the Floss* and other works has been much discussed, but see especially: Mary Jacobus, 'Men of Maxims and *The Mill on the Floss*', in *George Eliot*, ed. by K. M. Newton (London: Longman, 1991), 83-98; Beer, *George Eliot*; Shuttleworth, 'Critical Commentary'; Nancy L. Paxton, *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer: Feminism, Evolutionism, and the Reconstruction of Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); and Laura Comer Emery, *George Eliot's Creative Conflict: The Other Side of Silence* (London: University of California Press, 1976).

<sup>34</sup> *Letters*, IV, 468.

which differ according to the particular social and historical *telos*.<sup>35</sup> The corollary of this idea is that there is no *telos* in general but an *expressionism* in the Spinozistic sense.<sup>36</sup> But this mode of becoming is also, in an implicit challenge to both Spinoza and Kant, a development towards *others*, which in turn connects with Eliot's capacity for narrative pity as well as her appropriation of Aristotelian ethics (see below, chapter six).

Eliot's formulation also throws up the connection between *Bildung* and hermeneutics. The development of personality is intrinsically linked to the process of understanding, and this process requires, like a seed, 'nurture and growth', and takes place over time.<sup>37</sup> The seed is just one of many scientific and biological metaphors that Eliot uses to evoke not only human progress and development, but also the attendant losses that come with any 'historical advance', where certain members of society cannot withstand the internal and external pressures of both genetic dispositions and social change.<sup>38</sup> While the price of Maggie's struggle for adaption is spiritual 'disharmony' and ultimately death,<sup>39</sup> Mr Tulliver is so *unadapted* that his life story is not a 'development' in any meaningful sense at all:

Certain seeds which are required to find a nidus for themselves under unfavourable circumstances have been supplied by nature with an apparatus of hooks, so that they will get hold on very unreceptive surfaces. The spiritual seed which had been scattered over Mr Tulliver had apparently been destitute of any

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<sup>35</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 4th ed., trans. by Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). The concept of *Verhalten* is not dissimilar to Lewes's concept of the 'General Mind', which 'is both the thought and experience of a people of a particular social and historical period'. Richard A. Currie, 'Lewes's General Mind and the Judgement of St. Ogg's: *The Mill on the Floss* as Scientific Text', *Victorian Newsletter* 92 (Fall 1997), 25-7, p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> See Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, pp. 321-2.

<sup>37</sup> Prickett, *Origins of Narrative*, pp. 197-8.

<sup>38</sup> Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, p. 237-8.

<sup>39</sup> Bernard J. Paris, 'Toward a Revaluation of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* XI (1956-57), 18-31, pp. 18, 31.

corresponding provision, and had slipped off to the winds again from a total absence of hooks (366).

The whole 'texture' of Eliot's novel, in its concentration of metaphor and 'alternative visions' of reality, means that the reader will respond to the histories of Tom and Maggie in a different way, perhaps valuing Maggie's 'feminine' mode of imagination, and wider vision, rather than Tom's limiting and narrow patriarchal attitudes.<sup>40</sup> Eliot's novel shows Tom and Maggie's struggles to adapt to their environment, and particularly Maggie's efforts to find an interpretative 'key' to the world.<sup>41</sup>

she wanted some key that would enable her to understand and, in understanding, endure, the heavy weight that had fallen on her young heart. If she had been taught 'real learning and wisdom, such as great men knew', she thought she should have held the secrets of life; if she had only books that she might learn for herself what wise men knew! (379)

Maggie's hermeneutic quest takes her through poetry, literature, and even music, but all are found to be inadequate, proving at best to be delusive. She even misinterprets the serene mysticism of Thomas à Kempis, thinking that his doctrine of self-renunciation (or any doctrine, for that matter) will provide this 'key', only to find when it is too late, that

we have no master key that will fit all cases. The casuists have become a by-word of reproach; but their perverted spirit of minute discrimination was the shadow of a truth to which the eyes and hearts are too often fatally sealed: the truth, that moral judgements must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot (628).

Maggie eventually learns the 'true' message of Thomas à Kempis: that there is no 'final interpretative key, that there is always a discrepancy between inner and outer, and that this form of suffering is the meaning of renunciation'.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Uglow, *George Eliot*, pp. 131-2.

<sup>41</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 108.

<sup>42</sup> Carroll, *George Eliot*, p. 131.

Maggie's new knowledge enables her to renounce Stephen by invoking the demands of pity and faithfulness, but her choice is at once one of 'moral heroism' and 'self-destruction'.<sup>43</sup>

The idea of *Bildung* and the corresponding quest for understanding and origins, cannot be understood without noticing Eliot's reaction to that extraordinary search for origins, Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, which was published in November 1859, when Eliot was half-way through the writing of *The Mill on the Floss*.<sup>44</sup> Much has been made of Eliot's luke-warm reaction to the work:

it makes an epoch, as the expression of his thorough adhesion, after long years of study, to the Doctrine of Development. [...] The book is ill-written and sadly wanting in illustrative facts. [...] This will prevent the work becoming popular, as the 'Vestiges' did, but it will have a great effect in the scientific world, causing a thorough and open discussion of a question about which people have hitherto felt timid. So the world gets on step by step towards brave clearness and honesty! But to me the Development theory and all other explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes.<sup>45</sup>

This somewhat understated reaction is surely due to the fact that Eliot had accepted, albeit with strong qualifications, the idea of evolution many years before, as a result of her reading of Goethe, Lamarck, and Robert Chambers, whose *Vestiges of Creation* (1844) became a popular classic.<sup>46</sup> Also, as *de facto* managing director of the *Westminster Review*, Eliot had, for a woman of her time, unprecedented access to the progressive intellectual circle that was established around Chapman's publishing house.<sup>47</sup> Nine years before

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<sup>43</sup> Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans*, p. 102.

<sup>44</sup> G. S. Haight, 'The Mill on the Floss', p. 343.

<sup>45</sup> *Letters*, III, 227, and see also *Letters*, III, 214 & n.

<sup>46</sup> Haight, 'The Mill on the Floss', p. 348; Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, p. 238-9; Paxton, *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer*, p. 15.

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the Prospectus for the *Westminster*, which Eliot wrote for Chapman, stresses a shared belief in optimism and the 'Law of Progress', and the early issues contain articles by



Darwin's publication, Eliot, in an essay which dealt with the relation of 'the law of consequences' to human development, could use geological metaphors inspired by Charles Lyell's uniformitarian *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), which served as the philosophical and scientific basis for all Darwin's work:<sup>48</sup>

A correct generalization gives significance to the smallest detail, just as the great inductions of geology demonstrate in every pebble the workings of laws by which the earth has become adapted for the habitation of man.<sup>49</sup>

Also, one tends to forget that Lewes, among other things, was a naturalist and biologist, and was contributing to scientific journals on the development theory in the years before Darwin's publication. In the *Life of Goethe* (1855), Lewes claims Goethe, another polymath, as the founder of the modern discipline,<sup>50</sup> which had become the philosophical basis for all other areas of study and human experience:<sup>51</sup>

It is worthy of remark that the study of Development is quite a modern study. Formerly men were content with the full-statured animal—the perfected art—the complete society. The phases of development and the laws of growth were discarded, or touched on in a vague, uncertain manner. A change has come over the spirit of enquiry. [...] In Geology, in Philosophy, in History and in Art, we are all now bent on tracing the phases of development. To understand the *grown* we try to follow the *growth*.<sup>52</sup>

But what is the 'mystery' under the processes that interested Eliot more than the theory itself? Gillian Beer argues that Eliot identifies this 'mystery' in

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Spencer outlining his theory of Evolution. See Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 393; and see Haight, p. 97.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, 'Tempo and Mode in the Macroevoolutionary Reconstruction of Darwinism', *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* 91 (July, 1994), 6764-71, p. 6764.

<sup>49</sup> *Essays*, p. 31.

<sup>50</sup> Byatt, 'Editor's Introduction', pp. 17-18.

<sup>51</sup> It is interesting to note that Jena, Goethe's own university, and the centre for the early Romantics, in turn became the centre for Darwinism in Germany—*Darwinismus*—led by Ernst Haeckel, a pantheist of evangelical upbringing. See Desmond and Moore, *Darwin*, pp. 538-9.

<sup>52</sup> Lewes, *Goethe*, quoted in Byatt, 'Editor's Introduction', pp. 17-18.

her early work with 'origins', even though she 'never entirely does away with a sense of some slumberous and unchanging mystery outside—or as she puts it—"under" process'. Beer goes on to claim that in *The Mill on the Floss* Eliot tries 'to destabilise the idea of origins', because it is probable that she, following Lewes, 'perceived the theistic and patriarchal indications of Darwin's idea of "the one form"'.<sup>53</sup> We shall examine Lewes's contribution to the debate below, but it is clear that given Eliot's non-linear conception of history, and the concomitant insistence on the unrealisable nature of the hermeneutic imperative, we would need to locate the focus of Eliot's quest not on 'origins' but in 'the mystery of the human lot' (363), the one area of 'knowledge' not amenable to theory or abstractions:

I feel every day a greater disinclination for theories and arguments about the origin of things in the presence of all this mystery and beauty and pain and ugliness, that floods one with conflicting emotions.<sup>54</sup>

In the above letter to Sara Hennell, Eliot goes on to refer to an article by Herbert Spencer in the *Westminster Review*, which according to Eliot exhibited 'more feeling in it than we generally get in his writing'. Spencer and Eliot conducted an invisible but relentless debate, in the pages of their respective mediums, on the consequences of the theory of evolution by natural selection (see below). To Eliot's evident approval, Spencer had gone so far as to acknowledge that 'the sincere man of science [...] alone truly *sees* that absolute knowledge is impossible. He alone *knows* that under all things there lies an impenetrable mystery'.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Beer, 'Beyond Determinism', pp. 87, 91. In discussing Eliot's letter (*Letters* III, p. 227), Nancy L. Paxton unaccountably seems to read 'tragedy' for 'mystery'. *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer*, p. 92.

<sup>54</sup> *Letters*, II, 341.

<sup>55</sup> Herbert Spencer, 'Progress: Its Law and Cause', *Westminster Review* n. s. 11, 2 (April, 1857), 445-85, p. 485; *Letters*, II, 341 & n.

Eliot continually uses animal and evolutionary metaphors to highlight the limitations of the characters, from the 'emmet-like Dodsons and Tullivers' (363), to the narrow Mr Stelling, who could no more be expected to understand the 'delicate and difficult business' of education, 'than an animal endowed with a power of boring a whole through rock should be expected to have wide views on excavation' (241). This idea of narrowness, of extinction, and of being poorly adapted to the environment has social and historical analogues, and Eliot ironically invokes the language of the sociologist (Spencer?) and the naturalist (Darwin?) to suggest loss, tragedy, and the ravages of time:<sup>56</sup>

Therefore it is that these Rhine castles thrill me with a sense of poetry: they belong to the grand historic life of humanity, and raise up for me the vision of an epoch. But these dead-tinted, hollow-eyed, angular skeletons of villages on the Rhône, oppress me with the feeling that human life—very much of it—is a narrow, ugly, grovelling existence, which even calamity does not elevate, but rather tends to exhibit in all its bare vulgarity of conception; and I have a cruel conviction that the lives these ruins are the traces of were part of a gross sum of obscure vitality, that will be swept into the same oblivion with the generations of ants and beavers (362).

It is as well to make clear that by the 1850s, while the idea of evolution was controversial, it was at least widely if dimly understood. It was however Darwin's theory of the *mechanism* for evolutionary change, natural selection, that occasioned a huge debate at the time Eliot was writing *The Mill on the Floss*.<sup>57</sup> This was due not only to the fact that Darwin's theory threatened to undercut both Natural Theology and a Lamarckian 'progressive' evolution, but

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<sup>56</sup> However, compare Alan W. Bellringer, who argues that 'despite the constant stream of allusions to the dangers of nature in *The Mill on the Floss*, the narrator's own superb, intelligent, knowledgeable voice, embracing, in beautiful studied prose, geography, history, science, the arts and philosophy, by its even patient, amused, female tone counteracts the pessimism with an implicit claim to advancement and survival'. *George Eliot* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 58-9.

