



eCOMMONS

Loyola University Chicago  
Loyola eCommons

---

Master's Theses

Theses and Dissertations

---

1951

## The Comtist Strain in the Novels of George Eliot

James Donald Barry  
*Loyola University Chicago*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc\\_theses](https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Barry, James Donald, "The Comtist Strain in the Novels of George Eliot" (1951). *Master's Theses*. 3506.  
[https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc\\_theses/3506](https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/3506)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact [ecommons@luc.edu](mailto:ecommons@luc.edu).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).  
Copyright © 1951 James Donald Barry

THE COMTIST STRAIN IN THE  
NOVELS OF GEORGE ELIOT

by

James Donald Barry

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

June

1951

## LIFE

James Donald Barry was born in Oak Park, Illinois, February 28, 1926.

He was graduated from St. Mel High School, Chicago, Illinois, June, 1943, and from Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois, June, 1948, with the degree of Bachelor of Philosophy. From February, 1944, to June, 1946, he was in the armed service.

The writer began his graduate studies at Loyola University in September, 1948. From September, 1949, to February, 1951, he was a teaching fellow in the English Department of Loyola University.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. ELIOT AND COMTEISM . . . . .	1
<p>Eliot's early life--Initial acquaintance with Positivism--Exposition of Positivism--Eliot's further remarks on Comte and his work--Christianity, Comte, and Eliot--Critical opinion on the Positivism of Eliot's novels.</p>	
II. THE PRESENCE OF COMTE'S PHILOSOPHY IN ELIOT'S EARLIER NOVELS . . . . .	44
<p><u>Scenes of Clerical Life--Adam Bede--The Mill on the Floss--Silas Marner.</u></p>	
III. THE PRESENCE OF COMTE'S PHILOSOPHY IN ELIOT'S LATER NOVELS . . . . .	83
<p><u>Romola--Felix Holt: the Radical--Middlemarch--Daniel Deronda.</u></p>	
IV. THE EFFECT OF POSITIVISM ON ELIOT'S NOVELS . . . . .	138
<p>Fictional portrayal of ideas--Emphasis on character analysis--Egoism-altruism theme--Artificiality of altruistic characters--Melancholy of the novels--Eliot's signal triumph and major shortcoming.</p>	
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	149

## CHAPTER I

### ELIOT AND COMTISM

In the year 1819 St. Peter's Field at Manchester was the scene of a massacre, the author of Waverley produced The Bride of Lammermoor, John Keats wrote the "Ode to a Nightingale," and Robert Evans, the agent of a landowner, recorded the birth of his youngest child. Mary Ann Evans<sup>1</sup> was baptized on November 29th, seven days after her birth at Arbury Farm in Warwickshire. She was the third and last child of her father's second marriage, and she had a half brother and a half sister born of her father's first wife. She grew up in a period of religious reaction following the Napoleonic wars, a period in which a gradually reviving Anglicanism and an evangelical Dissent, the extreme of Protestantism, were growing side by side. Her constant companion was her brother Isaac, later to be drawn upon for the character of Tom Tulliver in The Mill on the Floss. The family lived at Griff, a house on the Arbury estate, and Isaac and Mary Ann went daily to

---

1 Information for this biographical sketch is taken mainly from Gerald Bullett, George Eliot: Her Life and Books, New Haven, 1948, and J. W. Cross, ed., George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals, 3 Vols., Edinburgh, 1885.

the nearby cottage of a Mrs. Moore, who kept a Dame's school. Mary Ann showed no signs of precocity; for this reason she received no special training and at the age of five simply joined her older sister, Christina, who was attending Miss Lathom's school at Attleboro. After three or four years at Attleboro, she was sent to Miss Wallington's school at Nuneaton, where she remained until she was thirteen. She became an omnivorous reader under the guidance of a Miss Lewis, an ardent evangelical whose teaching was sympathetically received by her young charge, and later an intimate friend to whom many of her letters are addressed. In submitting to the doctrines of feeling and duty, Mary Ann laid the groundwork for her reception of the doctrines of Comte. Before the age of twelve the young girl was teaching Sunday school and devoting her time to clothing societies.

Mary Ann's next change of scene brought her to Coventry and the school of the Misses Franklin. The religious views propounded at this school were those of the Baptists, and Mary Ann absorbed them studiously and eagerly. The term ending Christmas, 1835, marked her last formal schooling, for she returned home to care for her mother, who died the following summer.

During these years of early education Mary Ann became attached to such books as Defoe's History of the Devil, Pilgrim's Progress, Rasselas, Lamb's Essays, The Vicar of Wakefield, and Scott's novels. By the time she reached twenty we know that her

mind contained specimens from such authors as Shakespeare, Cowper, Wordsworth, Milton, Addison, Bacon, Byron, Southey, and Cervantes, and from such fields as geometry, entomology, chemistry, and metaphysics. Her interest in the Imitation of Christ, although conceivably overemphasized because of a too ready identification of Miss Evans with Maggie Tulliver of The Mill on the Floss, will be discussed later in this chapter.

The marriage of Christina in the spring of 1837 left the burden of running the Griff household on the shoulders of the seventeen-year-old girl. She continued her education at home, however, receiving tutoring in German, Italian, and music. When Isaac married in 1841 and took over his father's house and business, father and daughter moved to Foleshill Road, Coventry.

In Coventry the young intellectual girl entered a new phase of her development. Here she met Charles Bray and his wife, Caroline Hennell. In their society she became acquainted with the doctrine set down by Caroline's brother Charles in a book called Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity. This doctrine was influential in Eliot's transition from ultra-evangelical beliefs to that scientific and critical spirit which marked her century. Hennell maintained that Christ had merely assumed the role of the long-awaited Messiah, that the gospels were the product of pious imagination, and that Christianity's contribution to the world's heritage was ethical. Eliot's rejection of Christianity was, like

Hennell's, one of dogma; she did not reject conscience or morality.

In the last days of 1841 and the first months of 1842 she and her father were temporarily at odds over her refusal to accompany him to church. She considered that she had lost the Christian faith and that she would consequently be hypocritical to acknowledge it outwardly. He determined to leave her, but a reconciliation was brought about largely because of her intense desire for a home. In July of this year Mary Ann met Miss Sara Hennell, the sister of Mrs. Bray, and thus began a lifelong friendship.

In November of 1843 Charles Hennell married a Miss Brant, who had begun to translate Strauss's Das Leben Jesu, a book which describes the scriptural miracles as myths and denies the divinity of Christ without forsaking His moral teachings. Charles persuaded Mary Ann to continue the work; her acceptance took up her leisure time for approximately two years. She had already absorbed the essential ideas of the book from Hennell's similar work, and its content did not as a consequence engross her attention. She spent some time studying and translating Spinoza between 1849 and 1854; most of her work was turned over to Charles Bray, however, and she desired no credit for her endeavor. She was familiar with both the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus and the Ethics; neither furnished her with any strikingly new ideas, for Spinoza's thought was similar to that of Hennell and Strauss. Spinoza believed that speculative theology could not be profitable and that



the Bible furnishes us with an ideal of love, not an investigation of the nature of God.

The death of Mary Ann's father on May 31, 1849, marked the end of three years of almost constant ministry to his needs. She was crushed by his death, but the Brays helped her recover by taking her to Europe. After a tour of over a month's duration the Brays returned to England, Miss Evans staying in Geneva for eight months.

Upon her return to England in the spring of 1850 she spent the following nine months either at Griff with her brother or with the Brays. At the Brays she met John Chapman, who was contemplating the purchase of the Westminster Review. He arranged to publish her first essay in criticism, a review of Robert W. Mackay's The Progress of the Intellect. It appeared in the January, 1851, Westminster. In October of that year Chapman completed his purchase, and Miss Evans became his assistant editor. This position brought her into contact with the London intellectual society of the time. Among her business and personal acquaintances were Mazzini, James A. Froude, the Martineaus, Theodore Parker, Herbert Spencer, William Cullen Bryant, and George Henry Lewes.

It was Spencer who first suggested that she write fiction, but she put him off and during 1853 began to translate Ludwig Feuerbach's Das Wesen des Christenthums, a book which raises man to the position of God, which says that thought and faith are

to be found in the needs and desires of man, especially in man as a member of society. Meanwhile she was preparing much of the summary of contemporary literature which closed each number of the Review, and she wrote a review of Carlyle's Life of John Sterling as well as six or seven other essays. In July of 1854 the translation of Feuerbach was published, and her real name appeared in print for the first and only time.

Since 1851 she had known George Henry Lewes, a student of anatomy and philosophy, the author of a Life of Goethe, and the literary editor of the Leader, the first of the English critical weeklies. Their friendship had developed slowly, but by this time it was ripening into love. Lewes's personal life was very unhappy; his wife, though still living with him, had given birth to two children by Thornton Hunt, a literary associate. It was extremely difficult and expensive to obtain a divorce in the England of this day; as a result Lewes and Miss Evans simply left for Weimar on July 20, 1854. They were never legally married, but they lived together in apparent happiness until his death in 1878. It was Lewes who encouraged Mary Ann Evans to try her hand at fiction and who acted as her agent until his death.

Shortly after her first meeting with Lewes and during the time in which he was studying the philosophy of August Comte, she reveals a personal knowledge of Comte's thought in a letter to Sara Hennell. Under the date of September 2, 1852, she writes:

Harriet Martineau (in a private letter shown to me), with incomprehensible ignorance, jeers at Lewes for introducing psychology as a science in his Comte papers. Why, Comte himself holds psychology to be a necessary link in the chain of science. Lewes only suggests a change in its relations.<sup>2</sup>

Unless Miss Evans had more than a rudimentary knowledge of Positivism, her intellectual honesty would not permit a criticism of a woman who was preparing a translation of Comte. In another letter to Miss Hennell, this one dated November 3, 1853, Miss Evans mentions that Harriet Martineau's translation of Comte has been published and asks Miss Hennell whether she intends reading this one or that of Lewes.<sup>3</sup>

2 Cross, George Eliot's Life, I, 290.

3 Ibid., 315. Both Harriet Martineau and Lewes were admirers of Comte. Lewes, who began his study of Positivism in approximately 1842, presents his readers with a two-part treatment of the Cours de Philosophie Positive. The first part contains the philosophy of the preliminary sciences and includes, besides an exposition of Comte's thought, an admixture of criticism, illustration, and recent fact. The second part contains social science and the philosophy of history; this section is an abridgment of Comte's exposition with the preservation of his own terms whenever possible. Lewes's two major works on philosophy, Biographical History of Philosophy and History of Philosophy, are conceived with the idea that Positivism is the goal of philosophic endeavor. He would seem to have been a more extensive student of Comte than Miss Martineau, whose interest in Comte dates from 1851.

Harriet Martineau freely translated and condensed Comte's work for the following reasons: to acknowledge the benefits conferred upon England by the French thinker; to eliminate the diffuseness and redundancy resulting from the fact that his exposition was in the form of lectures given over a period of years; to bring his thought to a larger number of intelligent readers; and to give these readers a great philosophic system on which to base their thought.

In addition to the two references just seen, George Eliot mentions Comte, his works, or Positivism over twenty times in the selection of letters made by Cross. Who is this French philosopher whose name appears so often over the span of time covered by Eliot's correspondence, and what are his teachings?

The force of Positivism, though still evident in the exclusively empirical outlook of much present-day thought, is neither so well organized nor so widespread as it was in the nineteenth century. Basil Willey, in perhaps too sweeping a statement, considers Comte to be the central figure of that period:

He alone, of all the world-betterers and clean-sweepers, saw clearly that the new world must have a religion, and, since according to his philosophy the old one was necessarily dead, set himself to found a new one. It was this attempt above all which ruined his prestige; the materialists and infidels thought him crazy, and the orthodox thought him a blasphemous impostor. Nevertheless it is precisely this attempt (whatever we may think of the Positive "Religion" as such) which makes it possible to regard Comte as the central figure of his century-- of the century whose special problem was the reconciling of destruction with construction, negation with affirmation, science with religion, the head with the heart, the past with the present, order with progress.<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Willey mentions the old philosophy and Comte's conviction that a new one based on a synthesis of truth through the scientific method was needed.<sup>5</sup> An investigation of the tenets of

---

<sup>4</sup> Basil Willey, "Auguste Comte," Nineteenth Century Studies, London, 1949, 188.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

this new philosophy can perhaps best be opened by a statement of George Henry Lewes concerning the twofold problem of philosophy and the consequent division between Positivism and the other schools of thought. Lewes was an acquaintance and a disciple of Comte, much of his writing centers around Positivism, and it is doubtless true that he helped George Eliot develop her enthusiasm for him. The twofold problem is the study of man and the study of the external world. Lewes goes on to explain this conflict:

As Comte says, each may serve as the point of departure of the other. Hence two radically opposed philosophies--one considering the world according to our subjective conceptions--that is to say, explaining cosmical phenomena by the analogies of our sentiments and affections; the other considering man as subordinate to the laws of the external world, and as explicable only by the explanation of the properties of matter recognized in operation in the external world. The former of these philosophies is essentially metaphysical and theological. It rests upon the old assumption of man's mind being the normal measure of all things: it makes law the correlate of idea; it makes the universe subordinate to man. The second is the scientific or positive philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

It must not be concluded that Positivism is wholly scientific and that it rejects morality, art, religion, and the emotions; rather science is a means of fulfilling the aim of Positivism, a social doctrine; Lewes consequently points out that the key and capital distinction of the Positive philosophy is "the absolute predominance of the moral point of view--the rigorous

---

<sup>6</sup> George Henry Lewes, Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences: Being an Exposition of the Principles of the Cours de Philosophie Positive of Auguste Comte, London, 1853, 164.

subordination of the intellect to the heart."<sup>7</sup>

Comte's philosophy has for its groundwork three initial conceptions. From these three premises Comte deduces his philosophy of history and the important study of sociology. Carried to their logical extreme, they also produce the Positive religion.

First of all he regards all sciences, both physical and social, as branches of one science. All sciences, then, are to be investigated by one and the same method;<sup>8</sup> this method will proceed according to fact and reason toward the end of not only seeing but foreseeing the action of phenomena.<sup>9</sup> This method, which he will bring to bear on all phenomena, will be largely prompted by the fundamental law of human development, the second of his initial conceptions.

This law states that there are three stages of intellectual development through which man and society must pass. In the society of Comte's day all three were present in varying forms and degrees. The first, or theological, phase is marked by the mind's seeking to know the causes and essences of things. All effects are concluded to be the productions of supernatural agents; unusual effects are attributed to the pleasure or displeasure of

---

7 Ibid., 8-9.

8 Ibid., 10.

9 Ibid., 26-27.

some god. In the second, or metaphysical, phase supernatural agents are set aside, and the mind substitutes for them abstract forces inhering in substances and capable of engendering phenomena. What is attributed to a god by a mind in the theological phase is attributed to Nature or the vital force by a mind in the metaphysical phase. In the third, or Positive, phase the mind gives up as futile the seeking of causes and essences, and restricts itself to the formulation of laws of phenomena through observation. The scientific method, then, is the only method to use in the Positive phase. These phases are often referred to as stages or states.

Comte's third conception is the well-known classification of the sciences. The arrangement is based on the abstract sciences and requires that the first of them be the most simple and general and the last most complex.<sup>10</sup> This order necessarily determines "the rational connection of the different fundamental sciences by the successive dependence of their phenomena," and it lists them in order of increasing difficulty.<sup>11</sup> The Positive classification divides phenomena into five fundamental sciences, "whose succession is determined by a necessary and invariable subordination, based upon the simple, but profound, comparison of corresponding phenomena. These sciences are--astronomy, physics,

---

10 Ibid., 10-11.

11 Ibid., 42.

chemistry, physiology, and lastly, sociology."<sup>12</sup> This order is of great importance to Comte, for it is in this order that man's theories reach successively the theological, metaphysical, and Positive states. Astronomy, for example, is already completely scientific and Positive.<sup>13</sup> Physiology, on the other hand, is disturbed by the presence of all three states. Mathematics, Comte concludes, has been purposely omitted from the original listing, not because it is not a constituent part of natural philosophy--for it stands at the very head of the scale--but because it is valued chiefly as the basis for the whole of natural philosophy and as an instrument of investigation.<sup>14</sup>

This classification of the sciences is more than merely a conception from which Comte draws certain conclusions to which George Eliot will adhere. His classification has as its main end the study of sociology. She not only adopted much of his sociology, but she endorsed this classification. Mr. Henry H. Bonnell<sup>15</sup> points out that this endorsement taught her that man could not be understood unless the human society which makes up his environment

---

12 Ibid., 46.

13 Ibid., 47.

14 Ibid., 50.

15 Henry H. Bonnell, "George Eliot," Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Jane Austen: Studies in Their Works, New York, 1902, 157.



could be comprehended; this human society can be comprehended only by a knowledge of the biological conditions upon which society is based. Environment, habit, and heredity must temper our judgments of man's shortcomings. This forbearance is a means of conforming to the laws of the universal order, for example, to the law of environment. The conformity results in an improvement of Humanity, what Comte calls the Grand Etre, an improvement emanating from man's sympathy towards that portion of society which constitutes his environment. Here is the scientific excuse for altruism.