<sup>57</sup> J. W. Burrow, Editor's Introduction to Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (London: Penguin, 1968), pp. 40-1.

also its implication that man might be related to the apes, and was not necessarily the crowning glory of a separate creation. That this debate was held in ignorance of the science of genetics accounts for the difficult reception of a theory which, Darwin himself admitted, could not account for the fact of *random* variation on which the mechanism of natural selection is established.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, natural selection was only widely accepted as the mechanism for evolution in the 1950s as the centenary of the publication of the *Origin of Species* approached.<sup>59</sup>

Gillian Beer, in *Darwin's Plots*, claims that Eliot did not at once grasp the implications of natural selection, and that it was not until the late 1860s and the 1870s that she 'fully assimilated the implications of evolutionary ideas'.<sup>60</sup> The problem with this view is that, as far as evolution and natural selection are concerned, it implies that Eliot was living in an intellectual vacuum before the publication of the *Origin*. Although Darwin was understandably jealous of his theory, he did give out very broad hints to selected individuals in his circle, and actually went public on his theory on 1 July, 1858, at a meeting of the Linnean Society, some eighteen months before the work's actual publication.<sup>61</sup> Lewes and Eliot were abroad at this time, but they arrived back at Richmond in September of that year,<sup>62</sup> and in the unlikely

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<sup>58</sup> J. W. Burrow, 'Editor's Introduction', pp. 37, 41. Burrow points out that Gregor Mendel could have provided the answer, but his work was 'ignored and virtually unknown' (p. 47). See also Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1976; 1989), pp. 33-4.

<sup>59</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, 'Darwinism and the Expansion of Evolutionary Theory', *Science* 216 (23 April, 1982), 380-7, p. 380. Gould reminds us that 'evolution' should be distinguished from 'Darwinism'. Darwinism views natural selection as 'the primary directing force of evolution, in that it creates fitter phenotypes by differentially preserving, generation by generation, the best adapted organisms from a pool of random variants that supply raw material only, not direction itself. Natural selection is a creator; it builds adaptations step by step' (p. 381). See also Burrow, 'Editor's Introduction', pp. 32-3.

<sup>60</sup> Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Ark, 1983), pp. 157-8.

<sup>61</sup> Desmond and Moore, *Darwin*, p. 470.

<sup>62</sup> Haight, p. 265.

event that they had not heard of Darwin's theories before then, it would be astonishing if they had not heard of them at this time.<sup>63</sup> Herbert Spencer and John Chapman, the rest of the *Westminster* circle, and, one presumes, Lewes, were in the months leading up to publication, engaging in the Victorian equivalent of what can only be described as spin-doctoring, drawing up the battle lines in the so-called 'gorilla' debates, which centred on the work of the naturalist, Richard Owen.<sup>64</sup> As a pillar of the scientific establishment, Owen was looked to by the theologians to find in the gorilla evidence of the gap between ape and man, some sort of 'Creative leap' that would guarantee the special status of man in creation.<sup>65</sup> Eliot read his *On the Gorilla* (1859), and in *The Mill on the Floss* was able gently to satirise Owen's comparison of the human and primate hand:

'Your big thumb-----what's that Bob?' said Maggie.

'That's what it is, Miss', said Bob, quickly, exhibiting a singularly broad specimen of that difference between the man and the monkey (377).<sup>66</sup>

I believe that Eliot felt a great deal of sympathy with Owen's wish to retain the dignity of humankind, but at the same time felt that the evidence for transmutation—and the mechanism of natural selection as the chief agent of evolutionary change—was too compelling to be ignored.

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<sup>63</sup> The Leweses met Spencer on 28 January, 1859, and talked about 'matters personal and philosophical' (Haight, p. 271). They were to fall out with Spencer in June, blaming him for betraying Eliot's secret of authorship, when he failed to contradict Chapman when the latter asked Spencer directly whether Evans was the author of *Adam Bede* (p. 292).

<sup>64</sup> Desmond and Moore, *Darwin*, pp. 451, 464-6. Owen was a close friend of the Leweses. In 1855, Lewes went to Owen for help with his scientific studies, and later dedicated *Seaside Studies* (1858) to him. Eliot gave Owen an inscribed copy of *Adam Bede* (Haight, pp. 241, 273). Desmond and Moore argue that as early as 1857, Owen must have known that Darwin was writing on transmutation, to which Owen was scientifically and ideologically opposed (*Darwin*, p. 451).

<sup>65</sup> Desmond and Moore, *Darwin*, p. 452.

<sup>66</sup> See Richard Owen, *On the Gorilla* (1859), p. 9: 'Man's perfect hand is one of his peculiar physical characters; that perfection is mainly due to the differentiation of the first from the other four digits and its concomitant power of opposing them as a perfect thumb'. Quoted in Byatt, 'Explanatory Notes', *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 680n.

Evolution and natural selection (and we must add sexual selection) thus became dominant themes in Eliot's novel. As Rosemary Ashton points out, the passage cited above about evolutionary 'seeds' and corresponding 'hooks' (366) could almost have been written by Darwin himself, such is the uncanny correspondence of fictional metaphor and scientific 'fact'.<sup>67</sup> Not only does Tulliver's lack of adaptive capability dramatise the dark side of natural selection, but Tulliver himself actually dabbles in the process when he chooses Mrs Tulliver, the result of their union being a strange 'crossing' of inheritance: Maggie becomes a Tulliver, and Tom a Dodson, and this combination ensures Tulliver's downfall.<sup>68</sup>

'It seems a bit of a pity, though', said Mr Tulliver, 'as the lad should take after the mother's side instead o' the little wench. That's the worst on't wi' the crossing o' breeds: you can never justly calkilate what'll come on't. The little un takes after my side, now: she's twice as 'cute as Tom. Too 'cute for a woman, I'm afraid', continued Mr Tulliver, turning his head dubiously first on one side and then on the other. 'It's no mischief much while she's a little un, but an over 'cute woman's no better nor a long-tailed sheep—she'll fetch none the bigger price for that' (59-60).

As Eliot was to say later: 'But natural selection is not always good, and depends (see Darwin) on many caprices of very foolish animals'.<sup>69</sup>

I believe that Eliot understood the full (materialist) implications of Darwin's 'dangerous' idea much more acutely than Herbert Spencer, who hijacked the notion of evolution to fit in with the grand Victorian conflation of

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<sup>67</sup> Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, p. 238. Ashton goes on to make the curious claim that Eliot 'fictionalizes' the *Origin* 'without being directly influenced by it'.

<sup>68</sup> Knoepfmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 201. Although it may seem dubious to suggest that Tulliver actually engages in natural selection himself, we should recall that the first chapter of the *Origin* uses the practice of artificial selection in pigeon breeders and makes an analogy to the process of natural selection in nature. In an acute observation, Peter Brook observes that 'the nineteenth-century novel [...] will play out repeatedly and at length the problem of transmission, staging over and over again the relations of fathers and sons (and also daughters to mothers, aunts, madwomen, and others), asking where an inheritable wisdom is to be found and how its transmission is to be acted toward'. *Reading for the Plot*, pp. 27-8.

<sup>69</sup> *Letters*, IV, 377.

'progress' and 'development'.<sup>70</sup> Spencer was a thoroughgoing Lamarckian, believing that the driving force of evolution was inherited, directly acquired characteristics, which had the effect of getting rid of the unfit, an anti-Darwinian theory in the sense that it only gives a place to selection as an 'executioner', and not as 'creator'.<sup>71</sup> Thus, for the man who coined the phrase 'survival of the fittest', which Darwin (somewhat ill-advisedly) was later to adopt in place of 'natural selection', progress was an inevitable result of this process of specialization and gradual perfection, both in physiological and psychological terms. It also happily fitted in with the prevailing notions of the division of labour, fuelled by the spirit of optimism that still radiated out from the Great Exhibition right through the 1850s.<sup>72</sup> Darwin himself said in the *Origin*:

I believe [...] in no law of necessary development. As the variability of each species is an independent property, and will be taken advantage of by natural selection, only so far as it profits the individual in its complex struggle for life, so the degree of modification in different species will be no uniform quantity.<sup>73</sup>

That is to say, Darwin only ever spoke of an organism's 'adaptation' to a given environment, not of 'progress' according to 'an absolute scale of perfection', a strong qualification to the theory which was overlooked or

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<sup>70</sup> Stephen J. Gould, *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections on Natural History* (London: Penguin, 1980), pp. 36-7. Spencer, with characteristic immodesty, must have thought that Eliot's novels reflected his model of evolutionary progress, for he allowed them to be placed in the London Library, which he founded in 1840, and from which he had previously excluded all novels.

<sup>71</sup> Gould, 'Darwinism', p. 381. Gould points out elsewhere that Paley and the natural theologians allowed a role for selection in 'removing unfit individuals', and thus 'preserving [...] the created type'. Darwin, of course, only claimed that natural selection was the most important among many factors, including Lamarckian ones. Stephen Jay Gould, 'The Evolution of Life on Earth', *Scientific American* (October, 1994), 63-9, p. 63. In answer to critics, Darwin made later editions of the work more 'Lamarckian', although modern gene-theory has rendered these revisions unnecessary. Burrow, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 47.

<sup>72</sup> Burrow, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 33; Desmond and Moore, *Darwin*, pp. 393-5, 464, 535.

<sup>73</sup> Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, p. 348.

ignored both by Spencer and by the later 'Social Darwinists'.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, and somewhat paradoxically, Darwin's idea of 'the struggle for existence', which he only meant metaphorically (see *Origin*, p. 116), gave 'scientific' credibility to Spencer's own sociological theories, ones which equated evolution and development with inevitable progress.<sup>75</sup>

Diane Postlethwaite gives an excellent analysis of Lewes's search for the 'Victorian Spinoza', whom he found in Herbert Spencer, whose all-embracing synthetic philosophy was founded on the notion of developmental 'progress'. The result of physiological, social, and psychological progress would be to reconcile the freedom of the individual with the determined world of causality, and at the same time unite the two opposing ethical schools of Utilitarianism and the 'moral sense' of the followers of Shaftesbury, as well as, more ambitiously, the philosophies of Locke and Kant.<sup>76</sup> Eliot herself had a 'wild aspiration' as a youth 'to reconcile the philosophies of Locke and Kant',<sup>77</sup> but

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<sup>74</sup> Burrow, 'Editor's Introduction', pp. 33, 35.

<sup>75</sup> Burrow, 'Editor's Introduction', pp. 43-5. And of course Eliot's ambiguous relationship to Positivism (as distinct from positivism) is well documented. From among the many, see especially, T. R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Martha S. Vogeler, 'George Eliot and the Positivists', *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 35 (1980), 406-31. K. K. Collins points out that although Darwin 'rejected the notion of some unitary, universal law of progressive development, in *Origin of Species* he did reinforce this aspect of social evolutionism'. Darwin's 'laws' of natural selection were taken 'as cosmic assurance that the fittest—in the sense of superlative—would survive, and this meant irresistible progress'. 'Questions of Method', pp. 403, 405. Collins's analysis of these late essays by Eliot brings out Eliot's 'distrust of systems', and her foregrounding of human actions before universal laws.

<sup>76</sup> Diana Postlethwaite, *Making it Whole: A Victorian Circle and the Shape of Their World* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), pp. 186-7, 207. Postlethwaite reminds us that Lewes, for one, had serious doubts about Spinoza's ontology, but was able to find in Spencer's *The Principles of Psychology* 'a key to all mythologies, a ground for the Absolute that was based on sense experience; the grand Spinozistic synthesis of mind and body, rewritten in Baconian terms to fit a Victorian frame of mind' (p. 178). Postlethwaite goes on to discuss the characteristic Victorian concepts of the 'knowable' and the 'unknowable', the ineluctable but ultimately unavailing search for 'a meaningful order' in the midst of the 'tangled' poetic and scientific 'web' of the world (pp. 218-9). This has an obvious resonance with my earlier discussion of Eliot's hermeneutic quest (see above, chapter three).

<sup>77</sup> Edith Simcox recounts this anecdote. See her 'George Eliot', p. 780.



she later found herself temperamentally and ideologically unsuited to Spencer's rigorous theorising and 'system-making', and was able even at the height of her infatuation with him to satirise his capacity for making empirical facts conform to his elaborate theories:

I went to Kew yesterday on a scientific expedition with Herbert Spencer, who has all sorts of theories about plants—I should have said a *proof*-hunting expedition. Of course, if the flowers didn't correspond to the theories, we said, '*tant pis pour les fleurs!*'<sup>78</sup>

We need to mention in passing that the prevailing ideas which linked evolution with progress found adherents in Owen and the theists, who although they rejected natural selection, eventually accepted rather unwillingly a form of evolutionary process which replaced Darwin's 'random' variations with the preordained 'selection' of progressively beneficent variations, thereby ensuring a 'creative' hand in the direction of evolution.<sup>79</sup> Although Spencer was soon to offer an alternative to Darwin's anthropomorphic terminology (see above), the theistic implications of selection were seized upon by Owen and others in the scientific and political establishment, who were able to retain a concept of design amid the succession of species which, while no longer thought to be fixed and immutable, were nonetheless controlled by some divine guiding principle, of which the law of 'progress' was but one manifestation.<sup>80</sup>

G. H. Lewes, though one of Darwin's early champions and a great populariser of evolution, was nonetheless concerned many years later about Darwin's insistence on one or few starting points for life, as opposed to 'the multiplicity of origins'. Lewes discerned in Darwin's presumption 'a lingering influence of the tradition of creative fiat', and claimed that the rejection of this

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<sup>78</sup> *Letters*, II, 40, quoted in Postlethwaite, *Making it Whole*, p. 182.

<sup>79</sup> Desmond and Moore, *Darwin*, pp. 490-1, 545-7. Darwin, of course, insisted that natural selection was 'creative', but not in the anthropomorphic sense.

<sup>80</sup> Collins, 'Questions of Method', p. 402.

view would 'remove [one of] the great obstacles to the general acceptance of Evolution'.<sup>81</sup> Harriet Martineau, atheist, *Westminster* reviewer, and former lover of Erasmus, Darwin's brother, at once understood and accepted the full materialist implications of the *Origin*, but was concerned about Darwin's use of the word 'creation' in respect of the original 'progenitor' at the start of the evolutionary process. She assumed however, correctly as it turns out, that Darwin meant this and other 'theological' words

without reference to their primitive meaning. If so, they ought not to have been used: but the theory does not require the notion of a creation; and my conviction is that Charles D. does not hold it.<sup>82</sup>

Darwin himself was worried about misconstruction, and it is worth reminding ourselves that in an apparent effort to deter 'progressivist' or 'theological' interpretations of his theory, he did not use the terms 'evolution' and 'survival of the fittest' in the first edition of the *Origin*, preferring to rely on more neutral terms such as 'descent with modification', 'mutability', and 'natural selection'.<sup>83</sup> I believe that Eliot, like Harriet Martineau, was quick to pick up on the full materialist implications of the *Origin*. Eliot regarded herself as a 'meliorist' by temperament (see above, chapter three), and was uncomfortable, just like Darwin (but unlike Darwin able to say it through the oblique medium of fiction) about equating evolution and adaption with inevitable progress and intrinsic improvement and adaptability.

Sally Shuttleworth shrewdly brings out the striking parallels between *The Mill on the Floss* and Lewes's *The Physiology of Common Life*, which were being written at the same time. She argues that Lewes's formulation of the

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<sup>81</sup> George Henry Lewes, 'Mr Darwin's Hypotheses', *Fortnightly Review* n.s. 4 (Nov., 1868), 492-509, pp. 493-4.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Desmond and Moore, *Darwin*, p. 486. Desmond and Moore point out that Darwin did come to regret the use of these expressions. He never did pronounce on the origin of the first form or forms, and indeed it would have been beyond the scope of his study to do so. When Darwin used the word 'creation', he actually meant "'appeared" by some wholly unknown process' (p. 720n.).

<sup>83</sup> Burrow, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 27.

laws of the mind as being analogous to physical laws, an organic model which explored unconscious mental processes, resulted in a developmental model that was not necessarily progressive and linear, since latent mental processes could be seen to influence the present from the perspective of one's remotest past.<sup>84</sup> Shuttleworth goes on to argue that the *Origin* merely confirmed Eliot's 'non-progressive' conception of human history and development, and that despite her initial perceptions, Eliot was very quick to perceive the 'negative implications' of Darwin's account of evolutionary processes, and would dramatise these implications in *The Mill on the Floss*.<sup>85</sup> Shuttleworth points out that whenever a reference is made to the 'evolutionary distance' between man and animal, 'the gains seem of a rather questionable nature'. When compared to other animals in the evolutionary chain, Tom is aggressive and desires to be dominant, while Maggie for her part has a uniquely human capacity for suffering.<sup>86</sup>

But Maggie, gifted with that superior power of misery which distinguishes the human being and places him at a proud distance from the most melancholy chimpanzee, sat still on her bough, and gave herself up to the keen sense of unmerited reproach (100).

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<sup>84</sup> Shuttleworth, 'Introduction', *The Mill on the Floss*, p. xxiii. Shuttleworth points out that Lewes's theories were an extension of Comte's theories of the interaction of organism and medium. In the essay referred to above, Lewes argued that 'the struggle for existence' is one 'among many factors' in evolution, but does not explain all diversities. 'It is only necessary to add that under conditions of development are included the nature of the organism and its relations to the external medium—in a word, the whole life-history' ('Mr Darwin's Hypotheses', p. 503). Rosemarie Bodenheimer argues that Eliot's 'primary morality lies in her sense that characters must embrace choices in the face of relentlessly determining histories and circumstances'. *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans*, p. 102.

<sup>85</sup> See also Hardy, *Particularities*, pp. 68-9.

<sup>86</sup> Shuttleworth, 'Introduction', p. xxiv. Shuttleworth makes an important distinction between the 'progressivist model' of *Vestiges* and the *Origin*, which in its emphasis on 'chance mutations [...] suggested that perfect adaptation at one time could rapidly become mal-adaptation in the future should environmental conditions change' (p. xxiii). See also Shuttleworth's indispensable account of Eliot's work in relation to contemporary scientific developments: *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Eliot not only questions the real superiority of man over the animals, but adds a different dimension to the argument ignored by Spencer; namely that irrespective of the difference between man and the animals, any superiority evidenced by man over the animals will not be equally proportioned among the sexes, and that gender will be a determining factor in human development. Indeed, Eliot's critique of Herbert Spencer's ideas in *The Mill on the Floss*, while showing Eliot to be in general agreement with Spencer on the evolutionary basis of human character and development, demonstrates that she differed sharply as to what was the determining factor in sexual difference: for Spencer, it was biology; for Eliot, sexual differences were not only biologically determined but also culturally constructed. Eliot specifically targets Spencer's theories of human development as helping to shape the patriarchal and misogynistic culture of the time, and implicitly challenges Spencer throughout the novel.<sup>87</sup>

The most striking and insistent criticism of Spencer refers to his belief that industrialization was an inevitable result of evolutionary 'progress'.<sup>88</sup> The industrialization of St. Ogg's is represented by the mercantile values and laissez-faire economics of Stephen, values which no longer accord with the traditional virtues of thrift and honesty displayed by the Dodsons and the Tullivers, and which reveal themselves in the starkness of the choice offered Maggie towards the end of the novel. Stephen's world is one where

good society, floated on gossamer wings of light irony, is of very expensive production; requiring nothing less than a wide and arduous national life condensed in unfragrant deafening factories, cramping itself in mines, sweating at furnaces, grinding, hammering, weaving under more or less oppression of carbonic acid—or else, spread over sheepwalks, and scattered in lonely

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<sup>87</sup> Paxton, *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer*, p. 71. Although Paxton is mainly concerned with Eliot's critique of the cultural construction of gender, my own comparison of Spencer and Eliot would not have been possible without her excellent study.

<sup>88</sup> Paxton, *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer*, p. 87.

houses and huts on the clayey or chalky cornlands, where the rainy days look dreary (385).

As we noted earlier, Eliot resisted the notion of inevitable progress, a progress that Spencer associated with the 'outward' laws of biology and sociology. Eliot responds to Spencer by continually invoking the 'inward' laws of faithfulness and memory.<sup>89</sup> These inward laws trace a different trajectory from those outward laws which Stephen insists are 'natural', laws which Maggie in a moment of genuine heroism, and to obvious narratorial approval, is able to reject. Eliot's valorisation of these inward laws—and might it be these that represent the 'mystery [...] under the processes' that Eliot referred to in her understated reaction to *The Origin of Species*?—and her rejection of Spencer's crude biological determinism, find expression in Maggie's epic resistance to Stephen's patriarchal insistence on the 'naturalness' of their relation, a relation that biology may well reinforce, but that memory questions:

'Many things are difficult and dark to me—but I see one thing quite clearly—that I must not, cannot seek my own happiness by sacrificing others. Love is natural—but surely pity and faithfulness and memory are natural too. And they would live in me still, and punish me if I didn't obey them. I should be haunted by the suffering I had caused. Our love would be poisoned. Don't urge me; help me—help me, *because* I love you' (571).

The collision of these inward and outward laws results in the inevitable tragedy of the ending. Although the apocalyptic flood that brings about Maggie's death is widely seen as an artistic failure,<sup>90</sup> I should like to insist that the tragedy is both an artistic and philosophical necessity, one which explores the tension between irreconcilable goods, and which reveals that there is no place for Tom and Maggie in a world where will to system is

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<sup>89</sup> Paxton, *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer*, pp. 83, 90.

<sup>90</sup> See especially, Knoepfelmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, pp. 219-20; Byatt, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 38; Haight, 'Editor's Introduction', *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. xvi; and Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, pp. 59-60.

primary and biological and social determinism is relentless. Of course, there are as many interpretations of the flood as there are critics, reading into the events everything from anal rage, to incest, to the flood as orgasm, and even to a jealous and possessive narrator/author killing off the strange dark beauty that she is unable to control. However, as Penny Boumelha argues, even if these interpretations are 'correct', they are nevertheless subsumed by the 'sheer excess of the text', which produces at the limits of realism an ending which resists the very form and ideological baggage of the realist novel, and reverts to pure fantasy.<sup>91</sup>

That said, we should remind ourselves that there are of course two 'endings' to the novel, because while the flood is often treated as the novel's conclusion, the real or at least alternative ending is the elegiac description of Philip's return to the Red Deeps, which reaffirms the novel's cyclical model of history and reveals in its open-endedness (and resistance to a single interpretation) the full extent of the novel's hermeneutic inexhaustibility.<sup>92</sup> 'Endings' always gave George Eliot trouble: although she considered them 'the weak point of most authors', she insisted that 'some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation'.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, Maggie is anxious about the ending of Scott's *The Pirate* when she, being unable to finish the novel, 'made several endings; but they were all unhappy' (401). This idea of multiple interpretation is a paradigm for the whole novel, and, accordingly, the ambiguous narrative culminates in a flood which, far from being a contrivance, reveals the impossibility of an adequate interpretation and the incessant darkness and ineluctability of the hermeneutic quest:

In the first moments Maggie felt nothing, thought of nothing, but that she had suddenly passed away from that life which she had

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<sup>91</sup> Boumelha helpfully summarises the various critical responses to the flood. 'George Eliot and the End of Realism', pp. 29, 34n.