Comte discusses each science in great detail before taking up sociology, of which he is considered the modern founder. He is interested in the emotional life of the individual in opposition to the merely intellectual. Indeed, part of the formula to appear on the proposed religious banner of Positivism is "Love is our Principle."<sup>16</sup> Looking at the emotional life from the scientific point of view, Comte finds that it

is divisible into Personality and Sociality. The lower animals only manifest the first; the second commences with a separation of the sexes, and grows more and more energetic in proportion to the rank of the animal in the hierarchial scale; so that all the higher animals exhibit both Personality and Sociality. These may be denominated Egoism and Altruism.

A just equilibrium between these two elements is not possible, he

---

<sup>16</sup> Auguste Comte, General View of Positivism, trans. J. H. Bridges, 2nd ed., London, 1880, 286. This religious banner was to be adopted on the formation of the Great Western Republic, a federation of the French, Italian, Spanish, British, and German nations which would form the first step in the political

goes on to say. Personality usually predominates, even in man, but this preponderance arises from the instinct of self-preservation and is therefore essential to individual development. Personality is modified by the individual's desire and activity in living for others. There arises, then, "the great social problem: the subjection, as far as possible, of Personality to Sociality, by referring everything to humanity as a whole." This subjection will be hastened by the state's emphasis on social regeneration; indeed the conflict itself, says Comte, is the natural basis for the Positive theory of emotional life, the dichotomy between egoism and altruism.<sup>17</sup>

Egoism is separable into the instincts of preservation and perfectibility. The first, although the less noble, is obviously more widespread, energetic, and indispensable. It is made up of the nutritive, the sexual, and the maternal instincts. Pride and vanity also come under the heading of egoism but definitely have a relationship with altruism because they depend upon the opinion of others for their existence and thus lead to interests outside of self. Perfectibility is also composed of two instincts. Comte terms the first the military, and it includes the destruction of obstacles. The second, termed the industrial, includes

---

regeneration of all humanity.

17 Lewes, Comte's Philosophy, 217-218.

the creation of aids.<sup>18</sup>

An adequate basic summary of the conflict between egoism and altruism and its effect on man's moral condition is contained in the following quotation:

In every complex existence, the general harmony depends upon the preponderance of some chief impulse, to which all the others must be subordinate. This preponderating influence must be either egoistic or altruistic. It is not only in a social point of view that the superiority of the latter sentiment is felt; it influences no less strongly the moral condition of the individual. A character governed by the inferior instincts alone, can have neither stability nor fixed purposes; these qualities are alone attained under the empire of the impulses which prompt man to live for others. Every individual, man or animal, accustomed to live for self alone, is condemned to a miserable alternation of ignoble torpor or feverish activity. Even personal happiness and merit therefore depend on the predominance of the sympathetic instincts. Progress towards such a moral condition should be the object of every living being. To live for others is thus the natural conclusion of all Positive Morality.<sup>19</sup>

This chapter is not concerned with Eliot's specific use of Comtist thought; nevertheless the contrasting characters portrayed in so much of her writing, especially those of Daniel Deronda and Gwendolen Harleth in her last novel, seem to the present writer fictional adaptations of the thought contained in this exposition of the instincts which determine man's moral condition. To Mr. Bonnell this reaction is the normal one: "Every zealous and well-directed effort to sound the deep stream

18 Ibid., 218-221.

19 Ibid., 221-222.

of George Eliot's work must result in the discovery that the bed rock is Sympathy; and every faithful searcher for its source will find it arising from the springs of Altruism."<sup>20</sup>

These quotations indicate conclusively that all of Comte's social studies have as their foundation either the discord existing between egoism and altruism or the force of altruism itself. Actually the discussion of egoism has for its purpose not merely the recognition of reality but the contrast with altruism. It is altruism which leads to Comte's consideration of individual moral development, the concept of humanity as the Great Being, the human solidarity which expands to include our duty to the past, to our contemporaries, and to the future, and subjective immortality. We have already seen that the predominance of the sympathetic instincts will bring progress in our moral condition and that because of man's social conditions we must look upon him sympathetically, keeping always in mind that his environment, all the phenomena considered in the more general sciences, is often a determining factor in his behavior. The concept of altruism, then, will control the remainder of the Comtist thought considered. It is to be noted that this altruism is directed to all mankind, the body in which each man is a member and to which he owes a duty. This altruism does not, then, grow out of the Christian love for the Divine Creator, from which comes the Christian's rational love for

---

20 "George Eliot," Charlotte Bronte, etc., 131.

his fellows.

Comte's scientific study of sociology is divisible into that of social statics, those phenomena which form the conditions whereby sociology exists, i.e., the element of order, and that of social dynamics, those phenomena which form the laws of society's continuous movement, i.e., the element of progress.<sup>21</sup>

The discussion of social dynamics, which includes the further application of the law of the three stages, the philosophy of history, and the reconstruction of the past as having gone through the military and juridical phase ending with the French Revolution and entering more and more into the peaceful industrial phase, need not concern us here.<sup>22</sup>

In social statics Comte interests himself in the mutual actions and reactions which the various portions of society exercise upon one another. He studies the conditions of the social existence of the individual, the family, and society as a whole. Our primary concern is with the first two, for in the last Comte deals with such concepts as the division of labor, the political efforts of man, and government. In this last discussion only one point is important for Eliot's novels: the fact that human solidarity grows out of the distribution of man's employment, out of his participation in the vast common work of the world's peoples.

---

21 Lewes, Comte's Philosophy, 251.

22 Ibid., 273-324.

The relation of human solidarity to altruism will be discussed later.<sup>23</sup>

The study of the individual is an extensive elaboration of the supremacy of the emotional over the intellectual life and the conflict between egoism and altruism, both of which have been sufficiently discussed.<sup>24</sup>

It is in the family that we find altruism rising to prominence because of society's composition. The necessary subordination of woman to man and that of children to parents establishes spontaneously the first notion of social perpetuity by connecting the future with the past,<sup>25</sup> This first notion develops to the concept of human solidarity and the bond with all men, to which we will turn later. Comte explains the phenomenon thus: "The love of his family leads Man out of his original state of self-love and enables him to attain finally a sufficient measure of Social love."<sup>26</sup> There are, he explains further, three successive stages of morality, passing through which the sympathetic principle diminishes in intensity and increases in dignity. Self-love, the first stage, is followed by the presence of family attachment, the second stage; man must pass through both these preliminary modes of feeling

---

23 Auguste Comte, Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, trans. Harriet Martineau, New York, 1855, 508-514.

24 Lewes, Comte's Philosophy, 259-260.

25 Ibid., 262.

26 Comte, General View, 70.

before reaching the final stage, the subordination of self-love to social feeling toward all humanity. This exposition of moral stages shows again the belief of Comte that the primary principle of Positive morality is the preponderance of social sympathy, of the benevolent emotion.<sup>27</sup> In this system "the true object of human life" is the "perfection of our moral nature";<sup>28</sup> consequently, the subordination of self-love to social feeling is the primary motivating force in the life of a person interested in moral improvement.

An anonymous reviewer speaking of Comtist belief looks upon its denial of the possibility of knowing a First Great Cause and says:

What though there were no God, no revelation of that God in Christ: he would substitute another object of worship--a glorified humanity, the Grand Etre, man in his past, and present, and future. . . . To bygone generations we owe every advance in civilisation that separates our condition from the brute. To our contemporaries we should repay these benefits in an absolute, unselfish devotion. The only immortality to which we ought to look forward lies in the loving memory of posterity.<sup>29</sup>

There are, then, three major elements of Comte's philosophy left for investigation: human solidarity and man's relation to the past and future, immortality, and the concept of humanity. They are intimately related, and in Comte's discussion of one the

27 Ibid., 68-70.

28 Ibid., 79.

29 "George Eliot, and Comtism," London Quarterly Review, London, XLVII, Jan., 1877, 449.

other two are invariably suggested, but each will be taken up separately insofar as possible.

Comte insists that man in moving toward improvement should always connect his memories of the past with his designs and hopes for the future. The institution of the family introduces to man the idea of social perpetuity.<sup>30</sup> In filial love the child develops the instinct of continuity and of reverence for his ancestors. This union with the past history of man is supplemented by the development of brotherly love and the consequent feeling of solidarity or union with contemporary society. Already an outline of social existence is coming to light, and it becomes clearer when man enters into conjugal affection, from which parental love springs. Parental love, in teaching man to care for his successors, binds him to the future as filial love has joined him to the past.<sup>31</sup> That this tie with the future and past is considered important by Comte can be seen by his words in the closing pages of the discussion of humanity: "Solidarity with our contemporaries is not enough for us, unless we combine it with the sense of Continuity with former times; and while we press on toward the Future we lean upon the Past, every phase of which our religion holds in honour."<sup>32</sup>

---

30 Lewes, Comte's Philosophy, 262.

31 Comte, General View, 70.

32 Ibid., 290-291.



Solidarity with our contemporaries is not to be discounted, however. It is obviously important to Comte not only as a connecting link with the past and future but as the actual immediate environment, the influence of which has much to do with our moral actions. To George Eliot as well as to Comte this environment includes the moral and social influences of our fellow-men:

She it is who more than any other teacher has traced for us the complex interaction of human factors, the subtle weaving of the threads of destiny by unconscious hands into the web of our daily history--who, in showing us the mighty unforeseen issues of our tiniest actions for good or evil to ourselves and others, has taught us as far as in us lies, so to order our lives that we may not be ashamed.<sup>33</sup>

To Comte our union with the past is bound up with our purpose in life. He considers men, regardless of the time or place in which they live, as "so many indispensable cooperators in a fundamental evolution,"<sup>34</sup> and thus the life of each man is connected with the life of humanity as a whole. What has gone before has a determining influence on what is happening now and what will happen in the future:

The true general spirit of social dynamics then consists in conceiving of each of these consecutive social states as the necessary result of the preceding, and the indispensable mover of the following, according to the axiom

---

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Geddes, George Eliot: Moralist and Thinker, The Round Table Series, Edinburgh, 1885, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Lewes, Comte's Philosophy, 263.

of Leibnitz--the present is big with the future.<sup>35</sup>

Comte considers that not only individuals and classes but also different peoples are engaged in the evolutionary development which connects the present actors with both their predecessors and followers.<sup>36</sup> This principle is often termed the statement, theory or law of hereditary transmission.

Mr. George Willis Cooke comments on George Eliot's acceptance and use of this principle:

She not only accepted the theory of hereditary transmission as science has recently developed it, and as it has been enlarged by positivism into a shaping influence of the past upon the present, but she made this law vital with meaning as she developed its consequences in the lives of her characters. . . . Life could not be explained without it; the thoughts, deeds, and aspirations of men could be understood only with reference to it; much that enters into human life of weal and woe<sup>37</sup> is to be comprehended only with reference to this law.

Comte's opinion on the place of woman in society can best be introduced here because of its relation to human solidarity. Since the primary principle of Positivism is the preponderance of feeling over intellect and since woman is stronger than man in the sympathetic impulses, woman has the duty of encouraging the less sympathetic though more energetic man to greater activity in the process of social regeneration. Another duty of the woman

---

35 Comte, Positive Philosophy, 464.

36 Lewes, Comte's Philosophy, 264.

37 George Willis Cooke, George Eliot: A Critical Study of Her Life, Writings, and Philosophy, London, 1883, 167.

In family life is the education of the children. Under this system a young man is trained by the feeling of his mother until he voluntarily allies himself to the feeling of a wife. His moral education (moral education being the subordination of self to social feeling) is thus improved. As man becomes more grateful for this increasingly demonstrated influence of women, he will begin to worship them, the first step in the worship of humanity.<sup>38</sup> The worship of humanity is the culmination of the concepts of solidarity and the union with the past and future; it is the substitute for the theological and metaphysical worship of a god, a worship Positivism cannot carry on because it cannot "positively" prove the existence of anything except observable laws. The Positive worship can therefore be traced back to altruism through the sympathetic impulse of woman and the implanted (in the sense that it is an observable phenomenon) feeling of solidarity.

The problem of immortality is mentioned by Comte briefly but frankly in a discussion of public opinion. Having stated that the approval of our fellow-beings brings a joy only surpassed by that arising from the constant exercise of social sympathy, he goes on to say: "And still more prominence will be given to this noble form of ambition under Positivism, because it is the only way left us of satisfying the desire which all men feel of

---

<sup>38</sup> Comte, General View, 152-188.

prolonging their life into the Future."<sup>39</sup>

An anonymous critic discussing the influence of this concept on George Eliot finds fault with Comte as he sees in this belief of Comte's an unconscious tribute to the divinely-placed yearning for immortality. Comte and his school, he says, "discard the life of our creed, but eagerly follow its phantom."<sup>40</sup>

Observing that the miseries of this life argue for a world to come, Mr. Patrick Geddes asks George Eliot if there is a reality corresponding to these visions of the future, and he composes her reply in the affirmative:

The ancestral life which beats in us will afterwards animate our children, and in a broader if less direct line, we inherit and may gather into our being the countless treasures of experience which past generations bequeath to us, while we in turn transmit to all succeeding ages the influence we impress on the common life of humanity.<sup>41</sup>

We can see already that George Eliot, in the striking words of V. S. Pritchett, "promises no heaven and threatens no hell; the best and the worst we shall get is Warwickshire."<sup>42</sup>

Comte designated the central point of Positivism as "the great conception of Humanity, towards which every aspect of

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>40</sup> "George Eliot and Comtism," London Quarterly Review, XLVII, 470.

<sup>41</sup> George Eliot: Moralists and Thinker, 22.

<sup>42</sup> V. S. Pritchett, "George Eliot," The Living Novel, New York, 1947, 97.

Positivism naturally converges."<sup>43</sup> In speaking of the family, he brought up the union with the past in addition to the solidarity of the present.<sup>44</sup> In discussing the central point of Positivism he says:

It is our filiation with the Past, even more than our connection with the Present, which teaches us that the only real life is the collective life of the race; that individual life has no existence except as an abstraction. Continuity is the feature which distinguishes our race from all others.<sup>45</sup>

This "collective life" of the race, this continuity which allows the individual man to receive the heritage of the past and pass it on with his personal additions to the future, this sympathetic alliance with all good men--both those who are dead and those not yet born as well as those living, this subjective immortality--all these elements combine in the Grand Etre, Humanity, the being which will supersede God and require the worship of man.

The Grand Etre represents the principle of love upon which the entire Positive system rests. That it is composed of separable elements of society and that it stems from altruism can be seen in these words of Comte: "Its existence depends . . . entirely upon mutual Love knitting together its various parts. The calculations of self-interest can never be substituted as a

---

43 Comte, General View, 242.

44 Ibid., 70.

45 Ibid., 268.

combining influence for the sympathetic instincts." Humanity, he goes on to say, will stimulate the active powers of man as well as his feelings and reason. The exercise of this activity of man upon his environment will result in progress, "the development of Order, under the influence of Love." Thus it is seen that in Positivism "our thoughts will be devoted to the knowledge of Humanity, our affections to her love, our actions to her service."<sup>46</sup>

Upon reflection, the worship of the Grand Etre can be traced to the study of social science, and in turn that study is accounted for by the general aim for the original classification of the sciences, the study of the most complex phenomena, man and society. The Christian reader, as he sees worship developing from the original scientific study, can discern the manifestation of the need for religion in the world of men.