<sup>92</sup> Shuttleworth, 'Critical Commentary', pp. 494-5.

<sup>93</sup> *Letters*, II, 324.

been dreading: it was the transition of death, without its agony... and she was alone in the darkness with God (650-1).

The narrative at this point also demands the suspension of 'realism', whatever that might have come to mean, and a return to a pre-linguistic, or at least non-verbal, childhood world, which alone can in some sense atone for the losses of history, and provide a fleeting vision of a world where the power of love and intersubjectivity can subdue the demands of the hermeneutic imperative:

The whole thing had been so rapid—so dreamlike—that the threads of ordinary association were broken. [...]

It was not till Tom had pushed off and they were on the wide water—he face to face with Maggie—that the full meaning of what had happened rushed upon his mind. It came with so overpowering a force—such an entirely new revelation to his spirit, of the depths in life, that had lain beyond his vision which he had fancied so keen and clear, that he was unable to ask a question. They sat mutely gazing at each other: Maggie with eyes of intense life looking out from a weary, beaten face—Tom pale with a certain awe and humiliation. Thought was busy though the lips were silent: and though he could ask no question, he guessed a story of almost miraculous divinely-protected effort. But at last a mist gathered over the blue-grey eyes, and the lips found a word they could utter: the old childish—'Magsie!'

Maggie could make no answer but a long deep sob of that mysterious wondrous happiness that is one with pain (651, 654-5).

## VI

### Conclusion: George Eliot and Aristotelian Ethics

I feel a greater disinclination for theories and arguments about the origins of things in the presence of all this mystery and beauty and pain and ugliness, that floods one with conflicting emotions.<sup>1</sup>

From the foregoing I hope it is clear that in *The Mill on the Floss* George Eliot continues her move away from the epistemological pretensions (and mode of discourse) of science and philosophy and foregrounds art, narrative and history, and as we saw earlier, the ideas of the Jena Romantics. A further consequence of her approach will be that it will lead her to render ethics in what we can broadly call the Aristotelian tradition, which will be the issue explored in this final chapter. I will be suggesting that Eliot 'overcame' the Romantic impasse of the sublime by rendering ethics in a more Aristotelian sense, which sees ethics as a socially concretised practice, and sees virtue as valuable for its own sake and not for any external end. The Greek practice of fiction as a philosophical *engagement*—as opposed to the reflection or representation of a philosophical position—will be considered in relation to tragedy, narrative, and intersubjectivity. Following Martha Nussbaum, I will argue that it is *pity*, together with an awareness of the fragility of the other person, that enables the opening up of closed communities, and which ultimately sets Eliot apart from the philosophical systems of both Spinoza and Kant.

We can begin by way of the observation that most critics see the novel in general, and Eliot's work in particular, as a reflection or substantiation of a philosophical position.<sup>2</sup> The problem with this approach, however, is firstly that it ignores the idea that fiction is a philosophical *engagement*; and secondly

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Sarah Hennell, 5 June, 1857. *Letters*, II, 341.

<sup>2</sup> Seen in this way, Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* is a classic of the genre. I hasten to add that I am aware that this study itself is not totally immune from the critique which follows.



that it fails to grasp the character of the literary *utterance*, where figures in the story engage with each other, showing the development of arguments and positions *through the experience of others*. Pierre Hadot, in his *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, re-reads Greek philosophy in just this manner, revealing that the ancient texts are first and foremost ‘spiritual exercises’, which have not only a ‘moral, but also an existential value’. They attempt to enhance the totality of one’s being, rather than merely offer guides to ‘moral conduct’ or philosophical praxis.<sup>3</sup> This reassessment of Greek philosophy is crucial for it allows us to view the engagement with texts, and the dynamic that operates between literature and philosophy (between which of course the Greeks held no rigid division) as a paradigm for the intersubjective relationship itself, which is ‘ethical’ in a very broad sense. The crucial figure in Hadot’s interrogation of Greek philosophy is the enigmatic figure of Socrates, whose spiritual exercises were a

living call to awaken our moral consciousness. We ought not to forget that this call sounded forth within a specific form: that of dialogue. In the Socratic dialogue, the question truly at stake is not what is being talked about, but *who* is doing the talking.<sup>4</sup>

We have already discussed the importance of argument and dialogue in Eliot’s work, and in particular we can recall Mrs Poyser and Dinah’s ‘Socratic’ dialogues in *Adam Bede* (see below, chapter three). For Eliot, the importance is in the dialogue itself, in the constant challenging of positions. This relates to Eliot’s convictions about the undesirability of lapsing ‘from the picture to the diagram’, and of the nature of ‘aesthetic teaching’, which is perforce the highest and most difficult calling for any author because it ‘deals with life in its highest complexity’:

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<sup>3</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. by Michael Chase, ed. by Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 127.

<sup>4</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy*, p. 89.

Avowed Utopias are not offensive, because they are understood to have a scientific and expository character: they do not pretend to work on the emotions, or couldn't do if they did pretend. I am sure, from your own statement, that you see this quite clearly. Well, then, consider the sort of agonizing labor to an English-fed imagination to make art a sufficiently real background, for the desired picture, to get breathing, individual forms, and group them in the needful relations, so that the presentation will lay hold on the emotions as human experience—will, as you say, 'flash' conviction on the world by means of aroused sympathy.<sup>5</sup>

It is often argued that the dialogues of Plato represent not the ideal of knowledge or wisdom, but the love of the path to a knowledge which never arrives, or is acceded to only at rare moments of intellectual transcendence. What the dialogue as a practice and a literary/philosophical genre can achieve is *self*-knowledge, which somewhat paradoxically comes about as a result of the dialogue with others, effecting a profound inner transformation.<sup>6</sup> Hadot argues that over the centuries an 'abyss' has developed 'between philosophical theory and philosophizing as living action'. He uses the analogy of the creative artist, whose work bears only a distant relation to the theory of art, to insist that the true, lived, philosophy of the ancients bears little relation to the theoretical and systematic discourse that became what we now know as philosophy once Christianity had taken over its practical aspects, reducing the discipline to a mere 'handmaid of theology'. The goal of the ancients—and this includes the 'theoretical' Aristotle as well as Plato, together with the Stoics—was existential freedom: for them, 'the act of living in a genuinely philosophical way thus corresponds to an order of reality totally different to

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<sup>5</sup> *Letters*, IV, 300-1. The 'Avowed Utopia' to which Eliot refers is the Positivist Frederic Harrison's desire for a fully-fledged Religion of Humanity run on Comtean principles. Harrison wanted Eliot to be the 'Poet of Positivism', and although Eliot made it clear on numerous occasions that she was unwilling and unable to be so, it did not stop the Positivists from appropriating her poem 'O May I Join the Choir Invisible' for their secular liturgy. See Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, pp. 362-3; George Eliot, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Lucien Jenkins (London, Skoob Books, 1989), pp. 49-50. For Eliot's relation to Positivism in general, see T. R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity*, pp. 30-9.

<sup>6</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy*, p. 91.

philosophical discourse'.<sup>7</sup> Philosophy proper, as opposed to philosophical discourse, was a *lived* philosophy, already located within institutionalised practice. For the ancients, philosophy was

no longer a theory divided into parts, but a unitary act, which consists in *living* logic, physics, ethics. In this case, we no longer study ethical theory—that is, the theory of living and speaking well—we simply think and speak well. We no longer engage in theory about the physical world, but we contemplate the cosmos. We no longer theorize about moral action, but we act in a correct and just way.<sup>8</sup>

Thus philosophy for the ancients presupposes an engagement with the community, and takes as a given the requirements of justice.<sup>9</sup> This is perhaps the most important of the virtues (along with others such as courage, truthfulness and constancy), which were practised in pursuit of a common ethical goal of the good life, and which characterised the Athenian *polis*. This shared conception of the good life was not predicated on a universal or transcendental (Kantian) notion of the law, but on particular *human* goods which were defined by the practice of the virtues themselves and the ethical goal (*telos*) towards which each member of the *polis* would strive.<sup>10</sup> The Aristotelian tradition stresses that virtue is essentially valuable for its own sake and not for any external end. Kant also tries to remove any external motivation for moral action, although rather than seeing virtue as an end in itself, his argument for ethics is predicated on the moral autonomy of the self-determining agent. In contrast, the Aristotelian approach takes the

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<sup>7</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy*, pp. 107-8, 268-70. It is worth reminding ourselves in passing that Spinoza was profoundly influenced by ancient and particularly Stoic philosophy. I am thinking especially of Spinoza's goal of the third kind of knowledge and its capacity for individual transformation, his immanence, together with his unitary philosophical and political programme. This observation was made by Dr Peter Lynn during a discussion with the present author.

<sup>8</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy*, p. 267.

<sup>9</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy*, p. 274.

<sup>10</sup> Claire Colebrook, 'Ethics, Positivity and Gender: Foucault, Aristotle and the Care of the Self', *Philosophy Today* 42.1 (1998), 40-52, p. 44; Taylor, *Aristotle*, p. 91.

intersubjective as a *given*, and not as a way of getting around the subject of philosophy as the conditions for the possibility of knowledge, as in Kant, Spinoza, and the Romantics.

There has been no more powerful modern advocate of this broadly Aristotelian approach than Alisdair MacIntyre, whose *After Virtue* is one of the most important books on moral theory to emerge in recent years. Following on from Elizabeth Anscombe's famous essay on the virtues, 'Modern Moral Philosophy',<sup>11</sup> MacIntyre argues that Christianity, Kant and the Enlightenment have bequeathed to modernity incoherent conceptions of morality, for they destroyed the teleological and immanent nature of ethics in favour of transcendental and universalising ethical prescriptions which Nietzsche in his own way was right to reject. However, MacIntyre is quick to stress that Nietzsche's 'victory' was a hollow one, because in the process of destroying the entire Enlightenment project of rational conceptions of morality, he also rejected the whole Aristotelian tradition, the historical result being that modern conceptions of morality (and he specifically targets the Kantian and Utilitarian traditions) largely ignore this rich vein of *pre-modern* ethical thought. MacIntyre's account of the virtues is particularly rich because he situates them within a 'moral tradition' (a tradition which in modernity survives only in fragments), such that the 'internal' goods of practices which make for the virtues, while being relational are not merely relativistic or necessarily bound by particular historical conditions, and can be shown to be part of a 'core conception of the virtues', one which any society might be able to recognise.<sup>12</sup>

A key aspect of this account of the virtues is that it stresses their relation to the idea of the good human life taken as a whole, which is to say that there

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<sup>11</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33, 124 (1958), 1-19.

<sup>12</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985), pp. 117-8, 186-7.

is an overriding *telos* in which the virtues cohere, and which serves to give meaning and authenticity to the narrative of any given human life.<sup>13</sup> The merit of this conception of the self is that it views a life as a 'unity', and not as the Sartrean individual characteristic of modernity whose 'self' is seen to be separated from his or her actions or 'roles'. Crucially, what is recognised is that the unity of a life is a *narrative* unity, and as such has a beginning, middle and end, just as Aristotle had directed in his prescription for the drama in the *Poetics*.<sup>14</sup> This alternative conception of a self defined by the practice of the virtues, and in which a person's life is an unselfconscious 'narrative quest', has been largely ignored by modernity. However, MacIntyre believes that enough vestiges of the Aristotelian model remain to enable this conception of the self to be restored as the principal feature of a renewed moral tradition.<sup>15</sup>

Some scholars, notably D. Z. Phillips, have however taken issue with MacIntyre, arguing that his account of Greek ethics is 'too unified', and that he mistakenly believes that ethics and morality can ultimately be made coherent. Phillips complains that MacIntyre ignores the competing tradition of philosophers such as Iris Murdoch, Stuart Hampshire and Peter Winch, who philosophise 'against the stream', often using narrative as a means of explicating complex moral issues which traditional 'rational' philosophy has

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<sup>13</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 202-03.

<sup>14</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 204-05; Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 13. MacIntyre takes issue with Louis O. Mink, who claims (criticising Barbara Hardy) that narrative form is imposed on stories retrospectively, and cannot be so imposed on life. MacIntyre makes the obvious reply that in life there is a beginning (birth) and an ending (death), and points out that narrative form is prior to the narrative productions of poets and novelists because the form itself issues from the life experiences that the artists are representing. See Louis O. Mink, 'History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension', *New Literary History* 1 (1970), 541-58; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 211-2; and Barbara Hardy, 'Towards a poetics of Fiction: An Approach Through Narrative', *Novel* 1 (1968), 5-14.

<sup>15</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 219. For a useful account of MacIntyre's project, and an attempt at a synthesis of MacIntyre and Habermas, see Sharon Mary Meager, 'MacIntyre and Habermas in Conversation: Toward a Dialogic Narrative Approach to Ethics' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1991).

failed to treat with subtlety and discrimination. This group of philosophers attack what Winch calls 'the presumption of theory', a presumption that Philips claims that even MacIntyre succumbs to when he asserts that an 'Aristotelian conception of human nature' is superior, 'and that this can be demonstrated philosophically'.<sup>16</sup>

Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum in their own distinctive ways also question the presumption of theory and the limitations of traditional philosophy to deal with ethics and morality. Although they do not reject wholesale the value of the philosophical method, they have nevertheless come to be regarded as 'anti-theorists'.<sup>17</sup> Bernard Williams, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* looks to the ancient world to expose the limitations and theoretical pretensions of modern philosophy. He claims that the philosophy of the ancients was 'less obsessional' and 'less determined to impose rationality through reductive theory'.<sup>18</sup> For Williams, modern philosophy, especially that of the Kantian persuasion, dominated as it is by its illusory claims for a 'community of reason', is too detached from 'social and historical reality and from any sense of a particular ethical life'. Philosophy itself unaided cannot answer the questions that it so eloquently poses: the answers, if there are any, can only come retrospectively by means of a process of 'reflective living'.<sup>19</sup>

Martha Nussbaum, in *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, steers a course through the Kantian picture of the rational moral agent, to an extent immune to the incursions of luck, and the

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<sup>16</sup> D. Z. Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 50, 59, 61-62, 65. Phillips cites Winch approvingly: 'philosophy can no more show a man what he should attach importance to than geometry can show a man where he should stand'. Peter Winch, *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), cited in Phillips, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Jean Porter, 'Virtue Ethics', in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Cambridge, Ma. and Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 466-472, p. 469.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), p. 197.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, *Ethics*, pp. 197, 200.

alternative conception of the vulnerable human being, more or less totally susceptible to luck, and in thrall to the emotions and the appetites. Her approach to the work of the Greek tragedians and Aristotle is very suggestive, because in her reading the riskiness of life that the former dramatise and the latter describes, is not only part of the definition of what it is to be human, but indeed is what makes life valuable in a uniquely human way. Her central metaphor is that of the human being as a plant, growing towards the sky (human excellence), but always vulnerable to contingency and in need of nurture from without, qualities which cannot be altered without diminishing the very nature of what it is to be human. Nussbaum's central question is just how much luck the Greek ethical thinkers thought it was possible or desirable to live with. The Greeks on the one hand strove for self-sufficiency and immunity to luck in the manner of the gods, but at the same time recognised a compelling beauty (which beguiled even some of the gods of the epics themselves) in the vulnerability and unreliability of the human condition.<sup>20</sup> Nussbaum recognises the 'power' in these competing attitudes to luck, arguing that they represent goods which are not commensurate, being always in tension and subject to the vicissitudes of life, which even the person of practical wisdom will not be able totally to mitigate.<sup>21</sup>

Nussbaum reads the Greek tragedians as presenting a far richer and more complex view of human life than their philosophical counterparts, and especially those of the later Kantian and Utilitarian traditions, who have largely dominated modern ethical enquiry. We can relate this to our earlier discussion of the Romantics, who located ethics in the non-cognitive pre-semantic absolute, or sublime. Nussbaum's reading of Greek ethics enables us

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<sup>20</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 1-4. By 'luck', Nussbaum simply means contingent events that merely happen to a person, as opposed to events within a person's control.

<sup>21</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 318-20.

to overcome what we took be an impasse by regarding ethics as a concrete *practice*—to do with education, development, good fortune and worldly becoming. Thus ethics cannot be seen as a formal limit, a question of regulation or representation and law, or a negation of particularity; ethics is seen as *relational*, and to do with actualised social conditions, affections, and negotiation.<sup>22</sup>

Eliot, while broadly Aristotelian in approach, takes the intersubjective not as a *given* but as being approached through *literature* and *narrative*, from which emerges *point of view*. This approach is an implicit challenge to Nussbaum, because Eliot is ‘in-between’ the idea of fiction as the immediate ‘lived’ and unquestioning performance of life (as in Ancient Greece); and the idea that there might be a *single* philosophical position. So, contra Nussbaum, there is no general human position, and Eliot merely presents various philosophical positions lived as ways of life (see above, chapter two). In this way Eliot can be seen as broadly Aristotelian but at the same time observing the Kantian imperative which always asks the critical question of to whom and in what manner the world might be given:

‘O *I must go*’, said Maggie, earnestly, looking at Dr Kenn with an expression of reliance, as if she had told him her history in those three words. It was one of those moments of implicit revelation which will sometimes happen even between people who meet quite transiently—on a mile’s journey, perhaps, or when resting by the wayside. There is always this possibility of a word or a look from a stranger to keep alive this sense of human brotherhood (554).

Dr Kenn, so evidently speaking for the narrator, is one of Aristotle’s *phronimoi*, a person of practical wisdom. Someone with these qualities can find the balance between the rigid Kantian ethical obligations and the un-

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<sup>22</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, p. 352.



Kantian attention to subtle nuances of human behaviour and particulars.<sup>23</sup> He needs to negotiate a middle way between the competing values of Maggie and Tom. Maggie is non-autonomous: she sees herself only through others:

'I've been a great deal happier', she said at last, timidly, 'since I have given up thinking about what is easy and pleasant, and being discontented because I couldn't have my own will. Our life is determined for us—and it makes the mind very free when we give up wishing and only think of bearing what is laid upon us and doing what is given us to do' (397).

Maggie has an over sensitivity to nature, and even epistemologically, all her knowledge and reading go back to particulars. Contrast this with Tom, who as representative of the provincial capitalism of St. Ogg's, uses nature instrumentally, and reveals himself as a rigid Kantian (and a Dodson) in his ethical deliberations:

Tom felt intensely that common cause with his father which springs from family pride, and was bent on being irreproachable as a son; but his growing experience caused him to pass much silent criticism on the rashness and imprudence of his father's past conduct: their dispositions were not in sympathy, and Tom's face showed little radiance during his few home hours. Maggie had an awe of him, against which she struggled, as something unfair to her

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<sup>23</sup> One of Eliot's earliest published pieces, from the *Coventry Herald* of 5 February 1847, foreshadows this delicate balancing act so described: 'The true philosopher [...] gathers his rules of conduct, not from the suggestions of the appetite, not from the dictates of expediency, but from the indications of man's highest destiny, to be found in the faculties of his nature which may be justly said to be more than human, since they might belong to conditions of being far less limited than those of man. Self-renunciation, submission to law, trust, benignity, ingenuousness, rectitude,—these are the qualities we delight most to witness in the child, and these are the qualities which most dignify the man. The true philosopher [...] feels that in submitting to the restraint of a self-imposed law, he would be presenting humanity in its grandest aspect. But it is *only* the highest human state at which he aims—not anything superhuman. [...] He would be neither an angel, an anchorite, nor a saint, but a man in the most complete and lofty meaning of the name—a man to whom the "child is father" [Wordsworth, 'My heart leaps up when I behold'], perhaps in more senses than the poet thought; and who is no degenerate offspring, but a development of all the features impressed on that heaven-born parent.' 'The Wisdom of the Child', in 'Poetry and Prose from the Notebook of an Eccentric', *Essays*, pp. 20-1. In his headnote to this essay, Pinney reminds us that Eliot returned to this episodic and impressionistic form at the end of her career, in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, with the effect that her whole career is enclosed by work which can be described as 'moralia'. *Essays*, p. 13.

consciousness of wider thoughts and deeper motives; but it was no use to struggle. A character at unity with itself—that performs what it intends, subdues every counteracting impulse and has no visions beyond the distinctly possible, is strong by its very negations (406-7).

Dr Kenn's advice to Maggie echoes Tiresias's advice to Creon at the end of *Antigone*, who in urging a flexible, 'yielding' approach to ethical deliberation, becomes not Creon's opposite, but in some ways a middle way between the competing demands of Creon's duty to the harmony of the polis and Antigone's duty to family.<sup>24</sup> Dr Kenn's deliberations have all Tiresias's attention to the complexities and particularities of the world:

'At present everything seems heading towards the relaxation of ties—towards the substitution of wayward choice for the adherence to obligation which has its roots in the past. Your conscience and your heart has given you true light on this point, Miss Tulliver; and I have said all this so that you may know what I wish about you—what my advice to you—would be if they sprang from my own feeling and opinion unmodified by counteracting circumstances' (625).

But even the person of practical wisdom may falter when confronted with the narrowness and hypocrisy of the multitude, who look to the general and not the particular, and lack the capacity for minute discrimination and more importantly, pity:

It was naturally disappointing to Dr Kenn, after two years of superfluous incense from his feminine parishioners, to find them suddenly maintaining their views in opposition to his; but then, they maintained them in opposition to a higher authority, which they had venerated longer. That authority had furnished a very explicit

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<sup>24</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 79-80. In an article on James's *The Golden Bowl*, Nussbaum explores the connection between literature and moral philosophy, and suggests that Kant's categorical imperative actually has un-Kantian consequences, by denying that at a deeper level, rigorous 'ethical consistency' can lead to the breaking of certain commitments that should have been more binding than the original commitment. Most of Nussbaum's remarks about Maggie Verver, the heroine of *The Golden Bowl*, could just as well be applied to Maggie Tulliver; and it makes it all the more surprising that Nussbaum refuses to allow Eliot to be an Aristotelian in any sense. See her 'Reply to Richard Wollheim, Patrick Gardiner, and Hilary Putnam', *New Literary History* 15.1 (1983), 201-8, pp. 205-6.

answer to persons who might inquire where their social duties began, and might be inclined to take wide views as to the starting point. The answer had not turned on the ultimate good of society, but on 'a certain man' who was found in trouble by the wayside (637).<sup>25</sup>

St. Ogg's is the world of 'men of maxims', and the narrator goes to great pains to criticise the narrowness and Kantian inflexibility of their conceptions, while at the same time offering an alternative Aristotelian model of the ethical deliberations of the person of practical wisdom, who does not expect to find a 'master key that will fit all cases':

And the man of maxims is the popular representative of the minds that are guided in their moral judgements solely by general rules, thinking that these will lead to justice by the ready-made patent method, without the trouble of exerting patience, discrimination, impartiality, without any care to assure themselves whether they have the insight that comes from a hardly-earned estimate of temptation, or from a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human (628).