Referring to the Positivistic system of festivals to commemorate the social love of the past generations and their contributions to humanity, Comte again speaks of reward:

The education of Positivists will soon convince them that such recompense for honourable conduct is ample compensation for the imaginary hopes which inspired their predecessors. . . . To prolong our life indefinitely in the Past and Future, so as to make it more perfect in the Present, is abundant compensation for the illusions of our youth which have now passed away for ever.<sup>47</sup>

---

46 Ibid., 242-243.

47 Ibid., 255.

The actual cause of the proposed festivals was the increased emphasis on the present life and its relation to the collective life. This system of commemoration is one of the "new means" of binding the individual to the Grand Etre, one of the connections Comte has reference to when he says:

The restriction of our expectations to actual life must furnish new means of connecting our individual development with the universal progression, the growing regard to which will afford the only possible, and the utmost possible, satisfaction to our natural aspiration after eternity.<sup>48</sup>

Comte's worship of humanity includes his desire that every man improve himself so that he might be better able to serve this humanity. Out of man's service to collective mankind comes the concept of duty. The theological or metaphysical deities were independent and in need of little human service; the known supreme being, the Grand Etre, requires the benevolently directed efforts of man.<sup>49</sup> Because man's moral improvement demands the exercise of the sympathetic impulse, his consequent activity is the duty he owes not only to the supreme being but also to his very nature.

The bond between duty and altruism is an obvious one; because of man's membership in the collective humanity, he has a duty to be altruistic.

Having seen the outstanding dicta of Comte's philosophy, we can turn again to Eliot's personal remarks on him and his

---

<sup>48</sup> Comte, Positive Philosophy, 833.

<sup>49</sup> Comte, General View, 267.

work. We have noted only the two earliest recorded references to Comte and his work, references which indicate at least an initial grasp of his thought as early as 1852. What of the following years? What do her personal writings show us?

A short time after the defense of Lewes in his interpretation of Comte (September 2, 1852), she writes in a letter to the Brays dated in January of 1853; "I begin to feel for other people's wants and sorrows a little more than I used to do. Heaven help us! said the old religion; the new one, from its very lack of that faith, will teach us all the more to help one another."<sup>50</sup> No one will affirm that George Eliot changed from a heartless to a sympathetic woman upon reading Comte. Here, however, is an indication of an increase in altruistic feeling following her initial acquaintance with Comte's philosophy. This strengthening of her faith in others, this interest in helping her fellow men in their trials, this desire for a new world based on altruism--these quickening influences on Eliot's personality will help her produce fiction in which there is a sadness because man has made the wrong sort of a world. This strain in her personality and writing will lead to the pronouncement of The Athenaeum that the key to Middlemarch is Comtism.<sup>51</sup>

---

50 Cross, George Eliot's Life, I, 302.

51 The Athenaeum, London, December 7, 1872, 725.



On November 22, 1853, George Eliot writes to Sara Hennell and reveals the thoughts possessing her mind on her thirty-fourth birthday. One of the rare cheerful notes in her personal papers is marked by a happiness recently acquired:

I begin this year more happily than I have done most years of my life. 'Notre vraie destinée,' says Comte, 'se compose de resignation et d'activité,'-- and I seem more disposed to both than I have ever been before. Let us hope that we shall both get stronger by the year's activity,--calmer by its resignation. I know it may be just the contrary,--don't suspect me of being a canting optimist. We may both find ourselves at the end of the year going to the hell of conscious moral and intellectual weakness. Still there is a possibility--even a probability--the other way. I have not seen Harriet Martineau's 'Comte' yet--she is going to give me a copy,--but Mr. Lewes tells me it seems to him admirably well done.<sup>52</sup>

One of Eliot's closest friends and most frequent correspondents was a Mrs. Congreve, the wife of an active English supporter of Positivism. Many of her remarks are directed to this woman, and on June 27, 1859, she tells her of Lewes's enthusiasm for the Politique.<sup>53</sup> Her personal journal entry for October 25th of the same year tells us that she has been reading Comte's Catechism.<sup>54</sup>

Turning again to a letter addressed to Sara Hennell, we find that on July 12, 1861, Eliot states her gratitude to Comte in this manner:

52 Cross, George Eliot's Life, I, 317-318.

53 Ibid., II, 116.

54 Ibid., 139.

I quite agree with you--so far as I am able to form a judgment--in regarding Positivism as one-sided; but Comte was a great thinker, nevertheless, and ought to be treated with reverence by all smaller fry.

I have just been reading the Survey of the Middle Ages contained in the fifth volume of the 'Philosophie Positive,' and to my apprehension few chapters can be fuller of luminous ideas. I am thankful to learn from it.<sup>55</sup>

A letter of November 28, 1862, does not explicitly attribute her increase of happiness to what she has learned from Comte, but states that her further enjoyment of existence is based on a decrease in egoistic yearnings; Comte does insist, we recall, that personal happiness depends upon the predominance of the sympathetic over the egoistic instincts.<sup>56</sup> She is writing to a friend of her days in Geneva, a M. D'Albert, and she says:

I think this year's end finds me enjoying existence more than I ever did before, in spite of the loss of youth. Study is a keener delight to me than ever, and I think the affections, instead of being dulled by age, have acquired a stronger activity,--or at least their activity seems stronger from being less perturbed by the egoism of young cravings.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 309-310. The one-sidedness of Positivism refers to Comte's predilection in his later writings for prophesying the future. His future state, originating in the worship of women and later in the worship of the Grand Etre, was not received well by many people who thought that he had left the scientific field of sociology. For just such reasons George Eliot never subscribed to the Comtist fund.

<sup>56</sup> Lewes, Comte's Philosophy, 221-222.

<sup>57</sup> J. W. Cross, ed., George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals, Rosehill Limited ed., Boston, 1895, II, 271.

In the year 1863, letters addressed to Mrs. Congreve in October and on November 28th and remarks directed to Madame Bodichon on December 4th indicate continued interest in Comte. On May 28, 1865, Eliot's journal entry tells us that she is rereading Comte's sections on social science in Miss Martineau's edition. An apparently personal reference in another letter to Mrs. Congreve, this one dated February 27, 1865, suggests something further: "I am ailing, but striving hard 'not to mind,' and not to diffuse my inward trouble, according to Madame de Vaux's excellent maxim." Clotilde de Vaux was loved by Auguste Comte, and he intended her to be his leading disciple in propagating the ideas of the worship of women and humanity. She died in 1846, but George Eliot and Mrs. Congreve are familiar with one of her maxims in 1865. The inference is simply that Eliot carried on frequent personal conversations with Mr. and Mrs. Congreve on the subject of the founder of Positivism; she saw them often, and this contact undoubtedly increased her knowledge of Comte. Her journal records attendance at two of Mr. Congreve's lectures on Positivism, those of May 5 and 12, 1865.<sup>58</sup>

Here is a summary of several other references to Comte: her journal entry for June 7, 1865, informs us that Spencer has provided her with Mill's second article on Comte; on

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., II, 289, 291, 293, 317-318, 313; III, 12-13.

October 28, 1865, she tells Sara Hennell that she objects to those who read only what third-rate writers have to say about the first-rate Comte; on December 22, 1866, she asks Mrs. Congreve to tell her husband that Lewes and she will carry the Politique on their vacation to the continent; on April 17, 1868, she tells Mrs. Congreve of the desire held by Lewes and herself to aid in the publishing expense of Mr. Congreve's translation of Comte; in August of that year she is reading the Politique again; on October 27, 1868, she thanks Mrs. Congreve for her "valuable gift" of a medalion of Comte, which she "shall always hold precious"; on July 25, 1869, she is reading Nisard and Littré on Comte; and on October 27, 1870, she reads part of Comte's correspondence.<sup>59</sup>

Two final quotations from Eliot and one from Cross indicate that Eliot's life was marked by a gratitude to and a knowledge and admiration of Comte. She reveals a grasp of his doctrine and a defense of his views in a reply to Mrs. Peter Taylor on May 30, 1867:

Apropos of what you say about Mr. Congreve, I think you have mistaken his, or rather Comte's, position. There is no denial of an unknown cause, but only a denial that such a conception is the proper basis of a practical religion. It seems to me pre-eminently desirable that we should learn not to make our personal comfort a standard of truth.<sup>60</sup>

59 Ibid., II, 318, 324, 353; III, 29-30, 45, 50-51, 75, 93.

60 Ibid., 14.

On January 16th of the same year she writes to Mrs. Congreve and expresses her gratitude to Comte, as she records her daily activity:

After breakfast we both read the 'Politique'--George one volume and I another, interrupting each other continually with questions and remarks. That morning study keeps me in a state of enthusiasm through the day--a moral glow, which is a sort of milieu subjectif for the sublime sea and sky. Mr. Lewes is converted to the warmest admiration of the chapter on language in the third volume, which about three years ago he thought slightly of. . . . My gratitude increases continually for the illumination Comte has contributed to my life. But we both of us study with a sense of having still much to learn and to understand.<sup>61</sup>

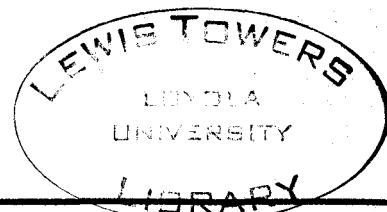
Writing the final pages of his commemoration of her, Mr. J. W. Cross, her husband after the death of Lewes, recalls the illness which was to bring about her death. Speaking of the activity of the time, he writes:

During her illness I read aloud, amongst other books, Comte's 'Discours Préliminaire,' translated by Dr. Bridges. This volume was one of her especial favourites, and she delighted in making me acquainted with it. For all Comte's writing she had a feeling of high admiration, intense interest, and very deep sympathy. I do not think I ever heard her speak of any writer with a more grateful sense of obligation for enlightenment.<sup>62</sup>

Let us look upon some of Eliot's personal statements on the tenets of Comtism. Her letters and journals abound with remarks on the need for altruism, the key, as we have seen, to

61 Ibid., 2-3.

62 Ibid., 418-419.



most of Comte's beliefs. Writing to Alexander Main, an editor of the outstanding sayings in her works, she says on January 1, 1873: "Amid all the irremediable trials of existence, men and women can nevertheless greatly help each other; and while we can help each other it is worth while to live."<sup>63</sup> On April 25, 1873, this statement on man's part in the future through love for youth is addressed to Mrs. William Smith:

With that renunciation for ourselves which age inevitably brings, we get more freedom of soul to enter into the life of others: what we can never learn they will know, and the gladness which is a departed sunlight to us is rising with the strength of morning to them.<sup>64</sup>

Cross's final words effectively summarize her chief end in life: "It was often in her mind and on her lips that the only worthy end of all learning, of all science, of all life, in fact, is, that human beings should love one another better."<sup>65</sup>

She reveals her sympathy with the study of the past in a letter of July 12, 1861, to Sara Hennell: "Yes; I hope we are well out of that phase in which the most philosophic view of the past was held to be a smiling survey of human folly, and when the wisest man was supposed to be one who could sympathize with no age but the age to come."<sup>66</sup>

---

63 Ibid., 158.

64 Ibid., 168-169.

65 Ibid., 347.

66 Ibid., II, 242.

Altruism, her doubt over future reward and punishment, and the implication that she has passed through the theological and metaphysical stages of her development are shown in these words of December 6, 1859, to M. D'Albert:

Many things that I should have argued against ten years ago, I now find myself too ignorant and too limited in moral sensibility, to speak of with confident disapprobation. On that question of our future existence to which you allude, I have undergone the sort of change I have just indicated, although my most rooted conviction is that the immediate object and the proper sphere of all our highest emotions are our struggling fellow-men in this earthly existence.<sup>67</sup>

A letter of November 22, 1861, contains the same thought as that addressed to J. W. Cross on August 14, 1875.<sup>68</sup> Writing to Sara Hennell she reveals her concentration on life because of doubt over the after-life: "The years seem to rush by now, and I think of death as a fast-approaching end of a journey,--double and treble reason for loving as well as working while it is day."<sup>69</sup>

Before the present writer concludes the discussion of Eliot's dependence on Comtist thought, two problems should be considered: the influence of Christianity on both Eliot and Comte and the opinions of the critics of her novels.

In a discussion of such great thinkers as Eliot and Comte, there is no danger of falling into what Professor Morize

---

67 Ibid., 116.

68 Ibid., III, 215.

69 Ibid., II, 250-251.

calls "the hypnotism of the unique source."<sup>70</sup> Eliot was an omnivorous reader, and there is no doubt that she was influenced by Strauss, Hennell, Feuerbach, and others; Comte's predecessors of similar thought include Saint-Simon, Turgot, and Dr. Burdin. Moreover, both of them were products of Western civilization, that culture indelibly marked by the thought of Christianity.

Comte's opposition to theology, and more especially to monotheism, might give the appearance of a virulent antagonism towards Christianity. He is not, however, so strongly opposed to Catholicism as the first glance would indicate. Protestantism comes in for his strong disapproval because of its emphasis on individualism, an emphasis which the originator of the word altruism cannot but oppose. In the dogma of Catholicism Comte finds much to praise. He sees in "the doctrine of the incarnation, the cult of the saints, and above all the cult of the Virgin . . . so many stones ready for the building of the new religion."<sup>71</sup> In these phenomena and the Catholic belief that man receives the body of his creator into his own body, Comte sees a transition in which humanity is becoming increasingly important and the worship of God is weakening. He follows Catholicism in setting up a ritual for the Positive religion, going so far as to incorporate sacraments

---

<sup>70</sup> André Morize, Problems and Methods of Literary History, Boston, 1922, 88.

<sup>71</sup> Henri de Lubac, S.J., The Drama of Atheist Humanism trans. Edith M. Riley, New York, 1950, 116.



into his Positive rites.<sup>72</sup> Despite this imitation of Catholicism Comte was forced in the end to admit that

'Catholicism proved competent only in regard to personal life, whence its influence barely extended to domestic relations, without in any way being able to embrace social life', so that its efficacy 'has been greatly exaggerated'; that it was, moreover, 'so shocking in itself, for both mind and heart', that 'our pious and chivalrous ancestors' would, like ourselves, have been very well aware of its natural flaws, but for the social efficacy which the priesthood stamped upon it and which alone caused its rule to be endured; that in spite of everything it preserved 'the fantastic spirit and egotistical character proper to even the purest theologism'; that its philosophic influence would have become disastrous 'without the whole set of polytheistic antecedents' from which it never succeeded in purging the understanding.<sup>73</sup>

Both Comte and George Eliot had great admiration for the Imitation of Christ, although part of Eliot's interest must be drawn from references in The Mill on the Floss, since the available letters are not generously revealing on this subject. Miss Evans probably read and doubtless admired the Imitation before her acquaintance with Comte.<sup>74</sup> Comte scorns the bad taste of the Protestants for their disregard of that "incomparable summary of Western monotheism."<sup>75</sup> Perhaps Comte was stimulated by what its

72 Ibid., 116 and 130.

73 Ibid., 120.

74 Cf. Cross, George Eliot's Life, Edinburgh, Letter to Sara Hennell, Feb. 9, 1849, I, 199-200, and Journal, Nov. 18, 1859, II, 142.

75 Lubac, Drama of Atheist Humanism, 121.

recent translator calls "that increasing modern sense of man's innate dignity, the call to spiritual knighthood by way of honour, frankness, love, self-control, honesty, and conscience, reminding us of our active part in aiming at the ultimate good for all."<sup>76</sup> The influence of Christianity on Eliot's thought is difficult to isolate, but it doubtless exists. Like Hennell, Strauss, and Feuerbach, she probably embraced much of the way of life demonstrated by Jesus as she rejected His dogma.

Yes, "the hypnotism of the unique source" is easily avoided. Auguste Comte's "mind was far less the servant of a personal choice than the instrument of the will of a particular age."<sup>77</sup> George Eliot was also a product of the century of ethics. She is nonetheless indebted to Comte for part of her thought and the structure of her books. Both Comte and Eliot were actors in the drama of atheist humanism.

Turning to the literary critics, we see that the influence of Positivism on Eliot's life and writings is no longer debated. It is true that Joan Bennett does not think Eliot learned anything new from Comte:

Charles Bray has a right to claim his share among the influences which shaped George Eliot's vision of life.  
 . . . There was no subsequent revolution in her ideas;

---

<sup>76</sup> Thomas à Kempis, The Imitation of Christ, trans. Edgar Daplyn, New York, 1950, 10.

<sup>77</sup> Lubac, Drama of Atheist Humanism, 98.

the standpoint of Herbert Spencer, of G. H. Lewes, of the writings of Auguste Comte and of Feuerbach tended to confirm and enlarge, not to alter, the conceptions she developed at Coventry.<sup>78</sup>

But this enlargement, this insistence by Comte of the conflict between egoism and altruism, for example, forms the basis for her novels. Without Comte her belief would perhaps have been essentially the same, but her novels would not be so strictly constructed moralistically. One of Eliot's early biographers, George Willis Cooke, agrees with Miss Bennett;<sup>79</sup> yet he states that Comte's "altruism commanded her hearty belief, and to its principles she devoted her life."<sup>80</sup>

Mr. Cornelius Weygandt sees and criticizes the preaching of Comte's Positivism in the novels following Silas Marner, those of her later period.<sup>81</sup> Weygandt's opinion is also held by Wilbur L. Cross.<sup>82</sup> Still another critic maintains that the later novels are marked by an emergence of Comtist philosophy from the background of her books, where it had been present since the

---

78 Joan Bennett, George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art, Cambridge, Mass., 1948, 25.

79 George Eliot: A Critical Study, 172.

80 Ibid., 189.

81 Cornelius Weygandt, "The Higher Provincialism of George Eliot," A Century of the English Novel, New York, 1925, 190.

82 Wilbur L. Cross, "The Psychological Novel," The Development of the English Novel, New York, 1899, 243-244.

earliest writing.<sup>83</sup>

As a final example of the general accord in the belief that Eliot's consciously moralistic writing is based on Positivism, let us turn to Madeleine Cazamian:

S'il faut chercher à quel système contemporain cette intuition [by which Eliot has been guided] violée et souveraine est apparentée, on le trouvera dans le positivisme. . . . Ce sont là les idées et les sentiments qui inspirent les jugements de G. Eliot sur la conduite de ses personnages et sur toutes les institutions morales, sociales, et religieuses; ce sont eux aussi qui, rayonnant au delà du présent, éclairent pour elle la promesse d'un avenir plus harmonieux et meilleur.<sup>84</sup>

In spite of all the evidence hitherto presented, there is no statement by George Eliot herself which admits her dependence on Comtism for some of the ideas in any particular novel or type of story. There are two reasons for this reticence, aside from the generally observed practice of authors not to state the influences upon them.

Frederic Harrison, in writing an exposition of Positivism, disavows any connection with the English Comtist group but asks for tolerance and understanding towards the sect and its members. He pictures the attitude of England in this manner:

---

83 Mathilde Parlett, "The Influence of Contemporary Criticism on George Eliot," Studies in Philology, Chapel Hill, XXX, Jan., 1933, 110.

84 Madeleine L. Cazamian, "George Eliot," Le Roman et Les Idées en Angleterre: L'Influence de la Science (1860-1890), Strasbourg, 1923, 170-171.

It seems that men in this country are at liberty to profess themselves adherents of every system of thought but one. A man may--one or two do--study and uphold the principles of Hegel. Benthamism is a creed with living disciples. Mr. Mill may be called the chief of a school. A fair field is open to all of these, at least in any field which is open to freedom of thought. But if a man ventures to treat a public question avowedly from the Positive point of view, he is assailed by professed friends to free inquiry as if he were an enemy of the human race, to whom the ordinary courtesies are denied; and some of the commonest names he will hear for himself are atheist, fanatic, and conspirator.<sup>85</sup>

Assuming that Harrison's statement is exaggerated, the present writer can evince no surprise that the sensitive George Eliot, whose husband read all the reviews of her books and showed her only the complimentary ones, would restrict her comments on Comtism to her personal writings and would not stand up on a platform and make a completely unmistakable statement of adherence to Positivism.

In the closing pages of his article Mr. Harrison speaks of his personal attitude towards Positivism and clearly states that he is not to be considered as allied with Mr. Congreve's group.<sup>86</sup> In commenting on his personal views in a letter of January 15, 1870, to him, Eliot reveals the second reason for the absence of a statement on her debt to Comtism:

---

<sup>85</sup> Frederic Harrison, "The Positivist Problem," Fortnightly Review, London, VI, New Series, Nov. 1, 1869, 490.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 490-493.

On reading 'The Positive Position' a second time I gained a stronger impression of its general value, and I also felt less jarred by the more personal part at the close. Mr. Lewes would tell you that I have an unreasonable aversion to personal statements, and when I come to like them it is usually by a hard process of conversion. . . . But the fact is, I shrink from decided 'deliverances' on momentous subjects from the dread of coming to swear by my own 'deliverances,' and sinking into an insistent echo of myself. That is a horrible destiny,--and one cannot help seeing that many of the most powerful men fall in to it.<sup>87</sup>

In a letter to Mrs. Peter Taylor dated July 18, 1878, she repeats the same thought and points out in addition that she is concerned only with aesthetic teaching:

I thought you understood that I have grave reasons for not speaking on certain public topics. No request from the best friend in the world--even from my own husband--ought to induce me to speak when I judge it my duty to be silent. If I had taken a contrary decision, I should not have remained silent till now. My function is that of the aesthetic, not the doctrinal teacher,--the rousing of the nobler emotions, which make mankind desire the social right, not the prescribing of special measures, concerning which the artistic mind, however strongly moved by social sympathy, is often not the best judge.<sup>88</sup>

There will be no further statement on Eliot's views.

We must turn to her aesthetic teachings; before we do, however, let us listen attentively to one of her statements on the purpose she has in writing. On July 5, 1859, after the completion of both Scenes of Clerical Life and Adam Bede, she writes to Charles Bray:

87 Cross, ed., George Eliot's Life, Rosehill, III, 80-81.

88 Ibid., 268.

If art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally. I have had heart-cutting experience that opinions are a poor cement between human souls; and the only effect I ardently desire to produce by my writings is, that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures.<sup>89</sup>

---

89 Ibid., II, 88.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PRESENCE OF COMTE'S PHILOSOPHY IN ELIOT'S EARLIER NOVELS

On September 22, 1856, George Eliot began to write fiction.<sup>1</sup> To affirm that her first volume, Scenes of Clerical Life, is a fictional adaptation of Comte's philosophy would be to extend the truth beyond all just bounds. To deny that this volume manifests elements of his thought would be to disregard its contents.

"The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton" is the title of the work by which Eliot entered the world of the novel. It was to be the first of a series of stories treating the life of the clergy in human rather than theological aspects, and upon its completion Lewes sent it to his friend John Blackwood, who printed it in the January, 1857, number of his magazine.<sup>2</sup>

The story tells how the Reverend Amos Barton, whose wife, Milly, does wonders in rearing a family of six children on

---

1 Oscar Browning, Life of George Eliot, Great Writers Series, ed. Eric S. Robertson, London, 1892, 46.

2 Blanche Colton Williams, George Eliot, New York, 1936, 128-131.



eighty pounds a year, is adroitly flattered and cozened by the Countess Czerlaski, who is being slandered by the townspeople. The Countess is left with little except her egoism when her half-brother, Bridmain, marries a servant and leaves her. She thereupon takes up her abode with her good friends the Bartons. Her visit lengthens into months, the expense and work involved in taking care of her has its effect on the Bartons' purse and Milly's health, and Mr. Barton is talked about in uncomplimentary terms in the village of Shepperton. After Milly becomes ill and the maid speaks to the Countess insolently, the Countess leaves. Milly dies a short time later, and the townspeople again look upon Amos with the human sympathy they had withdrawn. Mr. Barton loses his curacy, moves to another neighborhood, and after many years returns to visit the grave of the woman he had not loved enough.

Amos Barton is not the conventional fictional hero.

His creator goes to great lengths to show his deficiencies in grammar and the small esteem in which he is held by the townspeople.<sup>3</sup> More than once she interrupts the flow of incident to explain that she is writing of a character who is neither ideal nor exceptional. Why is she interested in telling her readers about common human beings? She does not have a lofty imagination, she tells us, and

---

<sup>3</sup> George Eliot, "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton," Scenes of Clerical Life, Rosehill Limited ed., Boston, 1894, I, 18-19.

being unable to invent thrilling incidents for your amusement, my only merit must lie in the truth with which I represent to you the humble experience of ordinary fellow-mortals. I wish to stir your sympathy with commonplace troubles--to win your tears for real sorrow: sorrow such as may live next door to you--such as walks neither in rags nor in velvet, but in very ordinary, decent apparel.<sup>4</sup>

Amos is not only an unconventional hero, but he is also selfish in his sympathy. His is not a life controlled by egoistic impulses but one which, because it was not strong in sympathy, evolved into one careless of feeling for others. It was this absence of sympathy which brought about the remorse and inward woe following his wife's death:

Amos Barton had been an affectionate husband, and while Milly was with him, he was never visited by the thought that perhaps his sympathy was not quick and watchful enough; but now he re-lived all their life together, with that terrible keenness of memory and imagination which bereavement gives, and he felt as if his very love needed a pardon for its poverty and selfishness.<sup>5</sup>

When Milly is lowered into the ground, he fully realizes his shortcomings and throws himself on the grave sobbing his apology for not having loved her enough.<sup>6</sup>

Milly Barton is beset by more than her simply forgetful husband. The Countess Czerlaski is outwardly egoistic, the prototype of a long series of Eliot's characters. The Countess really

---

4 Ibid., 82-83.

5 Ibid., 102.

6 Ibid., 108.

loved Milly, but only to the extent that her preoccupied affection would permit: "For you have already perceived that there was one being to whom the Countess was absorbingly devoted, and to whose desires she made everything subservient--namely, Caroline Czerlaski, nee Bridmain."<sup>7</sup> In another characterization of the Countess, George Eliot sounds like Thackeray as she says:

It is true, the Countess was a little vain, a little ambitious, a little selfish, a little shallow and frivolous, a little given to white lies.--But who considers such slight blemishes, such moral pimples as these, disqualifications for entering into the most respectable society!<sup>8</sup>

The reason Milly puts up with the Countess and guides and encourages her husband is that "her heart . . . overflowed with love." When the slander over the Countess's living at the Barton home had become widespread, Milly "was only vexed that her husband should be vexed--only wounded because he was misconceived." Milly's love is directed to others, and that the people of Shepperton realize her worth is shown when, after her death, they repay her affection with sympathy toward her husband: "No one breathed the Countess's name now; for Milly's memory hallowed her husband, as of old the place was hallowed on which an angel from God had alighted."<sup>9</sup>

---

7 Ibid., 57.

8 Ibid., 55.

9 Ibid., 26, 86, 103.

When Amos Barton prepares to leave Shepperton, there is regret in the hearts of the flock which had so recently criticized him. Is this turnabout in their view an unexpected and unjustified incident? Not at all, says our author, for

his recent troubles had called out their better sympathies, and that is always a source of love. Amos failed to touch the spring of goodness by his sermons, but he touched it effectually by his sorrows; and there was now a real bond between him and his flock.<sup>10</sup>

His life has had a beneficial effect upon others. His omissions and faults have been forgotten, and there is at the end of his curacy more love in Shepperton than there had been before his coming.

Her second venture into the field of fiction is entitled "Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story." It tells of the youthful love of Maynard Gilfil for Tina, an Italian orphan brought to England by Sir Christopher and Lady Cheverel. Tina, however, loves Sir Christopher's nephew, the self-centered Anthony Wybrow, and when Anthony, who had returned Tina's devotion, begins to court the young and noble Beatrice at the behest of his uncle, Tina goes through a sorrow and pain culminating in her determination to kill Anthony. When she arrives at their rendezvous, she finds him dead from a chronic heart disease, is shocked into insensibility, and leaves the manor. Maynard finds her at a friend's house, nurses her back to health, and marries her, but she dies in giving birth

---

10 Ibid., 106.

to her first child. After her death Maynard keeps a chamber in his home sacred to her memory, but he never speaks of his early love.

In the person of Anthony we have a development of the egoistic character. George Eliot describes the people of all her books from the omniscient point of view, but we see Captain Wybrow more through his action and conversation than through his creator's more typical direct observation. When he is preparing to fulfil his uncle's wish by wooing Beatrice Assher, he says good-bye to Tina, and after kissing her thinks to himself: "Poor little Tina! it would make her very happy to have me. But she is a mad little thing."<sup>11</sup> The casual reader is immediately arrested by this incisive characterization; the regular reader of Eliot notes that this person is in all likelihood the personification of the egoism he has seen again and again in Eliot's work.

George Eliot seldom expects her readers to grasp niceties of characterization, however. One of the main criticisms directed against her is that she is too direct and does not leave enough for her reader's imagination. This trait is shown in her personal estimate of Anthony; she is direct, but could anyone be more devastating and analytical in characterization without being direct? Is not her power of analysis sufficient to overcome any

---

<sup>11</sup> Eliot, "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story," Scenes, I, 151.

repugnance towards authorial speechifying? She is speaking of Wybrow's relation to Tina when she says that he

really felt very kindly toward her, and would very likely have loved her--if he had been able to love any one. . . . 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.<sup>12</sup>

This self-indulgence brings about his infatuation for Tina and enables him to abide by his uncle's wish that he court the young Beatrice. It is Anthony's egoism, then, which is a controlling factor in the plot. John Bassett points out that Eliot's theme may have two aspects: the degeneration following selfish acts or the regeneration following loving acts:

It is the first of these aspects that George Eliot commonly emphasizes and this accounts for the weighty sense of gloom and depression which marks the greater part of her work, a depression arising from the portrayal of the disastrous effects that overtake a wrongdoing which frequently has its inception in some seemingly harmless although selfish trait.<sup>13</sup>

Numerous other references to Anthony's character make his egoism unmistakable.

Although Tina's loving nature is pointed out, her chief function is to receive the love and sympathy of another. When she

---

12 Ibid., 177.

13 John J. Bassett, "The Purpose in George Eliot's Art," Anglia, Halle, LIV, Nov., 1930, 347.

recovers from the shock of Anthony's death, she finds that Maynard has cared for her during her illness. Her character would not permit a marriage with Wybrow, but is rather made for the one who has had her interest in his heart from early youth. When the music she loves has stirred her soul to remembrance and prompted her recovery, Eliot comments: "The delicate-tendrilled plant must have something to cling to. The soul that was born anew to music was born anew to love."<sup>14</sup>

When Maynard discovers Tina after her long absence from Cheverel Manor, he sits up with her throughout the night and comforts her in her bodily and mental pain. Eliot comments on their personal relations and on the human relations which have such a great influence on men's lives:

Mr. Gilfil felt as if in the long hours of that night the bond that united his love for ever and alone to Caterina had acquired fresh strength and sanctity. It is so with the human relations that rest on the deep emotional sympathy of affection: every new day and night of joy or sorrow is a new ground, a new consecration, for the love that is nourished by memories as well as hopes--the love to which perpetual repetition is not a weariness but a want, and to which a separated joy is the beginning of pain.<sup>15</sup>

That the most satisfactory results issue from actions based on sympathy and the most disastrous ones from actions based on egoism will be a recurrent theme as we continue to investigate Eliot's

---

<sup>14</sup> Eliot, "Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story," Scenes, I, 289.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 282-283.

novels.

The last of the Scenes of Clerical Life is entitled "Janet's Repentance" and relates the trials, quickening sympathy, and later happiness of Janet Dempster. As the story begins, the town of Milby, under the leadership of Janet's husband, Robert, is attempting to curtail the preaching of a new Evangelical clergyman, Mr. Edgar Tryan. The egotistical, well-respected, drinking lawyer who is Robert Dempster has been married to Janet for fifteen years, but their marriage is marred by his ill-treatment of Janet, who has taken to drink in an effort to deaden her sensibilities. Janet is essentially kind, but she does not follow her husband's views on Tryan's preaching. One night she embarrasses Robert in front of his associates, whereupon he turns her out of the house. She seeks refuge with a neighbor, and remembering the sympathetic appearance of Mr. Tryan, she sends for him. He comforts her and wins her confidence by demonstrating that he has attained peace through faith in God and sympathy with his fellows. Meanwhile, Dempster has an accident and a consequent attack of delirium tremens. Janet's sympathy is aroused, and she cares for him in his sickness, but before she can discover if he will accept her forgiveness, he dies. Janet resists further inclination to drink and arranges better living conditions for Mr. Tryan. When he dies of consumption, his spirit is rich in the knowledge that he has rescued Janet's life from despair, and his life is hallowed.



in the memory of his fellow men.