Eliot had already distanced herself from the Kantian and Utilitarian approaches to ethics in an early book review. Here she clearly places herself within the Aristotelian tradition:

The notion that duty looks stern, but all the while has her hand full of sugar-plums, with which she will reward us by-and-by, is the favourite cant of optimists, who try to make out that this tangled wilderness of life has a plan as easy to trace as that of a Dutch

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<sup>25</sup> 'Kenn' is not only a form of the Scots word for 'knowing', but it is the name of a local river. Rivers and water in the novel are not only important metaphors for tributaries of knowledge, but are potent symbols of destiny and determinism. It seems to me possible that the character of Dr Kenn is partly inspired by the seventeenth-century divine and author of hymns, Thomas Ken, or Kenn (1637-1711), a former Bishop of Bath and Wells. A man of music and political principle, Ken is not much remembered now, although his *Manual for Winchester Scholars* contains hymns (most notably 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow') which are still sung in Protestant churches. Ken was relieved of his bishopric after refusing to swear allegiance to the newly ascended William of Orange. *British Authors before 1800: A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. by Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (New York: Wilson, 1952). Samuel J. Rogal notes that George Eliot refers to the 'Good Bishop Ken's evening hymn' in *Adam Bede*, and the first chapter of that novel closes with Adam singing lines from Ken's 'Morning Hymn'. See his 'Hymns in George Eliot's Fiction', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 29 (1974-75), 173-84, pp. 178-9.

garden; but it really undermines all true moral development by perpetually substituting something extrinsic as a motive to action, instead of the immediate impulse of love or justice, which alone makes an action truly moral.<sup>26</sup>

And in *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie demonstrates an Aristotelian relational ethics, when she rejects Stephen's sophistry about the primacy of the 'natural law' of passion that he disingenuously claims should bind them together, and instead asserts the bonds of community and fidelity to the past:

'It is not so, Stephen—I'm quite sure that is wrong. I have tried to think it again and again—but I see, if we judged in that way, there would be a warrant for all treachery and cruelty—we should justify breaking the most sacred ties that can ever be formed on earth. If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie? We should have no law but the inclination of the moment' (601-2).

The approach to ethics we have been considering here links ethics with narrative, and implicitly critiques formalism, whose rigid Kantian structures cannot be responsive to the ethical nuances of the text or attend to the actual process of understanding the text and the world.<sup>27</sup> It can be said that narrative came into its own with the Romantic preoccupation with history, which foregrounded narrative as a means of explanation once the 'certainties' of theology came to be questioned. With modernity came an acute consciousness of our own 'time-boundedness', and narrative (that is, representations over time) became the focus for a search for meaning which was as much a way of negotiating 'reality' as it was a search for origins.<sup>28</sup> Another way of approaching this is to suggest that narrative is a way of exploring the various ways in which subjects are formed and reformed (which in turn relates to the earlier discussion of *Bildung*). Lyric poetry, with its singularity of voice, was

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<sup>26</sup> *Essays*, p. 135. In the headnote to this essay, Thomas Pinney suggests its relation to the doctrine of renunciation as evinced in *The Mill on the Floss*.

<sup>27</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 36. This particular attention to the ethics (as opposed to the Ethics) of reading has marked the work of a whole generation of so called narrative ethicists, of whom the most notable is Wayne Booth. See his *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>28</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, pp. xi-xii.

always more indebted to Kantian ethics which always figured the other through the limit of any given voice. The novel, however, is a social genre with a number of voices and perspectives: only with the interaction of voice, point of view, the past and narrative does the moral view of the world emerge, in *positivity* of narration. This mode of narration (which will be discussed in relation to tragedy below) is predicated on the polyvocal interaction of different characters and their narratives. As we have already seen, *The Mill on the Floss* constantly questions the idea of an unproblematic negotiation with 'reality', and the narrative constantly asserts the limits of meaning and understanding.<sup>29</sup>

Not a word was spoken by either of them as they walked along. Maggie was suffering in anticipation of what Philip was about to suffer, and dreading the galling words that would fall on him from Tom's lips; but she felt it was in vain to attempt anything but submission. Tom had his terrible clutch on his conscience and her deepest dread: she writhed under the demonstrable truth of the character he had given to her conduct, and yet her whole soul rebelled against it as unfair from its incompleteness (446).

Taken as a whole, the narrative logic of Eliot's novel indicates that a shift in character is necessary to overcome a certain existential impasse. It is narrative that is propelled by the limits of characters and the change that comes about through their negotiation with each other. This of course emphasises the ethical dimension to literature and narrative, but in such a way as to be contrary to the demands of the 'ethics' of reading of Hillis Miller and the formalists, who as we noted earlier, will not 'engage' with the text in an existential manner.

One of the ways in which *The Mill on the Floss* might be seen to overcome the imperatives of Kantianism and formalism is in its approach to gender. The manner in which Eliot negotiates the gender dichotomy as evinced in the narratives of Tom and Maggie can be seen as an attempt to

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<sup>29</sup> Shuttleworth, 'Critical Commentary', pp. 490-91.

undermine social closure. Seen in this way, Eliot's 'feminism' would be revealed in her insistence that ethical issues cannot be resolved by pre-determined categories. Having said that, Eliot always maintained that there are deep 'ontological' differences between the sexes,<sup>30</sup> and although this has earned the censure of some Anglo-American feminists, Eliot's seeming conservatism has generated feminist readings of her work which are much richer and less reductive than simple assertions of the limits to women's freedom that the novel either affirms or subverts.<sup>31</sup>

Luce Irigaray is useful for this study because of her concepts of intersubjectivity and the 'sensible transcendental'. Jessica Benjamin describes intersubjectivity as a 'viewpoint' rather than a process, one in which

the individual grows in and through the relationship to other subjects. Most important, this perspective observes that the other whom the self meets is also a self, a subject in his or her right. It assumes that we are able and need to recognise that other subject as different and yet alike, as an other who is capable of sharing similar mental experience. Thus the idea of intersubjectivity reorients the conception of the psychic world from a subject's relations to its object toward a subject meeting another subject.<sup>32</sup>

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray discusses the Socratic dialogues as the paradigm for intersubjectivity—a process of endless becoming, and a kind of 'knowledge' which is linked to love and beauty. This celebration of love and beauty is an attainment of the 'sensible transcendental', a 'middle' term which reconfigures the rigid dichotomies of

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<sup>30</sup> Shaffer, 'Kubla Khan', p. 254. Eliot thought that the finest novels by women not only rank with the finest of all, but 'have a precious speciality, lying quite apart from masculine aptitudes and experience'. *Essays*, p. 324.

<sup>31</sup> For an excellent discussion of the language of the novel, see Jacobus, 'Men of Maxims'. The reader may have noticed that in this study I have largely not addressed the wealth of feminist scholarship concerning both Eliot, and the issue of women in philosophy generally. My broad argument—that Eliot actively engaged in philosophy and did so through a literary project—raises questions that would have such broad relevance for feminist scholarship that I have been unable to negotiate such issues within the limits of this study.

<sup>32</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problems of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), pp. 19-20.

male/female and transcendent/immanent. It is, for women (and men, one presumes, at least in principle), a path to the contemplation of the 'divine'.<sup>33</sup> Margaret Whitford argues that Irigaray's sensible transcendental as 'God' is a reinterpretation of Feurbach's thesis that 'conceives and affirms a profoundly human relationship as a divine relationship'.<sup>34</sup> Whitford sums up the need for a sensible transcendental, and points us to Irigaray's interest in Greek tragedy, and *Antigone* in particular, which in her reading dramatises the split between the corporeal and the spiritual, and which only the sensible transcendental can repair:

A sensible transcendental is the condition of an ethics of sexual difference, necessary if the tale of Antigone is not to go on repeating itself. If women are cut off from their own becoming, then they are 'buried alive' in our culture. Because of the split, women, as the body, represent sexuality, which is then cut off from the ideal or spiritual, and becomes a 'lower' function, that which is to be transcended in pursuit of the good.<sup>35</sup>

Irigaray thus re-conceives sexual difference in terms of an intersubjective rapprochement that redistributes metaphysical binaries.<sup>36</sup> The space of this rapprochement is figured using a variety of tropes, one of which is the envelope, which Irigaray uses in relation to Spinoza.<sup>37</sup> We can relate this to Eliot in the claim that what lies beyond reason and finitude—which for Kant can only be known negatively—and which we characterised earlier as a 'mystical' reformulation of Spinoza's third kind of knowledge, is for Eliot an infinite sublimity that is achieved not by recognition of the critical limit, but *through the other person*. This would be a 'sensible transcendental' and

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<sup>33</sup> Irigaray, 'Sorcerer Love: A reading of Plato, *Symposium*, "Diotima's Speech"', in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, pp. 20-33.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 141-5.

<sup>35</sup> Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, p. 149.

<sup>36</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, pp. 116-129.

<sup>37</sup> Irigaray, 'The Envelope: A Reading of Spinoza, *Ethics*, "Of God"', in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, pp. 83-94.

incidentally would agree with Deleuze's Spinozistic terminology of what he calls 'transcendental empiricism'.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, for Eliot, even the Spinozistic modes of self-determination are only made possible in the presence of others, and this reveals the process of intersubjectivity as a means of direct communication: the power to touch 'the domain of the existential', as Hadot puts it.<sup>39</sup> Hadot encapsulates the broad approach that we have been outlining: 'as a matter of fact, ethics—that is, choosing the good—is not the consequence of metaphysics but metaphysics is the consequence of ethics.'<sup>40</sup> One can begin to see why Martha Nussbaum puts Spinoza and Kant on the same side of the ethical tradition, namely, because of their common ideals of self-sufficiency, and, like Plato, a failure to make conceptual room for *pity*—which amounts to an awareness of the fragility of the other person.<sup>41</sup>

Eliot herself is critical of the closed understanding of certain communities, such as that of St. Ogg's, which is represented by Stephen. This closure can only be opened by pity:

If that state of mind could have lasted, her choice would have been to have Stephen Guest at her feet, offering her a life filled with all luxuries, with daily incense of adoration near and distant, with all possibilities of culture at her command. But there were things in her stronger than vanity—passion, and affection, and long deep memories of early discipline and effort, of early claims on her love and pity; and the stream of vanity was soon swept along and mingled imperceptibly with that wider current which was at its highest force today, under the double urgency of the events and inward impulses brought by the last week (555).

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<sup>38</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (London: Athlone Press, 1994), p. 161; and *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester, ed. by Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 105.

<sup>39</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy*, p. 285.

<sup>40</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy*, p. 283.

<sup>41</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, p. 385.



Pity enables intersubjectivity, and is connected to the idea that luck can affect even the good person through no fault of their own, and so when we reflect on our own frailty in the face of similar unsolicited events, pity is the response that at once is the most 'ethical' of the tragic emotions.<sup>42</sup> Dr Kenn and Maggie's intersecting narratives dramatise the intersubjective relationship forged by pity and fellow-feeling:

Dr Kenn's ear and eye took in all the signs that this brief confidence of Maggie's was charged with meaning.

'I understand', he said; 'you feel it right to go. But that will not prevent our meeting again, I hope—it will not prevent my knowing you better, if I can be of any service to you'.

He put out his hand and pressed hers kindly, before he turned away.

'She has some trouble or other at heart', he thought. 'Poor child! she looks as if she might turn out to be one of

'The souls by nature pitch'd too high,  
By suffering plung'd too low' (554).<sup>43</sup>

Not only is there narrative pity for Maggie, she herself has pity for Phillip, who, notwithstanding his noble nature and tenderness, cannot hope to attain the state of *eudaimonia*, because of the 'luck' that has resulted in his disability.<sup>44</sup> He thus needs to be, in the narrator's words, 'singled out for pity', because his *telos* has been irrevocably frustrated:

He had not his full share in the common good of men: he could not even pass muster with the insignificant, but must be singled out for pity, and excepted from what was a matter of course with others. Even to Maggie he was an exception: it was clear that the thought of his being her lover had never entered her mind (430).

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<sup>42</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 383–85. See also Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. xxxi. Aristotle says that the person having undergoing the tribulations visited upon him or her by luck must not be extremely virtuous, only moderately so. A bad character would equally spoil the tragic effect, because pity requires an acceptance on the part of those observing that the events unfolded could just as easily have happened to them.

<sup>43</sup> Eliot draws the verse from John Keble's *The Christian Year* (Oxford: Parker, 1827), LXXXIV, St. Philip and St. James, verse 12.