Before considering the characters who produce the plot of the story, let us observe the attitude of the author, the altruistic viewpoint from which she gazes on the world and its creatures.

She imagines Mr. Jerome, a friend of Janet who has a very kind voice, pointing out the need for sympathy. She hears him saying: "Ah, friends, this pleasant world is a sad one, too, isn't it? Let us help one another, let us help one another."<sup>16</sup> This quotation reminds the present writer of Canon Barry's idea that George Eliot in all her novels seems to say: "If there is good in store for the race, why not strive towards accomplishing it? How laughable our regard for self; how piteous, too!"<sup>17</sup>

Although the reader is not restricted to any one of Eliot's books for an insight into her tolerance of religions, "Janet's Repentance" shows her reasoning clearly. She is tolerant of any religion which gives comfort to her fellow men. The individual members, not the church sects, win her interest:

Yet surely, surely the only true knowledge of our fellow-man is that which enables us to feel with him--which gives us a fine ear for the heart-pulses that are beating under the mere clothes of circumstance and opinion. Our subtlest analysis of school and sects must miss the

---

16 Eliot, "Janet's Repentance," Scenes, II, 29.

17 William Barry, "The Genius of George Eliot," Heralds of Revolt: Studies in Modern Literature and Dogma, London, 1902, 29.

essential truth, unless it be lit up by the love that sees in all forms of human thought and work, the life and death struggles of separate human beings.<sup>18</sup>

A brief consideration of the characters of Janet and Edgar Tryan will be sufficient to show the increasingly familiar dependence on the application of sympathy. When Robert Dempster cast his wife out into the streets, she

felt she was alone: no human soul had measured her anguish, had understood her self-despair, had entered into her sorrows and her sins with that deep-sighted sympathy which is wiser than all blame, more potent than all reproof--such sympathy as had swelled her own heart for many a sufferer.<sup>19</sup>

In reality Janet's care for the sick people of Milby was not a powerful enough altruism for her subsequent problems. This love was inadequate when the breaking point with her husband finally came. Her nature required the direction of a great love outside of self. Since her mother was not feeble, aged, or sickly, Janet's moral nature could not be stimulated by strong maternal feeling.<sup>20</sup> Mr. Tryan's sympathy for her was an immediate help, but it was insufficient for continued improvement of her affection, "the chief strength of her nature."<sup>21</sup> It is in the care of her sick husband that she becomes indifferent to personal needs, for "she was too unconscious of herself to feel either temptations or

---

18 Eliot, "Janet's Repentance," Scenes, II, 55.

19 Ibid., 88.

20 Ibid., 96.

21 Ibid., 157.

accusations."<sup>22</sup> This impetus to someone outside of self expands to the altruistic and happy care for Mr. Tryan and the needy members of his flock.<sup>23</sup>

Mr. Tryan's life has been marked by a strong "dependence on sympathy,"<sup>24</sup> but his contact with Janet impresses upon him anew the need for an extension of sympathy.<sup>25</sup> The role of affection in the life of man, then, has two aspects. The personal need for sympathy acts as a starting point for his love towards others. His personal desire for sympathy provides him with an appreciation for the feelings of others; henceforth he should extend his sympathy outside himself. If man's personal need for affection is not guided to an outward and selfless extension of love, a degeneration which results in a desire for mere gratification and consequent egoism will follow.

In her salute to the good accomplished by Mr. Tryan and Evangelicalism, Eliot points to the realization of duty and the resultant trend to altruistic action:

Nevertheless, Evangelicalism had brought into palpable existence and operation in Milby society that idea of duty, that recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self, which is to the moral life what the addition of a great central ganglion is to animal life. No man can begin to mould himself

---

22 Ibid., 151.

23 Ibid., 175-176.

24 Ibid., 37.

25 Ibid., 108-118.

on a faith or an idea without rising to a higher order of experience: a principle of subordination, of self-mastery, has been introduced into his nature; he is no longer a mere bundle of impressions, desires, and impulses.<sup>26</sup>

Eliot sums up the feelings of Dempster when he loses Mr. Jerome's legal business by the observation that "the involuntary loss of any familiar object almost always brings a chill as from an evil omen; it seems to be the first finger-shadow of advancing death."<sup>27</sup> She is not content with the effect the thought of death has on the souls of men:

It is a sad weakness in us, after all, that the thought of a man's death hallows him anew to us; as if life were not sacred too--as if it were comparatively a light thing to fall in love and reverence to the brother who has to climb the whole toilsome steep with us and all our tears and tenderness were due to the one who is spared that hard journey.<sup>28</sup>

In the world of George Eliot life must be emphasized because we can have no certainty of the after-life. The doctrine of consequence plays a large part in her stories because justice must be meted out in this world. Robert Dempster dies, not that the

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 52. It must not, of course, be concluded that the source of Eliot's concept of duty could be no one other than Comte. Wordsworth, for example, was one of her lasting favorites, and he considers duty in many of his poems. For Eliot's reading of Wordsworth, confer Cross, George Eliot's Life, Edinburgh, Letter to Miss Lewis, November 22, 1839, I, 61, and Letter to Frederic Harrison, April 19, 1880, III, 388-389.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 63.

sympathy of Janet may be inspired--for that action was accomplished during his illness--but because the consequences of his ill-treatment of her must be revealed within the pages of life. Eliot's insistence that we reap what we sow is central to her moral writing, for she must demonstrate the reaping in this life. As a product of the nineteenth-century scientific movement George Eliot lost her faith in the reward and punishment of an after-life, but she retained a Positive morality and attempted to provide it with sanctions in this life. It is her success, notwithstanding this great limitation, which marks her as a great novelist and prompts F.W.H. Myers to speak of

the greatness of her actual achievement, of her practical working-out of the fundamental dogma of the so-called Religion of Humanity--the expansion, namely, of the sense of human fellowship into an impulse strong enough to compel us to live for others, even though it be beneath the on-coming shadow of an endless night. For she held that there was so little chance of man's immortality that it was a grievous error to flatter him with such a belief; a grievous error at least to distract him by promises of future recompense from the urgent and obvious motives of well-doing,--our love and pity for our fellowmen.<sup>29</sup>

There is a reward which comes to the doer of good, however, and it is the influence he has upon others and the memory of him in their lives. The doctrine of subjective immortality is suggested by the results of Edgar Tryan's life. There is more than a simple gravestone to hallow his memory; there is another memorial

which bears a fuller record: it is Janet Dempster, rescued from self-despair, strengthened with divine hopes, and now looking back on years of purity and hopeful labor. The man who has left such a memorial behind him, must have been one whose heart beat with true compassion, and whose lips were moved by fervent faith.<sup>30</sup>

Let us turn now to Eliot's first full-length novel,

Adam Bede. It has received high praise since its original publication and is considered by some critics as "probably the most beautiful and completely satisfying of all George Eliot's books."<sup>31</sup> Gerald Bullett maintains that, despite isolated defects, it is a book which, "taken as a whole, cannot be spoken of except in terms of high respect."<sup>32</sup>

The plot has two strands: that dealing with the activities of Adam Bede and his family and that concerned with Arthur Donnithorne, the young heir to a great estate. Seth Bede, Adam's brother, is in love with the young Methodist preacher, Dinah Morris; she refuses his proposal, however, because she wishes to devote her life to others. Adam, a young ambitious carpenter, has a secret admiration for the lovely and egotistical Hetty Sorrell, niece of the sharp-tongued Mrs. Poyser. His friend and social superior Arthur is also infatuated with her, and although Arthur

---

30 Eliot, "Janet's Repentance," Scenes, II, 186.

31 Edward Wagenknedht, "The 'New' Novel: George Eliot," Cavalcade of the English Novel, New York, 1943, 321.

32 George Eliot, 181.

resolves to give up the affair, circumstances and his own weakness prevent the fulfillment of this resolution. When Arthur attains his majority, a great birthday feast is held, and Adam is named caretaker of the Donnithorne forests. Arthur's affair with Hetty has been continued secretly. When Adam discovers Arthur and Hetty in a parting embrace, a fight ensues, after which Adam demands a letter from Arthur to Hetty, in which Arthur explains that their marriage is impossible. Arthur goes away for military training, and Hetty, anxious for any change in her crushed state of life, accepts Adam's proposal. Fear comes into her life as the marriage approaches, and she consequently goes in search of Arthur under the pretense of a visit to Dinah. She is unable to find him, contemplates suicide, and is jailed for the murder of her newly-born child. When Dinah comes to her in prison, she brings her to confess and repent of having deserted her child. Hetty asks forgiveness of Adam on the morning she is to be hanged. A short time later Arthur arrives with a release from death but an order of deportation. Arthur's grandfather has meanwhile died, but Arthur tells Adam that, because he is returning to the army to make up for the past, Adam should remain on the estate. Adam assents, they part friends, and Adam later marries Dinah after her deciding at last that it is the Divine Will that they be joined.

In the major characters revealed by this pastoral novel, we find a tension out of which the plot organically forms it-

self. The egotistical Hetty is the center toward which the major male characters are attracted. Adam is unaware of her outstanding trait and so approaches her rather naively. Arthur, through a partial weakness in his nature, makes love to Hetty without thinking of the future consequences. Let us turn to the text for a characterization of Arthur, the person with whom many readers are most sympathetic.

In all justice to Arthur, and to his creator, who is always quick to point out the good facets of her weak characters, we should first ascertain whether or not he falls into misdeeds without a struggle. Eliot emphasizes his active conscience: "Nature has taken care that he shall never go far astray with perfect comfort and satisfaction to himself."<sup>33</sup>

The chief motivation in Arthur's resolution to give up Hetty is an avoidance of scandal which would show itself in a decrease of the respect being shown him. He would hate himself if he caused such an uproar, for "he could no more believe that he should so fall in his own esteem than that he should break both his legs and go on crutches all the rest of his life. He couldn't imagine himself in that position; it was too odious, too unlike him." The reader is not surprised to learn that Arthur's

---

<sup>33</sup> George Eliot, Adam Bede, in The Best-Known Novels of George Eliot, Modern Library ed., New York, n.d., 92.



determination to break up the affair with Hetty is motivated by egoism, is an action "that he should always look back upon with pride."

It is easy to see that Arthur is proud and vain, that he is consequently dependent on the opinions of others, and that Comte would not therefore describe him as in the fully developed stages of egoism. Speaking of his friendship for Adam, Eliot, in an effort to make her analysis complete, says: "I will not say that his love for that good fellow did not owe some of its force to the love of patronage: our friend Arthur liked to do everything that was handsome, and to have his handsome deeds recognized."

In all of her longer novels Eliot makes certain through repetition that we fully realize the characteristics of her main personages; as a result we are certain that Arthur lived "a great deal in other people's opinions and feelings concerning himself."<sup>34</sup> She also makes certain that we do not completely condemn those characters who perform morally bad actions. Speaking of Arthur's reaction to the fight with Adam and his consequent loss of Adam's respect, she says:

Arthur's, as you know, was a loving nature. Deeds of kindness were as easy to him as a bad habit: they were the common issues of his egoism and his sympathy.

---

34 Ibid., 102, 200, 120, 126.

He didn't like to witness pain, and he liked to have grateful eyes beaming on him as the giver of pleasure.<sup>35</sup>

It is impossible to describe Arthur's character completely without overwhelming the reader with quotations; two outstanding points are nevertheless obvious: his egoism is sufficient to bring sorrow into the lives of the Hayslope citizenry, but his nature is a mixed one, and sympathy directs many of his actions. The fact that he is neither a black nor a white character accounts for the interest in him shown by the reading public.

Hetty Sorrell's actions are almost entirely motivated by egoism. The sharp and carefully-chosen words of Mrs. Poyser present characterization difficult to forget: "She's no better than a peacock, as 'ud strut about on the wall, and spread its tail when the sun shone if all the folk i' the parish was dying. . . . It's my belief her heart's as hard as a pebble." Why does Hetty turn to Adam immediately after her sorrow over Arthur's departure? Eliot tells us that her resolution was the convulsive action of a person desperate for a change, a person with nothing to cling to because of the possession of "a mind where no strong sympathies are at work." After Hetty leaves Hayslope in an effort to find Arthur, she feels sorrow over what she has left behind. Is her sorrow incited by love for the Poyser, who have given her a home these many years? Does she worry about their concern over

her probably prolonged absence? No; "s/he thought of all she had left behind with yearning regret for her own sake: her own misery filled her heart: there was no room in it for other people's sorrow."<sup>36</sup>

Eliot seldom lets her readers mistake her egoistic characters. In the event the reader missed the point of the selection just quoted, he reads this statement a few pages later:

Poor wandering Hetty, with the rounded childish face, and the hard unloving despairing soul looking out of it--with the narrow heart and narrow thoughts, no room in them for any sorrows but her own and tasting that sorrow with more intense bitterness!<sup>37</sup>

Contrasted with Arthur and Hetty are Adam and Dinah.

It is true that we are told of Adam's "too little fellow-feeling with the weakness that errs in spite of foreseen consequences,"<sup>38</sup> but aside from this comment both Adam and Dinah are highly praised and almost perfect people. While reading the characterization of each of them, the present writer realizes the truth of Gerald Bullett's acute observation on Eliot's power of character portrayal: "If you are a character in a George Eliot novel, the chief thing you have to fear is your author's unqualified moral approval. If that cannot destroy your pretension to reality, nothing can."<sup>39</sup>

---

36 Ibid., 114-115, 247, 270.

37 Ibid., 283.

38 Ibid., 154.

39 George Eliot, 182.

Before the story is well under way, Adam characterizes himself in a soliloquy which, though rich in dialect, is difficult for the reader to take:

'A pig may poke his nose into the trough and think o' nothing outside it; but if you've got a man's heart and soul in you, you can't be easy a-making your own bed an' leaving the rest to lie on the stones. Nay, nay, I'll never slip my neck out o' the yoke, and leave the load to be drawn by the weak uns.'<sup>40</sup>

At the end of the story he is the same Adam, devoid since Hetty's trial of the hardness which he had accused himself of,<sup>41</sup> but with the same love for his fellows. When Dinah hesitates in her answer to his proposal, he hopes that she will come to see his point of view:

'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 o' knowledge.'<sup>42</sup>

Eliot makes her characterization unmistakable by showing us Adam from her vantage point. At this type of observation she is always at her best when dealing with gray characters; the reader may consequently have a cloying sensation when he reads

<sup>40</sup> Eliot, Adam Bede, in The Best-Known Novels, 37.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 370.

that

Adam had a devout mind, though he was perhaps rather impatient of devout words; and his tenderness lay very close to his reverence, so that the one could hardly be stirred without the other. But after feeling had welled up and poured itself out in this way, busy thought would come back with greater vigour; and this morning it was intent on schemes by which the roads might be improved that were so imperfect all through the country, and on picturing all the benefits that might come from the exertion of a single country gentleman, if he would set himself to getting the roads made good in his own district.<sup>43</sup>

Dinah's place in the story of Adam Bede was decided upon long before details were worked out in Eliot's imagination. Her function in the plot is made obvious by her actions. She refuses Seth's proposal because of her love for others; she does not like to leave Hayslope because of her interest in Hetty, but the appeal of ministering to the people of Snowfield is stronger; she comforts Lisbeth Bede in her sorrow; she goes to Hetty in prison and rides with her to the execution; finally she finds it necessary to hesitate over Adam's proposal because her acceptance may offend God by taking her away from the creatures to whom she has dedicated her life.<sup>44</sup> If the reader needs any further confirmation of Dinah's altruism, around which the story is constructed, he has passages such as Dinah's statement to Seth after he has asked her to marry him: "I desire to live and die without husband or

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 27, 25-26, 76-84, 45 and 47, 367-371.

children. I seem to have no room in my soul for wants and fears of my own, it has pleased God to fill my heart so full with the wants and sufferings of his fair people."<sup>45</sup> Dinah's diction at this point and throughout the story, although probably chosen because of her Methodist preaching background, does not help the reader to accept her reality. Largely because of her moral perfection, the present writer considers her the signal failure in a galaxy of outstanding characters contributing to the continued popularity of Adam Bede.

Out of altruism Comte draws forth the concept of human solidarity. Since man can improve himself morally only by extending his love to others, he should feel his solidarity with the rest of the race. Eliot suggests this solidarity in her statements on the doctrine of consequences, a belief, as we have seen, which must be upheld by a novelist who issues no promise for a future life. Both Adam and Mr. Irwine are deeply aware of this doctrine, but Arthur's early actions are not influenced by it. Without the altruistic spirit it is possible only to believe, not to realize or to act upon the fact that trouble breeds far-flung consequences. Adam says to Arthur:

'I've seen pretty clear, ever since I could cast up a sum, as you can never do what's wrong without breeding sin and trouble more than you can ever see. It's like

---

45 Ibid., 27.

a bit o' bad workmanship--you never see th' end o' the mischief it'll do. And it's a poor look-out to come into the world to make your fellow-creatures worse off instead o' better.<sup>46</sup>

Mr. Irwine is of the same opinion: "Our deeds carry their terrible consequences, quite apart from any fluctuations that went before--consequences that are hardly ever confined to ourselves."<sup>47</sup>

The advice is clear, but the strong element of egoism in Arthur's nature prevents him from following it.

Once man has become convinced of the solidarity of the race, of his membership in humanity, he will become more altruistic in his realization. Eliot explains that there is bound to be despair as well as gladness in the world:

There are so many of us, and our lots are so different: what wonder that Nature's mood is often in harsh contrast with the great crisis of our lives? We are children of a large family, and must learn, as such children do, not to expect that our hurts will be made much of--to be content with little nurture and caressing, and help each other the more.<sup>48</sup>

Man's obligation to judge carefully his every action stems from the fact that even the tiniest action may control his later deeds. Eliot's belief in the power of past actions on present deeds is made obvious by one of the most famous sentences in her writings. She is demonstrating that Arthur's attentions to

---

46 Ibid., 123.

47 Ibid., 127.

48 Ibid., 213-214.

Hetty should not be considered out of character: "Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds; and until we know what has been or 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."<sup>49</sup> The influence of the past becomes more prominent in Remola, but it is present in both Adam and Arthur in Adam Bede. Eliot describes Adam's thoughts of Hetty on the day of his father's funeral service:

But Adam's thoughts of Hetty did not deafen him to the service; they rather blended with all the other deep feelings for which the church service was a channel to him this afternoon, as a certain consciousness of our entire past and our imagined future blends itself with all our moments of keen sensibility. . . . The secret of our emotions never lies in the bare object, but in its subtle relations to our past.<sup>50</sup>

Why does Adam marry Dinah at the end of the story? This tying-up of the plot was suggested by Lewes<sup>51</sup> and is strongly condemned by many critics, but Eliot justifies it by saying that it grew out of Adam's love for Hetty and his consequent knowledge of Dinah: "And Adam was so bound up with the sad memories of his first passion, that he was not forsaking them, but rather giving them a new sacredness by loving her. Nay, his love for her had grown out of

---

49 Ibid., 229.

50 Ibid., 146.

51 Cross, George Eliot's Life, Rosehill, II, 51.



that past: it was the noon of that morning."<sup>52</sup>

Man's immortality in the memory of those who follow him is emphasized in Eliot's salute to the peasant artisans such as Adam Bede. Such men can be found in every generation and locale:

Their lives have no discernible echo beyond the neighborhood where they dwelt, but you are almost sure to find there some good piece of road, some building, some application of mineral produce, some improvement in farming practice, some reform of parish abuses, with which their names are associated by one or two generations after them. Their employers were the richer for them, the work of their hands has worn well, and the work of their brains has guided well the hands of other men. . . . Others there are who die poor, and never put off the workman's coat on week-days: they have not had the art of getting rich; but they are men of trust, and when they die before the work is all out of them, it is as if some main screw had got loose in a machine; the master who employed them says, 'Where shall I find their like?'"<sup>53</sup>

The comparative shortness of the following discussion of The Mill on the Floss and Silas Marner is accounted for by the fact that they are weaker in Comtist thought than Scenes of Clerical Life and Adam Bede. Quotations illustrative of the Comtist strain in the earlier two books abound, but similar selections are not as common in the two novels we will now consider.

The Mill on the Floss was not greeted with kindness by the Quarterly Review: "Indeed, we confess that, notwithstanding

52 Eliot, Adam Bede, in The Best-Known Novels, 364.

53 Ibid., 156-157.

his somewhat unedifying end, Tulliver is the only person in 'The Mill on the Floss' for whom we can bring ourselves to care much.<sup>54</sup> It has always been a widely-read novel, however, and a modern critic, Mr. J. Lewis May, points to its moral and aesthetic sense, its effect on the mind and soul as well as the senses, as the quality that accounts for its "unique and distinctive greatness."<sup>55</sup>

The story opens with a delightfully reminiscent portrayal of the youth of open-hearted, passionate, and loving Maggie Tulliver and her older and more stable brother, Tom. They live with their parents at Dorlcote Mill, which has been in the family for a couple of generations and over which Mr. Tulliver has often had to go to law. The children's schooling is interrupted when Tulliver falls ill after losing everything in a lawsuit conducted by Mr. Wakem. Tom gets a job to help pay the accrued debts, while Maggie nurses her father back to health. In the meantime Wakem acquires ownership of the mill and asks Tulliver to manage it for him. Tulliver is forced to accept, but curses Wakem and has Tom swear vengeance if it becomes possible. Maggie begins to see Wakem's son, Philip, whom she had met at Tom's school and who is physically deformed. When Tom discovers their clandestine meetings, he berates Philip for his conduct and deformity and forces

---

54 "Eliot's Novels," Quarterly Review, London, CVIII, 1860, 483.

55 J. Lewis May, George Eliot: A Study, London, 1930, 159.

Maggie to swear that she will never see him again without Tom's knowledge. Tom has meanwhile been investing his money so that he is now able to pay off the debts. Tulliver determines to leave the mill; before his resolution can be carried out, however, he fights with Wakem and dies without forgiving him. Three years later Maggie takes a vacation from her job of governess to visit her mother and her cousin Lucy. Lucy is tacitly engaged to Stephen Guest, a friend of Philip. Maggie, with her brother's permission, begins to see Philip at Lucy's, but she will not marry him and thereby alienate her brother. Stephen is attracted to her; she partially resists, but they are on the first leg of an elopement journey before she refuses to ruin the lives of Lucy and Philip. Her reputation is beyond repair, but Philip writes his forgiveness and tells her of his joy in knowing and loving her. Lucy also forgives her. Maggie decides on a life of renunciation, but before her resolution can be effected, a flood comes to St. Ogg's. Maggie rescues Tom from the mill, only to go to her death in his unavailing though loving arms.

That the activity of the past is bound up with the present is reiterated in the action as well as the words of this story. In a charmingly nostalgic closing to a chapter devoted to the childhood of Tom and Maggie, Eliot points out that "our delight in the sunshine on the deep-bladed grass to-day, might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the

sunshine and the grass of far-off years, which still live in us, and transform our perception into love."<sup>56</sup> Why does Maggie finally part with Stephen and return to St. Ogg's? Her reason is the most memorable and widely-quoted sentence in the book. She says to Stephen and to us: "If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie?" This decision arises from a disregard for self and is based on a renunciation of "whatever is opposed to the reliance others have in us--whatever would cause misery to those whom the course of our lives has made dependent on us."<sup>57</sup>

Maggie's rejection of Stephen is her moral triumph.

What nature brings about her partial acceptance of his attentions? Eliot reveals Maggie's nature by telling us of her reaction to the meeting with Philip after his long absence:

Her tranquil, tender affection for Philip, with its root deep down in her childhood, and its memories of long quiet talk confirming by distinct successive impressions the first instinctive bias--the fact that in him the appeal was more strongly to her pity and womanly devotedness than to her vanity or other egoistic excitability of her nature, seemed now to make a sort of sacred place, a sanctuary where she could find refuge from an alluring influence which the best part of herself must resist, which must bring horrible tumult within, wretchedness without.<sup>58</sup>

Why does Maggie awaken on the deck of a steamer to find herself

---

<sup>56</sup> George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss, in The Best-Known Novels of George Eliot, Modern Library ed., New York, n.d., 422.

<sup>57</sup>. Ibid., 749.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 699-700.

fleeing from the past at the side of Stephen Guest? She was not clear about the situation for a moment; then the full realization of its consequences comes upon her:

The irrevocable wrong that must blot her life had been committed: she had brought sorrow into the lives of others--into the lives that were knit up with hers by trust and love. The feeling of a few short weeks had hurried her into the sins her nature had most recoiled from--breach of faith and cruel selfishness; she had rent the ties that had given meaning to duty, and had made herself an outlawed soul, with no guide but the wayward choice of her own passion.<sup>59</sup>

There was, then, a conflict in her nature. The tragedy of her life, the loss of Philip, resulted from the temporary triumph of egoism over the "faith and sympathy that were the best organs of her soul."<sup>60</sup> Her subsequent moral recovery comes about only when she realizes what she has done and resolves to stamp out her egoism. She explains to Stephen:

'I do care for Philip--in a different way: I remember all we said to each other; I know how he thought of me as the one promise of his life. He was given to me that I might make his lot less hard; and I have forsaken him. And Lucy--she has been deceived--she who trusted me more than anyone. I cannot marry you: I cannot take a good for myself that has been wrung out of their misery.'<sup>61</sup>

The ideas are unmistakable. In the world of Comte and Eliot to

---

59 Ibid., 746.

60 Ibid., 736.

61 Ibid., 752.

reject the duty arising from altruism is to bring moral degradation, and to embrace that duty is to improve in the moral order.

What that duty is in the case of an individual life, however, and whether a person is to be blamed for a misdemeanor is a problem that Comte and Eliot consider only in the light of individual circumstances. Comte tells us that "the standard by which to judge of action is always to be taken relatively to the social state in which the action takes place."<sup>62</sup> Eliot repeats his thought in reference to her fictional creations:

The great problem of the shifting relations between passion and duty is clear to no 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 judgments must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot.<sup>63</sup>

Philip Wakem finds a new life in his love for Maggie.

Deformed from birth, he is naturally self-conscious and perhaps more inclined to consider things in reference to himself than would a physically normal person. When he parts from Maggie after their first meeting in the Red Deeps, he goes home to remember the

---

62 Comte, General View, 41.

63 Eliot, The Mill, in The Best-Known Novels, 765.

past and to hope for a happy future despite Tom's opposition and his own intervention in the life of Maggie's family:

You can hardly help blaming him severely. He was four or five years older than Maggie, and had a full consciousness of his feeling towards her to aid him in foreseeing the character his contemplated interviews with her would bear in the opinion of a third person. But you must not suppose that he was capable of a gross selfishness, or that he could have been satisfied without persuading himself that he was seeking to infuse some happiness into Maggie's life--seeking this even more than any direct ends for himself. He could give her sympathy--he could give her help. . . . He would be her guardian angel; he would do anything, bear anything for her sake--except not seeing her.<sup>64</sup>

Maggie's total influence on his life is revealed in his letter to her after the flight with Stephen. He extends his complete forgiveness and tells her of the effect she has had on his moral growth:

'The new life I have found in caring for your joy and sorrow more than for what is directly my own, has transformed the spirit of rebellious murmuring into that willing endurance which is the birth of strong sympathy. I think nothing but such complete and intense love could have initiated me into that enlarged life which grows and grows by appropriating the life of others; for before, I was always dragged back from it by ever-present painful self-consciousness. I even think sometimes that this gift of transferred life which has come to me in loving you, may be a new power to me.'<sup>65</sup>

Human solidarity again dictates the influence of actions upon more than one member of the human family, this time in Mr.

---

64 Ibid., 622-623.

65 Ibid., 769.

Tulliver's loss of the lawsuit. While he is recovering from the initial shock, officials are preparing to carry out the injunctions of the court:

Allocaturs, filing of bills in Chancery, decrees of sale, are legal chain-shot or bomb-shells that can never hit a solitary mark, but must fall with widespread shattering. So deeply inherent is it in this life of ours that men have to suffer for each other's sins, so inevitably diffusive is human suffering, that even justice makes its victims, and we can conceive no retribution that does not spread beyond its mark in pulsations of unmerited pain.<sup>66</sup>

The results of this unmerited pain can often be beneficial either to the recipient or to those around him. When Maggie calls for Tom at Mr. Stelling's school and the brother and sister return to the mill, which their father has lost, Mrs. Stelling provides a lunch for their journey:

Maggie's heart went out towards this woman whom she had never liked, and she kissed her silently. It was the first sign within the poor child of that new sense which is the gift of sorrow--that susceptibility to the bare offices of humanity which raises them into a bond of loving fellowship, as to haggard men among the icebergs the mere presence of an ordinary comrade stirs the deep fountains of affection.<sup>67</sup>

Eliot's journal entry for November 28, 1860, the year of the publication of The Mill on the Floss, indicates that she is writing a new story "which has thrust itself between me and the other book I was meditating."<sup>68</sup> The new story is Silas Marner,

66 Ibid., 575.

67 Ibid., 537.

68 Cross, George Eliot's Life, Rosehill, II, 218.



and the one which it interrupts is Romola, for which she had gathered material on her 1860 journey to Italy. Eliot did not expect this short work to be as interesting to the public as the others had been. On February 24, 1861, she tells John Blackwood that, because Wordsworth is dead, she had expected no interest to be shown it until Lewes encouraged her to go ahead with the portrayal of the strong "remedial influences of pure, natural human relations."<sup>69</sup>

Silas Marner is in general a highly acclaimed book.

Ernest A. Baker recognizes it as "melodrama used allegorically to inculcate the persistent lesson of the mutual influences of human souls," but goes on to say that "nowhere, however, are the darker aspects of a story relieved with sunnier humour, and nowhere does George Eliot show an easier mastery of the rich vernacular of the English peasant."<sup>70</sup> The scene in the Rainbow Inn is an object of sustained and sincere critical applause.<sup>71</sup>

The story opens with an introduction to Silas Marner, for the past fifteen years the weaver of Raveloe. He had come there after being unjustly accused of theft in his former parish; having blasphemed the unjust God, who permits such actions to go

---

69 Ibid., 228.

70 Ernest A. Baker, The History of the English Novel, VIII, London, 1937, 249.

71 Cf. Bullett, George Eliot, 208, and Leslie Stephen, George Eliot, English Men of Letters Series, New York, 1902, 108.

unpunished, he began to accumulate gold by living frugally as well as privately. Godfrey Cass, the Arthur Donnithorne of Silas Marner, is in love with Nancy Lammeter, but cannot marry her because of a wife and daughter concealed in another town and known only to his brother, Dunstan, whom he hates. One particularly foggy night Dunstan apparently solves his financial problems by stealing Marner's gold. An investigation is conducted, but nothing materializes, and no inquiry is made for Dunstan, who does not return to town. On New Year's Eve Godfrey's wife decides to reveal her relationship to Godfrey and sets out with her child for the Squire's party. She takes opium on the way, falls asleep in the snow, and dies of exposure; the child crawls away from her mother and finds her way to Marner's cottage. Silas adopts this golden-haired treasure, who has come to replace his guineas, and rears his Eppie with kindness.

Sixteen years later we see Marner's cottage improved through Godfrey's help and his faith in life renewed through Eppie's love. Godfrey and Nancy have been married for many years, but they have no children. Nancy opposes adoption as an action contrary to Providence. When necessary drainage reveals the missing gold and Dunstan's skeleton in a stone pit near Marner's cottage, Godfrey realizes that all things come to light, and out of fear that Nancy will learn of the past through others, he confesses to her that he is Eppie's father. They resolve to adopt Eppie, but

she refuses to leave Silas, and Godfrey accepts this punishment for his early sin. When the story ends, Eppie has married and Silas continues to live with his "daughter."

Godfrey Cass is not a fully developed character largely because Eliot's characterization is at its best when she has several hundred pages with which to work. We see enough, however, to know that he is of the Donnithorne and Wybrow ilk and that he was good practice for the coming presentation of Tito Melema in Romola. Godfrey's youthful thoughts are those of men who can "find no resting-place outside the ever-trodden round of their own petty history." His interest in Nancy is dictated by the desire to fulfil that "need of some tender, permanent affection, the longing for some influence that would make the good he preferred easy to pursue."<sup>72</sup> The experienced reader of Eliot knows that a desire for affection is not enough; a morally good character must desire to give of himself, not merely to receive another's love.

The reader is not surprised to find that Godfrey, like Arthur Donnithorne, expects something to turn up in his favor, expects chance to come to his rescue. His creator shows sympathy towards her character, but she is adamant in predicting the result of his actions:

And in this point of trusting to some throw of fortune's dice, Godfrey can hardly be called specially old-fashioned.