<sup>44</sup> *Eudaimonia* can roughly be translated as 'happiness', but any satisfactory definition would also have to include the properties of health, prosperity, and blessedness, as well as generally living well according to the *telos* of one's life. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 148.

Aristotle even went as far as to suggest that ugly people could not share fully in *eudaimonia*, and should be pitied relative to their ugliness. However, they are to be pitied only because we recognise them as essentially the same as us, and not because they necessarily exhibit moral virtues or defects:

Do not think too hardly of Philip. Ugly and deformed people have great need of unusual virtues, because they are likely to be extremely uncomfortable without them: but the theory that unusual virtues spring by a direct consequence out of personal disadvantages, as animals get thicker wool in severe climates, is perhaps a little overstrained. The temptations of beauty are much dwelt upon, but I fancy they only bear the same relation to those of ugliness, as the temptation to excess at a feast, where the delights are varied for eye and ear as well as palate, bears to the temptations that assail the desperation of hunger. Does not the Hunger Tower stand as the type of the utmost trial to what is human in us? (430-1)<sup>45</sup>

Pity, as the most important of the tragic emotions is thus connected to Eliot's notion of particularity and sympathy:

With that cry of self-despair, Maggie fell on her knees against the table, and buried her sorrow-stricken face. Her soul went out to the Unseen Pity that would be with her to the end. Surely there was something being taught her by this experience of great need; and she must be learning a secret of human tenderness and long-suffering, that the less erring could hardly know? (649).

Seen in this way, *The Mill on the Floss* can be seen as a challenge to the organicism of *Middlemarch*, even though its composition predates the latter work, widely considered to be Eliot's masterpiece. But why has posterity delivered the judgement that Eliot's earlier novel is less great than *Middlemarch*? One answer might be to suggest that the organicism of *Middlemarch* (even though it might itself be undermined) embodies the drive

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<sup>45</sup> It is tempting to wonder whether Eliot, painfully aware of her own lack of physical beauty, is cursing her own 'luck' at what nature had given her in that department. Herbert Spencer famously refused to marry Eliot on account of her ugliness, and in an essay on 'Personal Beauty' in *The Leader* (April 15, 1854), pp. 356-7, seems to be obliquely referring to Eliot's prominent facial features to illustrate the difference between an 'ugly' and a 'Greek-like' head. See Haight, p. 115.

to system (take, for example, Casaubon's ultimately fruitless search for the 'Key to all Mythologies').<sup>46</sup> *The Mill on the Floss*, however, has a major element where this drive to system is thwarted, where the 'light irony' that sustains the world of St. Ogg's must stop, and where there is some aspect of self unaccounted for by the deterministic system.

While Eliot has a Spinozistic sense of totality, she is neither Spinozistic nor Kantian in the sense that the question for her is not one of conditions, and she does not have an epistemological focus. Her moral insight is not derived from the epistemological limit, and as we have seen she works against duty (in the Kantian sense) as the foundation of ethical life. Her commitment to a reformulated third kind of knowledge and her general view of nature are guilty of the Kantian paralogism, that is, the impossibility of knowledge beyond finite intuition. For Eliot, contra Kant, there is an order and value in nature which is not just the effect of reflective judgement. The division between the non-consequentialism of Kantianism—a law valuable for its own sake—and Aristotle's consequentialism—a law in terms of the good life—is important here. Eliot seems to incorporate both positions: we never know what the good life is or what a law will do, and so we require some sort of universalism, but one that is perforce tempered by the limits of reason.

However, Eliot is a post-Kantian in the inescapable sense that she complements her 'imaginative Spinozism'<sup>47</sup> by an account of aesthetic experience. Eliot relies on the Romantic notion of the need to reclaim through art a lost 'naturalness', a theory of the imagination which, in contrast to Spinoza, ultimately views man as central.<sup>48</sup> In this way art and narrative do seem to provide something like moral insight, and further, the exemplarity of

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<sup>46</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, ed. by David Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), bk. 1, ch. 7, p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> John Jones describes Wordsworth in this way (see above, chapter three).

<sup>48</sup> Hampshire, *Two Theories of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1977), pp. 91-94.

narrative gives ethics a positivity which is precluded by the purely regulatory nature of the categorical imperative.<sup>49</sup> Eliot shows a Kantianism in her lack of commitment to communitarian ethics: for her, communities (such as St. Ogg's) are often sites where ethical questions are closed down and the 'opening' is achieved through novelistic examination. This is a type of *catharsis*, which, according to Aristotle, is the function of tragedy, and which must invoke fear and pity if it is to be ethically illuminating.<sup>50</sup> Thus Eliot, despite her extraordinary synthesis of Kant and Spinoza, remains ethically an Aristotelian:

And again, it is my way, (rather too much so perhaps) to urge the human sanctities through tragedy—through pity and terror as well as admiration and delights.<sup>51</sup>

MacIntyre argues that tragedy is a way a culture reveals its conflicts of virtues, which suggests (contra Kant) that ethics is not about categorical imperatives but difficult decisions between competing values according to forms of life.<sup>52</sup> Nussbaum, similarly, sees tragedy as an exercise in the constitution of social value, and a demonstration that the *good* (again, contra Kant) is not a definitional property contraposed to desire, but is negotiated in

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<sup>49</sup> Tobin Siebers has tried to rehabilitate Kant in the service of narrative ethics, but in an Aristotelian context, arguing that Kant's own use of narrative is inseparable from his practical philosophy. He claims that Kant did not reject 'character' or 'virtue'; he just wanted to ground them in reason. Siebers goes on to complain that the early MacIntyre of *A Short History of Ethics* misreads Kant because he had not yet developed his later interest in narrative. Kant 'remains his nemesis, because he [MacIntyre] doesn't perceive the connection between ethics/life and narrative form'. Tobin Siebers, *Morals and Stories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 98-103, 107, 112; Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1967). See also Hilary Putman, 'Taking Rules Seriously—A Response to Martha Nussbaum', *New Literary History* 15.1 (1983), pp. 193-200. Putman argues that Kantian and Aristotelian ethics need not conflict.

<sup>50</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 10. See also Taylor, *Aristotle*, p. 109. Martha Nussbaum explains that the original meaning of the Greek word *katharsis* describes more a process of simplification or clarification, 'concerning who we are', rather than moral purification or expurgation. *The Fragility of Goodness*, p. 391.

<sup>51</sup> *Letters*, IV, 301.

<sup>52</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 143-44.

terms of partial and fragile goods—which are valuable precisely because they can be lost and are finite.<sup>53</sup> Eliot made clear her prescription for tragedy:

A good tragic subject must represent a possible, sufficiently probable, not a common action; and to be really tragic, it must represent irreparable collision between the individual and the general (in differing degrees of generality). It is the individual with whom we sympathise, and the general of which we recognise the irresistible power. The truth of this test will be seen by applying it to the greatest tragedies. The collision of Greek tragedy is often that between hereditary, entailed Nemesis, and the peculiar individual lot, awakening our sympathy, of the particular man or woman whom the Nemesis is shown to grasp with terrific force.<sup>54</sup>

In her essay on *Antigone*, Eliot characterises the essence of tragedy as the ‘antagonism of valid claims’, where there is ‘right on both sides’, and where these claims are mutually exclusive, resulting in Creon’s ‘exasperation’ and Antigone’s ‘defiant hardness’:

Wherever the strength of a man’s intellect, or moral sense, or affection bring him to opposition with the rules which society has sanctioned, *there* is renewed the conflict between Antigone and Creon; such a man must not only dare to be right, he must also dare to be wrong—to shake, to wound friendship, perhaps, to hem in his own powers. Like Antigone, he may fall victim to the struggle, and yet he can never earn the name of a blameless martyr any more than the society—the Creon he has defied, can be branded as a hypocritical tyrant.<sup>55</sup>

For Eliot, the relationship between Antigone and Creon is a struggle between the inward and outward laws which are in constant and inevitable tension, and which at society’s current state of development cannot yet be harmonised:

Is it not rather that the struggle between Antigone and Creon represents that struggle between elemental tendencies and

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<sup>53</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> Cross, III, 44-5.

<sup>55</sup> ‘The Antigone and its Moral’, *Essays*, 261-5, p. 265. Darrell Mansell argues that Eliot conforms to Hegel’s definition of tragedy, as the conflict between two incompatible conceptions of the ‘good’. See ‘A Note on Hegel and George Eliot’, *The Victorian Newsletter* 27 (1965), 12-5.

established laws by which the outer life of man is gradually and painfully being brought into harmony with his inward needs? Until this harmony is perfected, we shall never be able to attain a great right without also doing a wrong.<sup>56</sup>

As I suggested earlier, Eliot identifies more with Tiresias, the voice of Aristotelian 'moderation and reverence', and with the Chorus that draws the ultimate moral 'that lofty words [...] are not becoming to mortals'.<sup>57</sup> It is clear that while Eliot follows Aristotle's basic prescription for tragedy, she rejects his premise that tragedy requires action 'of a certain magnitude',<sup>58</sup> and she therefore brings to the novel a thoroughly modern conception of the genre, one which combines natural history, determinism, and the Development theory, with the everyday events of the social and economic life of St. Ogg's:<sup>59</sup>

The pride and obstinacy of millers and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day, have their tragedy too, but it is of that unwept, hidden sort, that goes on from generation to generation and leaves no record—such tragedy, perhaps, as lies in the conflicts of young souls, hungry for joy, under a lot made suddenly hard to them, under the dreariness of a home where the morning brings no promise with it, and where the unexpected discontent of worn and disappointed parents weighs on the children like a damp, thick air in which all the functions of life are depressed; or such tragedy as lies in the slow or sudden death that follows on a bruised passion, though it may be a death that finds only a parish funeral (275).

Thus Maggie is Antigone to Tom's Creon, Maggie passive and self-denying in the face of social convention and the ravages of 'luck'; and Tom, rigid and unyielding in his Kantian moral domain of seeming immunity to 'luck'. Many of the other characters define themselves in relation to 'luck'. Mr Tulliver seems to have no immunity to luck whatever, and frequently has reason to curse his luck, as described in the terms of tragedy by the narrator:

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<sup>56</sup> *Essays*, p. 264.

<sup>57</sup> *Essays*, p. 265.

<sup>58</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 14. In the novel, the narrator refers to Aristotle's doctrine when Maggie pushes Lucy into the mud (book 1, chapter 10).

<sup>59</sup> Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, p. 273.

Mr Tulliver's prompt procedure entailed on him further promptitude in finding the convenient person who was desirous of lending five hundred pounds on bond. 'It must be no client of Wakem's', he said to himself; and yet at the end of a fortnight it turned out to be the contrary; not because Mr Tulliver's will was feeble, but because external fact was stronger. Wakem's client was the only convenient person to be found. Mr Tulliver had a destiny as well as Oedipus, and in this case he might plead, like Oedipus, that his deed was inflicted on him rather than committed by him (198).

However, Tulliver does have some 'luck', when Tom is able to turn the family fortune around: "It's a great thing when a man can be proud as he's got a good son. I've had that luck'" (456). More promisingly, Bob Jakin takes 'a hopeful view of his own luck'; but it is Dr Kenn who most fully achieves the Aristotelian balance between Kantian self-sufficiency, and the risks and rewards attendant with the demands of love and friendship:<sup>60</sup>

The great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty is clear to any man who is capable of apprehending it: the question, whether the moment has come in which a man has fallen below the possibility of a renunciation that will carry any efficacy, and must accept the sway of a passion against which he had struggled as a trespass, is one for which we have no master key that will fit all cases. The casuists have become a by-word of reproach; but their perverted spirit of minute discrimination was the shadow of a truth to which eyes and hearts are too often fatally sealed: the truth, that moral judgements must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot (627-28).

It is clear that the conflict of the book is the conflict between the two incompatible approaches to 'luck' that are embodied in the treatment of Tom and Maggie. Indeed, as Nussbaum points out in relation to the conflict between Antigone and Creon, this conflict is inevitable, and cannot be reconciled in a grand Hegelian synthesis.<sup>61</sup> This is because any approach

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<sup>60</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, p. 343. Nussbaum makes this point in relation to *Antigone*, not Eliot's novel.

<sup>61</sup> Contrary to Darrell Mansell's argument in 'A Note on Hegel and George Eliot'.

which seeks to lessen conflict, also diminishes the intrinsic value of what made both positions distinctive in the first place. The paradox at the heart of this is that 'the price of harmonisation seems to be impoverishment, the price of richness disharmony'.<sup>62</sup> The only approach one can take which does justice to the distinctiveness of the competing claims without diminishing the power of each, seems to be that of a Tiresias or a Dr Kenn. These characters show 'yielding' and 'flexibility', together with a conception of practical reasoning that 'accommodates' itself to the world while recognising its richness and complexities.<sup>63</sup>

Eliot, in response to critical censure at her treatment of Tom, stresses the nature of these incommensurable goods, which is the essence of tragedy:

As if it were not *my* respect for Tom which infused itself into my reader—as if he could have respected Tom, if I had not painted him with respect; the exhibition of the *right* on both sides being the very soul of my intention in the story.<sup>64</sup>

However, although it is clear that Eliot asserts 'the right on both sides', it is also obvious that on an ethical level the narrator expects us to admire Maggie more than Tom, whose moral hardness is continually juxtaposed with Maggie's 'relational' ethics:

It came with the memories that no passion could long quench: the long past that came back to her and with it the fountains of self-renouncing pity and affection, of faithfulness and resolve. The words that were marked by the quiet hand in the little old book that she had long ago learned by heart, rushed even to her lips, and found a vent for themselves in a low murmur that was quite lost in the loud driving of the rain against the window and the loud moan and roar of the wind: 'I have received the Cross, I have received it from thy hand; I will bear it, and bear it until death, as thou hast laid it upon me.'

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<sup>62</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, p. 75.

<sup>63</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>64</sup> *Letters*, III, 397. A critic had accused Eliot of holding Tom with 'disdain'.



But soon other words rose that could find no utterance but in a sob: 'Forgive me, Stephen! It will pass away. You will come back to her' (648-9).

Eliot shows forcefully the Aristotelian point that any life such as Tom's—that is, devoted to the pursuit of self-sufficiency and the exclusion of 'luck' from the moral domain—is less rich than Maggie's, notwithstanding her own self-denying and similarly inflexible ethical position. The fact that Maggie is willing to embrace the world of risk and mutability in the pursuit of the human values of love and friendship makes her in the last analysis ethically superior to Tom.<sup>65</sup>

Another bone of critical contention, one which has persisted well into this century, is Eliot's rendering of Maggie's great 'mistake', that is, her attraction to and near-elopement with Stephen.<sup>66</sup> Aristotle described the capacity for error (*hamartia*), which can bring about misfortune to the person who committed the error, even if he is undeserving of that misfortune.<sup>67</sup> This capacity for error is even more pronounced in young people, who from lack of experience of the vicissitudes of life, generally have an openness or simplicity towards the world, which however comes with a tendency to excess. In the end, this 'yielding and open posture towards the world' is what gives the young person both the 'fragility' and the 'beauty' that are captured in the metaphor of the plant.<sup>68</sup> Nussbaum notes that in many of the Greek tragedies, 'the good die young'. This however is not the result of divine intervention: it is a rather sad acknowledgment that this openness and trust towards the world brings with it the risk of 'betrayal' or 'defilement', a risk that in certain

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<sup>65</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 63-7. Again, Nussbaum makes this point only in relation to Antigone and Creon.

<sup>66</sup> Ruskin thought that Stephen and most of the other characters in the novel were 'simply the sweepings out of a Pentonville omnibus'. *Fiction, Fair and Foul V*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1908), XXXIV, p. 377.

<sup>67</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 21.

<sup>68</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 337-39.

circumstances becomes too great to be sustainable. And in these circumstances the tragic protagonist cannot 'close off' the risks of the world without a commensurate loss in value.<sup>69</sup> Seen in this way, perhaps the much-maligned flood that brings the tragic resolution to the novel is less capricious and far more meaningful than it is generally considered.

Certainly, Eliot's defence of Maggie's 'mistake' is strikingly similar to Aristotle's description of the 'tragic hero', a character which had rarely been represented in English fiction before this time:<sup>70</sup>

The other chief point of criticism—Maggie's position towards Stephen—is too vital a part of my whole conception and purpose for me to be converted to the condemnation of it. If I am wrong here—if I did not really know what my heroine would feel and do under the circumstances in which I deliberately placed her, I ought not to have written this book at all, but quite a different book, if any. If the ethics of art do not admit the truthful presentation of a character essentially noble but liable to great error—error that is anguish to its own nobleness—*then*, it seems to me, the ethics of art are too narrow, and must be widened to correspond with a widening psychology.<sup>71</sup>

Aristotle also stressed that the tragedy would be heightened—that is, evoke fear and pity—if as a result of this error, misfortune or harm is brought upon people close to the tragic hero. It is plain that Eliot followed this precept also, in view of the pain and suffering inflicted on Philip and Lucy as a result of her one tragic error.

On account of the overriding consideration that the tragedy must invoke fear and pity, Aristotle did not specify any rigid conventions for plot construction (although he did not like plots resolved by the *deus ex machina*). He felt that as long as the tragic events followed as a reasonably probable consequence of what had gone before, then that was acceptable. However,

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<sup>69</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 419-20.

<sup>70</sup> Bennett, *George Eliot*, p. 116.

<sup>71</sup> *Letters*, III, 317-18.

even though the unity of the plot is important, events which are 'contrary to expectation' are also desirable because they evoke astonishment (*thaumaston*). Aristotle goes on to suggest that the connection between the tragic event and what precedes it can be a little contrived as long as it evokes fear and pity, as this is what is ultimately important. To this end, Aristotle prefers the credible impossible to the incredible possible.<sup>72</sup>

The suggestion that Eliot was following Aristotle's prescription for the tragic drama prompts one again to consider the ending in a different light. Although Eliot admitted that the 'tragedy is not adequately prepared', due to her being 'beguiled by love of my subject in the first two volumes',<sup>73</sup> she never accepted that the manner of the tragedy was itself misjudged. The resolution of the problem—though that resolution is death—is more than adequately foreshadowed throughout the work, and more importantly, it is foreshadowed in such a way as to not only be 'connected' to the preceding events, but also to cause 'surprise'.<sup>74</sup> Thus, according to Aristotle's model, the ending is not only 'contrary to expectation', but also 'connected', thereby heightening the 'emotional impact' of the plot.<sup>75</sup>

It is at this point of tragic resolution through death that we find the fictional and the autobiographical uncannily mirroring each other. In the novel Philip refers to Maggie and Stephen's 'mistake', which:

proceeded from only one side of your characters, and belonged to that partial, divided action of our nature which makes half the tragedy of the human lot (633).

And shortly after embarking on her career in fiction, Eliot wrote:

I feel, too, that all the terrible pain I have gone through in past years partly from defects of my own nature, partly from outward things,

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<sup>72</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 41.

<sup>73</sup> *Letters*, III, 317.

<sup>74</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 27.

<sup>75</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, Translator's Introduction, p. xxxix.

has probably been a preparation for some special work that I may do before I die.<sup>76</sup>

Unlike her fictional creation, Eliot did not die before she lost her innocence and unyielding nature, but at the same time Eliot finds in the possibility of death a way of bringing forth an answer to the fragility of human existence, an answer predicated on intersubjectivity:

We are very well now—after a fair share of cold and consequent headaches, and life is very sweet to us though verging near to the valley of death—or perhaps because it is so verging, and the time together so unspeakably precious. Do not ever imagine us forgetful or ungrateful. You are part of the furniture of our souls—among the sacred things on the hearth.<sup>77</sup>

Shortly before her death, Eliot was visited by a Russian woman mathematician, Sofia Kovalovskaya, who recounts the story of an extraordinary conversation between the two women. Kovalovskaya remarked to Eliot that a feature of all her novels is that of 'death always appearing as the general reconciler, untying all the knots tightened by human passions'. Eliot's reply adds meaning to the tragic events of the novel, and throws a fleeting light upon the darkness and suffering at the root of the hermeneutic quest, in narrative as much as life:

'There is some truth to what you say; but I'd like to ask you one thing. Have you really not noticed that it actually happens that way in life? I personally refuse to believe that death is not more logical than one usually thinks. When a situation in life becomes more tense, when one cannot see a way out anywhere, when the most sacred duties conflict, then death appears, suddenly opening new ways about which no one had thought before, and reconciles that which had seemed irreconcilable. It has already happened so many times that faith in death has given me the courage to live!'<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Letters*, II, 343.

<sup>77</sup> *Letters*, VII, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Raymond Chapman and Eleanora Gottlieb, 'A Russian View of George Eliot', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 33, 1 (1978-9), 348-65, pp. 363-4.

*The Mill on the Floss* can be seen as tragic, both at the social and cosmological levels. In the novel we find a sense of the irreducibility of suffering which runs against both Kant and Spinoza. For Kant, ethics is ultimately a question of duty and choice with clear and rational imperatives; for Spinoza as long as we act in accordance with the power of our mode of existence there will be a general joy in accord with the system. However, whereas both Kant and Spinoza see ethics as ultimately coherent, what *The Mill on the Floss* shows is that there are radical ethical disjunctions which have to do with the *singularity* of persons. But that is not all. Following Nussbaum's theory of the fragility of goodness, any engagement with the world of human beings or the capricious world of contingency is a source of vulnerability, but, crucially, it is also what makes life valuable.<sup>79</sup> The *good*, then, is not what lies beyond singularity in a realm of transcendent justification, but is precisely good because it is limited, fragile, and capable of loss.

By insisting on the recognition of partial and fragile goods, Nussbaum is critical of modern Utilitarian and Kantian approaches to ethics, which strive for ultimate conditions or general concepts of law. Eliot herself recognises the force of particular goods, but also demonstrates the way in which from these particulars we can extend our sympathy towards the ethical totality. This brings us back to the dispute between Spinoza and Kant about absolute knowledge. In Spinoza we find some sort of a comprehension of totality through the third kind of knowledge, whereas in Kant, while we have no knowledge of the totality, we are capable of forming an idea of what lies beyond human intuition. Indeed, the Kantian sublime is generated from just that pressing sense of the limits of human cognition. And so there is a broad opposition between Spinoza, who asserts the possibility of intuiting the

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<sup>79</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, p. 353.

absolute, and Kant, who allows us only to feel the impossibility of such an intuition. Eliot ultimately decides this question narratologically, and through Aristotle creates a synthesis of Spinoza and Kant, in which the former enables an intimation of totality through narrative form, and the latter provides a cultivation of the *idea* of totality through art and literature.

The dispute between Spinoza and Kant is still being played out today. On the one hand there is the hermeneutic tradition, with its commitment to a *negotiated* truth of narrative and art in the face of both the admission that there is no absolute truth, and also the concomitant fear of relativism. On the other hand we find the post-structuralists, who insist on the impossibility of remaining within any narrative context as long as the question of a truth that exceeds all content can be asked. The importance and relevance of Eliot's fiction for this dispute is that she not only affirms the emergence of concepts and truth from non-conceptual and random circumstances, but she also acknowledges the force of law or absolute striving. Seen in this way, Eliot is neither fully Aristotelian or Kantian, nor even fully Spinozistic. Rather, through her fiction she shows that all these ethical and philosophical problematics dominate human life.

It may well be that the participants in the contemporary version of this debate could learn from George Eliot's fictional interventions, if only they would be prepared to read her novels not simply as a form of nineteenth-century realism—whatever one might take that to be—but as a form of questioning, of the emergence of other voices, and of the *givenness* of the world.

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