---

<sup>72</sup> George Eliot, Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe, in The Best-Known Novels of George Eliot, Modern Library ed., New York, n.d., 807.

Favourable Chance, I fancy, is the god of all men who follow their own devices instead of obeying a law they believe in. Let even a polished man of these days get into a position he is ashamed to avow, and his mind will be bent on all the possible issues that may deliver him from the calculable results of that position. . . . Let him forsake a decent craft that he may pursue the gentilities of a profession to which nature never called him, and his religion will infallibly be the worship of blessed Chance, which he will believe in as the mighty creator of success. The evil principle deprecated in that religion, is the orderly sequence by which the seed brings forth a crop after its kind.<sup>73</sup>

Godfrey's life is marked by a happiness deserved to the extent that he has done much to eliminate the results of his early life and has become a better man. His home is childless, however, and "his conscience, never thoroughly easy about Eppie," considers this absence under the "aspect of a retribution."<sup>74</sup> When Dunstan's skeleton is uncovered, Godfrey reveals his past sin to Nancy. The first part of his punishment is her complaint that he had concealed it from her so long that they had already been grossly negligent in their duty to Eppie. Bitterness floods his soul as he realizes that he has never really known his wife's true nature.<sup>75</sup> The second part of his punishment is Eppie's refusal to acknowledge him and leave Silas. The past strikes back at Godfrey, and he bows to the continuing influence of his past actions as he says:

---

73 Ibid., 838.

74 Ibid., 901.

75 Ibid., 903.-904.

'While I've been putting off and putting off, the trees have been growing--it's too late now. Marner was in the right in what he said about a man's turning away a blessing from his door: it falls to somebody else. I wanted to pass for childless once, Nancy--I shall pass for childless now against my wish.'<sup>76</sup>

The seed has of course brought forth its crop, for in the Eliot world retribution must come before death.

Meanwhile Silas Marner is recovering "a consciousness of unity between his past and present."<sup>77</sup> In his former life he had "loved his fellow with tender love, and trusted in an unseen goodness."<sup>78</sup> He had lost this feeling, and until Eppie's appearance no one was inclined to say that he had recovered any of it. After she comes into his life, they live "together in perfect love,"<sup>79</sup> and he regains his faith in goodness, though he still has doubts over his old religion.

This combination of Godfrey's egoism, which led to the consequences of the story, and Marner's loss and renewal of human love prompts Edward Wagenknecht to say that Eliot's Silas Marner "whether she intended it or not, . . . harmonizes well with the general tenets of her loosely-held Comtian 'religion of

---

76 Ibid., 912.

77 Ibid., 888.

78 Ibid., 848.

79 Ibid., 891.

humanity." 80

We have seen that all of the novels of Eliot's first period contain elements of Comtist thought. Scenes of Clerical Life and Adam Bede are more obviously marked than either The Mill on the Floss or Silas Marner, but on the basis of textual evidence a statement that Eliot's earlier novels were influenced by Comte could not be denied.

---

80 "George Eliot," Cavalcade, 324.

## CHAPTER III

### THE PRESENCE OF COMTE'S PHILOSOPHY IN ELIOT'S LATER NOVELS

When George Eliot turned to the realm of the historical novel in 1862, she preceded her creative writing by long periods of intensive, scholarly, and sometimes unnecessary research. The resultant novel Romola has brought forth diverse reactions from the critics. Gerald Bullett<sup>1</sup> maintains that Eliot's learning eclipses her power to portray life. William Barry thinks that Romola shows Eliot's art of invention based on research: "The story called 'Romola' is history made present and romance turned epic. What praise can be higher than this?"<sup>2</sup> There can be no doubt in the mind of the careful reader that Romola is sometimes tedious, sometimes overly didactic, and often too preoccupied with history, but the book remains, despite these and other justified criticisms, what Edward Wagenknecht calls "one of the great readings

---

1 George Eliot, 214.

2 "The Genius of George Eliot," Heralds, 10.

experiences of English fiction."<sup>3</sup>

The setting of Romola is Florence in the late fifteenth century. We are introduced to a young shipwrecked Greek scholar named Tito Melema, a handsome and outwardly pleasing person whose actions portray what Wagenknecht terms "the most famous study of deterioration of character in English fiction."<sup>4</sup> Tito meets Bardo de Bardi, a blind scholar who seeks immortality for his labors in classical fields. Bardo is overjoyed to find a person willing to help him and his beautiful daughter-amanuensis, Romola, fulfil his life's work, especially since his son has left him. Tito sells the jewels he has saved from the shipwreck, jewels which should be used for the rescue of Baldassarre, a man who has reared Tito as a son and whose whereabouts since the shipwreck are unknown. This act is the manifestation of Tito's decision not to leave Florence, Romola, and a young peasant girl named Tessa, whose trust in him has won his interest. Tito feels that the search for Baldassarre might prove fruitless; even if he were successful, he would only return to the exacting life of the past. Even when Tito learns of Baldassarre's whereabouts from a Fra Luca who turns out to be Romola's brother, he decides to disregard the plea for rescue. After professing his love for Romola, he fears

---

3 "George Eliot, Cavalcade, 325.

4 Ibid., 326.



revelation of his past through Fra Luca and marries Tessa in what only he knows to be the mock ceremony of a carnival. He sends Tessa away, Fra Luca's death removes the source of revelation, and Tito consequently marries Romola.

Eighteen months later Tito has become a city official, the Medicis have flown, and Savonarola's prophecy of purification seems about to be fulfilled as Charles VIII of France enters Florence. Baldassarre, Tito's father, arrives in Florence; Tito denies even acquaintance with him, and realizing that violence will probably come, he buys a coat of mail as protection against his father's vengeance. Meanwhile, Romola's father has died, and Tito's action in selling the dead man's library, contrary to Bardo's desire to have it preserved intact, brings about a breach with Romola. Tito still keeps Tessa and her child concealed on an outlying farm; while he is visiting her, Baldassarre makes an unsuccessful attempt on his life. Tito asks forgiveness for his denial but is refused. Popular government has meanwhile come to Florence. Shortly after its inception Romola resolves to leave her husband, but she is stopped in her flight by Savonarola, who accuses her of violating the marriage pledge and of deserting Florence in her greatest need. Embracing self-renunciation, she returns to her husband and her city.

More than a year later we learn that she has joined the Church and is caring for the sick and hungry, in the process of

which she meets Baldassarre, from whom she soon hears the story of Tito's past. She also becomes acquainted with Tessa and her relationship to Tito, but before she can ask Tito's permission to live apart from him, she learns that her godfather has been jailed as a Medicean. Tito is, of course, safe because of his duplicity. Romola requests Savonarola's intercession; his refusal because of political preoccupations causes her to lose her faith in him. She leaves Florence again after her godfather's execution. When the people turn against Savonarola, Tito is also set upon by the mob. He escapes from the enraged crowd by jumping into the Arno River, but when he is washed ashore, Baldassarre is waiting to kill him. Romola has meanwhile regained her faith in man through visiting a town beset by the plague. After helping these peasants recover their health and their faith in life, she returns to Florence, largely because of an increased sense of debt to Savonarola. When she hears of her husband's death, what she considers her consequent duty prompts her to bring Tessa and the two children to her home. After Savonarola is tortured and hanged, Romola continues to worship his memory because of his gift to her in the form of devotion to others.

From this outline of the story, the reader can easily understand one critic's statement that "the dominant theme, as usual, is the contrast and conflict between unscrupulous opportunist egoism and self-sacrificing devotion to duty,"<sup>5</sup> the conflict

emphasized in the social statics of Comte's philosophy.

Once again Eliot makes use of her two major characters to manifest the conflict between egoism and altruism. This dissension forms the bulk of the novel's Comtist thought, though there are passages in which suggestions of human solidarity and the Great Humanity are recognizable. The character of Tito is the climax toward which Eliot has been working in the portrayals of Wybrow, Donnithorne, and Cass. Let us observe the change in this man "whose nature was all gentleness"<sup>6</sup> but whose successive actions brought about the evil which flows from selfishness.

Tito's actions stem from the egoism of his motivation in life. We are prepared for his mock marriage to Tessa by Eliot's statement following his realization that Remola might be informed of his past: "He was at one of those lawless moments which come to us all if we have no guide but desire, and if the pathway where desire leads us seems suddenly closed; he was ready to follow any beckoning that offered him an immediate purpose."<sup>7</sup> That this desire is directed more and more exclusively to his own personal well-being is stressed again and again by his creator. We are told, for example, that he "had an unconquerable aversion to anything unpleasant, even when an object very much loved and desired

---

<sup>6</sup> George Eliot, Romola, in The Best-Known Novels of George Eliot, New York, n.d., 1002.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 1026.

was on the other side of it."<sup>8</sup>

When Tito decides not to attempt the rescue of Baldassarre, he sows the seed which brings about his later actions. When he asks Fra Luca if Baldassarre is dead,<sup>9</sup> he reminds the reader of Godfrey Cass's waiting for word of Molly's death in Silas Marner.<sup>10</sup> Eliot tells us of the conditions of Tito's mind after he has heard that Fra Luca, the only person in the vicinity of Florence who knows his past, is in poor health: "If he were only dead at Fiesole at that moment! The importunate selfish wish inevitably thrust itself before every other thought."<sup>11</sup> Why is that selfish wish an "inevitable" one? The deeds of man's past formulate his present acts: Tito

cared so much for the pleasures that could only come to him through the good opinion of his fellow-men, that he wished now he had never risked ignominy by shrinking from what his fellow-men called obligations.

But our deeds are like children that are born to us: they live and act apart from our own will. Nay, children may be strangled, but deeds never: they have an indestructible life both in and out of our consciousness; and that dreadful vitality of deeds was pressing hard on Tito for the first time.<sup>12</sup>

---

8 Ibid., 1005.

9 Ibid., 1008.

10 Eliot, Silas Marner, in The Best-Known Novels, 871.

11 Eliot, Romola, in The Best-Known Novels, 1018.

12 Ibid., 1044.

The climax of Tito's moral degeneration is the denial of Baldassarre. When the older man clutches Tito's arm on the steps of the Duomo, Tito looks at him and calls him a madman.<sup>13</sup> This unpremeditated action demonstrates to Tito "that inexorable law of human souls that we prepare ourselves for sudden deeds by the reiterated choice of good or evil which gradually determines character."<sup>14</sup> Of course Tito might have followed Baldassarre and confessed all to him, but he did not think of that resource, for "the repentance which cuts off all moorings to evil, demands something more than selfish fear."<sup>15</sup> Tito's fear did not prompt him to thoughts of removing his enemy, however:

His dread generated no active malignity, and he would still have been glad not to give pain to any mortal. He had simply chosen to make life easy to himself--to carry his human lot, if possible, in such a way that it should pinch him nowhere; and the choice had, at various times, landed him in unexpected positions. The question now was, not whether he should divide the common pressure of destiny with his suffering fellow-men; it was whether all the resources of lying would save him from being crushed by the consequences of that habitual choice.<sup>16</sup>

The greatness of Eliot's characterization owes much to its massiveness. She does not ordinarily characterize in one sentence or in one repeated phrase, as Dickens often does. There is,

---

13 Ibid., 1086.

14 Ibid., 1088.

15 Ibid., 1089.

16 Ibid.

however, one sentence in her portrayal of Tito which is brilliant in its concise completeness. Explaining Tito's desire to arrange his future life to his own mind, Eliot remarks: "He would have been equal to any sacrifice that was not unpleasant."<sup>17</sup> How had his life developed to such a moral state?

Our lives make a moral tradition for our individual selves, as the life of mankind at large makes a moral tradition for the race; and to have once acted nobly seems a reason why we should always be noble. But Tito was feeling the effect of an opposite tradition: he had won no memories of self-conquest and perfect faithfulness from which he could have a sense of falling.<sup>18</sup>

A late nineteenth-century critic provides us with a reaction which is assuredly common to many readers:

When the beautiful Greek awakes from his swoon beside the Arno to find no pleasant solitary lair, but the vindictive eyes of Baldassarre looking down at him, and the eager knuckles at his throat, the real pit-ecousness and terror is not that a young man is about to die, but that now the visible seal of finality is to be set upon that death of the soul which had already taken place.<sup>19</sup>

Thus does George Eliot portray the crippling effect of egoism on man's moral nature.

In contrast to Tito we are given Romola, who is called by a modern critic "a nineteenth-century positivist read into the

---

17 Ibid., 1128.

18 Ibid., 1179.

19 Edward Dowden, "George Eliot," Studies in Literature 1789-1877, 5th ed., London, 1889, 246.

fifteenth century"<sup>20</sup> and who feels "equal to any self-infliction that would save her from ceasing to love."<sup>21</sup> When her marriage to Tito proves unsuccessful, she decides to leave him, but her resolution is changed by Savonarola's insistence "that she cannot escape her duty." It is his "active sympathy, that clear-sighted demand for the subjection of selfish interests to the general good, which he had in common with the greatest of mankind," that brings about within her "the inspiring consciousness . . . that her lot was vitally united with the general lot." Did Romola find solace in the dogma of Catholicism? No; she joined the Church "because in this way she had found an immediate satisfaction for moral needs which all the previous culture and experience of her life had left hungering." She had doubts about herself, but "whatever else made her doubt, the help she gave to her fellow-citizens made her sure that Fra Girolamo had been right to call her back," and her problem "was not to settle questions of controversy, but to keep alive that flame of unselfish emotion by which a life of sadness might still be a life of active love."<sup>22</sup> This adoption of ethics and rejection of dogma is the mark of Positivism soundly criticized by

---

20 Horace James Bridges, "George Eliot: A Centenary Tribute (1919)," As I Was Saying, Boston, 1923, 103.

21 Eliot, Romola, in The Best-Known Novels, 1106.

22 Ibid., 1186, 1097, 1267, 1208, 1208, 1209.

Wilfrid Ward.<sup>23</sup>

Savonarola loses his hold upon Romola; indeed when she leaves Florence for the second time, she feels "even the springs of her once active pity drying up, and leaving her to barren egoistic complaining."<sup>24</sup> These "springs" are renewed by her visit to a town afflicted by the plague. It is not until this point that her altruism operates on a truly Comtist basis. From the time she was attracted by the cry of a hungry baby,

she had not even reflected, as she used to do in Florence, that she was glad to live because she could lighten sorrow,--she had simply lived, with so energetic an impulse to share the life around her, to answer the call of need and do the work which cried aloud to be done, that the reasons for living, enduring, labouring, never took the form of argument.

The experience was like a new baptism to Romola. In Florence the simpler relations of the human being to his fellow-men had been complicated for her with all the special ties of marriage, the State, and religious discipleship; and when these had disappointed her trust, the shock seemed to have shaken her aloof from life and stunned her sympathy. But now she said, 'It was mere baseness in me to desire death. If everything else is doubtful, this suffering that I can help is certain; if the glory of the cross is an illusion, the sorrow is only the truer. While the strength is in my arm I will stretch it out to the fainting; while the light visits my eyes they shall see the forsaken.'<sup>25</sup>

Here is ethics without God, duty without dogma.

---

<sup>23</sup> Wilfrid Ward, The Clothes of Religion: A Reply to Popular Positivism, London, 1886.

<sup>24</sup> Eliot, Romola, in The Best-Known Novels, 1291.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 1334.



In the epilogue of the novel Eliot preaches Comtism through the lips of Romola:

'It is only a poor sort of happiness that could ever come by caring very much about our own narrow pleasures. We can only have the highest happiness, such as goes along with being a great man, by having wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of the world as well as ourselves; and this sort of happiness often brings so much pain with it that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything else, because our souls see it is good. There are so many things wrong and difficult in the world, that no man can be great--he can hardly keep himself from wickedness--unless he gives up thinking much about pleasure or rewards, and gets strength to endure what is hard and painful. My father had the greatness that belongs to integrity; he chose poverty and obscurity rather than falsehood. And there was Fra Girolamo,--you know why I keep to-morrow sacred: he had the greatness which belongs to a life spent struggling against powerful wrong, and in trying to raise men to the highest deeds they are capable of.'<sup>26</sup>

In this manner Romola received from her father and from Savonarola the impetus for her personal development of the greatest good in the world of Comte and Eliot, altruism.

In 1865 George Eliot began the least known of all her novels, Felix Holt, the Radical. Despite the masterful presentation of setting in the introduction and the richness of the character portrayal in the Mrs. Transome and Harold story, the present-day reader has little trouble in appreciating this statement of a modern critic:

---

26 Ibid., 1349.

The whole production is laboured and unreal. It smells of the lamp. If I were left quite alone in some remote country inn, with bad weather outside and nothing to read within but a copy of 'Felix Holt' discarded by a previous traveller, I do not think I should--I do not think I could--settle down to read it.<sup>27</sup>

What is the story formulated by Eliot from materials which Anna T. Kitchel lists as "mixed products of its author's memory of English provincial life, of historical research, and of an assimilation of the doctrines of Comte . . .".<sup>28</sup>

In the year 1832 the aristocratic Mrs. Transome eagerly awaits the return to England of her long-absent son, Harold. Her anticipated happiness is dealt a severe blow by his immediate announcement that he intends to stand for Parliament as a Radical candidate. Although he dislikes the family lawyer, Jermyrn, he resolves to use him as an agent for the campaign. Meanwhile, Mrs. Holt, a resident of Treby Magna, is also finding disappointment in her son, Felix, who has stopped the sale of his late father's worthless and possibly harmful drugs and thus offended his mother's sensibilities. She tells her story to Rufus Lyon, the Dissenting minister; as a consequence Felix meets the minister and Esther, who has been reared as his daughter. The "clever, frank, good-

---

27 May, George Eliot, 216.

28 Anna T. Kitchel, George Lewes and George Eliot, New York, 1933, 237.

natured egoist"<sup>29</sup> who is Harold Transome continues his campaign, in the process of which the reader learns that Jermyn not only controls the family estate but is the father of the Radical candidate. Meanwhile, Felix and Esther have become better acquainted; on one occasion, in fact, Felix viciously upbraids the young girl for her shallowness, asking her why she can't dedicate herself to higher things rather than lowering herself and the man she will marry by the exercise of her shallow interests. By means of a practical joke in which Maurice Christian, a servant of the rival candidate Philip Debarry, is temporarily deprived of some personal possessions, Mr. Lyon sees some papers which make him fearful that Esther's true parentage will come to light. He is apprehensive of her reaction and for this reason goes to Mr. Jermyn for legal advice. Jermyn knows that Christian is an assumed name, that Esther's father is dead, and that she has a possible claim on the Transome estate. When Christian tells Mr. Lyon of Esther's possible claim--Jermyn having determined on temporary silence--the minister reveals her parentage to her; in keeping with her increasingly devotional character, Esther receives the news graciously. The influence of Felix is becoming observable. On the day of Transome's defeat there is a riot which Felix attempts to control. In the

---

<sup>29</sup> George Eliot, Felix Holt: the Radical, Rosehill Limited ed., Boston, 1893, I, 154.

course of his activity he throws down a constable who later dies of spinal concussion. Felix is jailed for manslaughter and for leading the riot he was trying to quell. Transome resolves to help Felix when the trial takes place; in the meantime he files suit against Jermyn for mismanaging the estate. Jermyn tells Harold that a death in the riot has brought about a new claim on the estate, a claim only Jermyn realizes. Harold withdraws his suit temporarily; before he can decide what to do, Christian, who has been an active snooper, reveals that the claim is Esther's. Esther accepts Harold's invitation to come to Transome Court, where settlement can be arranged out of court. Shortly after her arrival Harold resolves to marry her. Esther speaks for Felix at his trial, but a sentence of four years is imposed by a severe judge. Her speech is strongly influential on the townspeople, however, and they meet to formulate a petition for pardon. It is at this meeting that Jermyn sees Harold for the first time since Harold's suit has been reopened. Angry words pass between the two men, and Jermyn tells Harold that he is suing his own father. This effect of other men's lives upon his own prompts Harold to leave England. When he tells his plan to Esther, she reveals her love for Felix and her consequent renunciation of any claim on the Transome estate. She returns to her father's house, where she is waiting to take up life with Felix when he is released from prison.

In the closing words of the book's introduction, the

reader sees a foreshadowing of the story that is to come. The plot will include a Mr. Jermyan and the Transome family; the theme will be human solidarity and the effect of man's actions on those around him:

For there is seldom any wrong-doing which does not carry along with it some downfall of blindly climbing hopes, some hard entail of suffering, some quickly satiated desire that survives, with the life in death of old paralytic vice, to see itself cursed by its woful progeny,-- some tragic mark of kinship in the one brief life to the far-stretching life that went before, and to the life that is to come after, such as has raised the pity and terror of men ever since they began to discern between will and destiny.<sup>30</sup>

The author will often occupy herself with a discussion of the social changes in Treby parish. This interest in the setting of characters is not particularly original; it is motivated in this case, however, by Eliot's desire to stress the oneness of the human lot:

These social changes in Treby parish are comparatively public matters, and this history is chiefly concerned with the private lot of a few men and women; but there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life, from the time when the primeval milkmaid had to wander with the wanderings of her clan, because the cow she milked was one of a herd which had made the pastures bare.<sup>31</sup>

The time scope of this novel is determined not by the character who furnishes the title but by Harold Transome. The story opens with his return to England after an absence of fifteen

---

30 Ibid., 13-14.

31 Ibid., 68.

years. and it closes with his departure. He comes home to assume control of the family estate and to run for Parliament. Why does he leave? He has passed through a new experience; he has learned with shame of the conditions of his birth; he has come to a realization of his membership in the solidarity of mankind:

It was the most serious moment in Harold Transome's life; for the first time the iron had entered into his soul, and he felt the hard pressure of our common lot, the yoke of that mighty resistless destiny laid upon us by the acts of other men as well as our own.<sup>32</sup>

The characters of Esther and Felix furnish additional proof of Eliot's preoccupation with the Comtist egoism versus altruism theme; before taking up their individual characteristics, however, let us read one of Eliot's didactic statements on the joy of life, this one made in reference to Mrs. Transome's disappointment in her son:

The mother's love is at first an absorbing delight, blunting all other sensibilities; it is an expansion of the animal existence; it enlarges the imagined range for self to move in; but in after years it can only continue to be joy on the same terms as other long-lived love,-- that is, by much suppression of self, and power of living in the experience of another.<sup>33</sup>

The Felix-Esther strand of plot is a means of showing the influence of an altruistic soul on one suppressed in self.

The initial conversations between Felix and Esther are

---

32 Ibid., II, 310.

33 Ibid., I, 31.

largely controlled by Felix, who reproaches the young girl for not following her father's principles and attributes her shallowness to "idle fancy and selfish inclination."<sup>34</sup> We learn this perfect hero's attitude towards life from his own lips in these conversations with Esther:

'I don't say life is not worth having: it is worth having to a man who has some sparks of sense and feeling and bravery in him. And the finest fellow of all would be the one who could be glad to have lived because the world was chiefly miserable, and his life had come to help some one who needed it. He would be the man who had the most powers and the fewest selfish wants.'<sup>35</sup>

Later in the same discussion Felix explains to Esther that deciding to become a watchmaker rather than aspiring to a higher position was dictated not by reward but by his altruistic nature:

'Thousands of men have wedded poverty because they expect to go to heaven for it; I don't expect to go to heaven for it, but I wed it because it enables me to do what I most want to do on earth. Whatever the hopes for the world may be,--whether great or small,--I am a man of this generation; I will try to make life less bitter for a few within my reach. It is held reasonable enough to toil for the fortunes of a family, though it may turn to imbecility in the third generation. I choose a family with more chances in it.'<sup>36</sup>

Thus does the very, very good Felix embrace humanity for the field of his altruism.

---

34 Ibid., 171.

35 Ibid., II, 33.

36 Ibid., 40.

In addition to these remarks from Holt's lips, we have Esther's characterization of him after her conversion to his beliefs. She is speaking to Harold:

'If it is eccentricity to be very much better than other men, he is certainly eccentric; and fanatical too, if it is fanatical to renounce all small selfish motives for the sake of a great and unselfish one. I never knew what nobleness of character really was before I knew Felix Holt.'<sup>37</sup>

If these observations are not explicit enough for any reader, a few words from Eliot can always be depended upon. Such expressions as "his renunciation of selfish claims, his habitual preoccupation with large thoughts and with purposes independent of every-day casualties,"<sup>38</sup> indicate conclusively that Holt is overflowing with altruism. Eliot's realism suffers in characters of Holt's goodness. The present writer is reminded of Adam Bede, who is not quite so generous in revealing his desires to better his fellowman and who is consequently closer to the reality of life.

Esther Lyon is the chief developing character of this novel. The influence of Felix begins to manifest itself when she casts aside her self-love to care for her father in a more affectionate manner.<sup>39</sup> She still believed "that in the eyes of a high-bred man no young lady in Treby could equal her" in appearance,

---

37 Ibid., I, 171.

38 Ibid., II, 71.

39 Ibid., I, 214-215.



but the disapproval of Felix was exerting a gradual influence on her. On one occasion we are told that she "looked unusually charming. . . , from the very fact that she was not vividly conscious of anything but of having a mind near her that asked her to be something better than she actually was." Felix provides her with that necessary "mental preparation" which enables her, upon learning that her true father is dead, to see in Mr. Lyon "the object of a new sympathy." She promptly asks his forgiveness for not having loved him enough.<sup>40</sup>

Lest the casual reader should think that Esther's regeneration comes from a new interest in her father's creed of Dissent, Eliot emphasizes her similarity to Romola, as she points to morality and not dogma as the foundation of Esther's internal change:

Esther had been so long used to hear the formulas of her father's belief without feeling or understanding them, that they had lost all power to touch her. The first religious experience of her life--the first self-questioning, the first voluntary subjection, the first longing to acquire the strength of greater motives and obey the more strenuous rule--had come to her through Felix Holt.<sup>41</sup>

During the time that Esther spends at Transome Court, Felix is in jail awaiting trial. Esther is temporarily attracted by this promise of a change in rank, but after a time her new life

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., I, 240; II, 4, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., II, 43-44.

becomes marked by "dulness in its ease, and in the absence of high demand; and there was a vague consciousness that the love of this not uninteresting man who hovered about her gave an air of moral mediocrity to all her prospects."<sup>42</sup> Why is marriage between Esther and Harold extremely improbable? Their characters do not permit a compatible union. Esther's better nature could not be won by this clever, frank, good-natured egoist<sup>43</sup> whose

very good-nature was unsympathetic: it never came from any thorough understanding or deep respect for what was in the mind of the person he obliged or indulged; it was like his kindness to his mother,--an arrangement of his for the happiness of others, which, if they were sensible, ought to succeed.<sup>44</sup>

The plot is thus determined by the characters of the major participants.

Much of the incident in this story is directed to the activity of election day; in fact the riot which Felix tries to control takes place on this day. As Felix goes to Treby Manor in an effort to save its inhabitants from the wrath of the mob, "his very movement seemed to him only an image of the day's fatalities, in which the multitudinous small wickednesses of small selfish ends, really undirected towards any larger result, had issued in widely shared mischief that might be hideous."<sup>45</sup> The riot occurs,

---

42 Ibid., 234.

43 Ibid., I, 154.

44 Ibid., II, 239.

45 Ibid., 119-120.

then, because the actions of its participants are not directed to any end outside their selfish individual existences. Evil actions in the moral world of Comte and Eliot originate in people whose motivations are selfish rather than selfless:

The Hazaeles of our world who are pushed on quickly against their preconceived confidence in themselves to do doglike actions by the sudden suggestion of a wicked ambition, are much fewer than those who are led on through the years by the gradual demands of a selfishness which has spread its fibres far and wide through the intricate vanities and sordid cares of an every-day existence.<sup>46</sup>

The element of reform in this book should be mentioned before passing on to Eliot's greatest work. The title of this novel describes Felix Holt as a Radical. During the speech he makes on election day, we find that he is more radical than the Radical Party candidate, for he is not primarily interested in suffrage or the ballot. He follows the Comtist line as he insists that moral reform must precede political reform, that "public opinion--the ruling belief in society about what is right and what is wrong, what is honourable and what is shameful"<sup>47</sup> must be developed, and that public duty must be embraced.<sup>48</sup> That the predominance of the moral point of view is the fulcrum on which Positive beliefs turn we have already seen; indeed Comte's strong

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 83. This opinion is not exclusively Comtian, of course, and is held by Thomas Carlyle among others. Although George Eliot corresponded with Mrs. Carlyle, she does not seem to have been a student of Carlyle's works, and it seems likely that her reading in Comte was the source of this idea.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 79-86.

opposition to communism is based on his antagonism towards communism's disregard of moral in favor of political reform.<sup>49</sup>

Critics of literature often occupy themselves in an effort to predict the future popularity of an author's individual works. As the years go by, more and more readers of George Eliot's novels are concluding that the one work which will outlive all her others is Middlemarch, that "magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people."<sup>50</sup> Other modern critics declare that it has "some claim to be regarded as the greatest English novel of its time,"<sup>51</sup> that it is "the ripest and fullest exposition" of Eliot's "mind and philosophy,"<sup>52</sup> that it is the only book which "can be said to represent her mature genius,"<sup>53</sup> and that no other "novel of the nineteenth century . . . surpasses Middlemarch in range or construction."<sup>54</sup> The present writer can add only one comment to those already mentioned: the distinctive pleasure of encountering Middlemarch for the first time can be exceeded only by returning to the book for a second perusal.

---

49 Comte, General View, 114-123.

50 Virginia Woolf, "George Eliot," The Common Reader, New York, 1925, 237.

51 Bullett, George Eliot, 230.

52 Baker, History of the English Novel, VIII, 254.

53 F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition, London, 1948, 61.

54 Pritchett, "George Eliot," Living Novel, 91.

Part of the triumph of this novel lies in its author's forbearance of repetitious and didactic commentary. The reader of Middlemarch is constantly aware of the intricacies of the plot, the strange incidents which bring the characters together, and the recurrent interaction of personalities. Ernest A. Baker points to Middlemarch as a

characteristic study of human solidarity. Our interests are inextricably bound up together. All these lives touch at innumerable points; their motives and the consequences of their acts are interwoven to an unforeseeable and dumbfounding extent. No member of society can have an independent existence; everything he does affects the remainder.<sup>55</sup>

Let us look at Eliot's single, unmistakable, didactic statement on human solidarity before reading a synopsis of the plot:

Scenes which make vital changes in our neighbours' lot are but the background of our own, yet, like a particular aspect of the fields and trees, they become associated for us with the epochs of our own history, and make a part of that unity which lies in the selection of our keenest consciousness.<sup>56</sup>

Middlemarch opens with the story of beautiful, young Dorothea Brooke, who marries middle-aged Edward Casaubon, a lonely clerical scholar and would-be author of The Key to All Mythologies because she feels that he understands the craving of her soul to serve the people around her. Because Casaubon will not allow

<sup>55</sup> Baker, History of the English Novel, VIII, 254.

<sup>56</sup> George Eliot, Middlemarch, Everyman ed., New York, 1930, I, 286.

Dorothea to help him in his work and because he does not return to her the unselfish devotion she gives to him, their marriage is an unhappy one.

Mr. Casaubon is a rector in Middlemarch, to which Mr. Lydgate, a young physician, comes to put into practice the ideals of the science he has learned for the good of humanity. He is supported in his plans for the community by the hypocritical Mr. Bulstrode, the town banker, and in his weakness he allows himself to be used by Bulstrode. Lydgate meets and marries Rosamond Vin-  
cy, an ambitious and selfish belle who wants him to be a "successful" man and who thwarts him in his attempts to fulfil his personal ideas of duty towards society and science. Rosamond's brother, Fred, a young blade educated as a gentleman, leads an easy, purposeless life in expectation of a fortune to be given him by a rich uncle. Fred loves plain and sensible Mary Garth, who must work to help support her family. She returns his affection but refuses to marry anyone whose life is so useless and self-centered. Fred's expectations are frustrated when his uncle leaves his fortune to a hitherto unknown love child, Joshua Rigg. Fred is forced by Mary and his family to try to make something of his life; he goes into business with Mary's father and finds happiness in his lowly job.

Meanwhile the Lydgates have fallen into debt because of Rosamond's selfish extravagance and her husband's blindness to

what she is doing. There is a coolness between them, but Rosamond's interests are temporarily filled by Mr. Will Ladislaw, curly-headed cousin of Mr. Casaubon. Casaubon hates Will, whom he suspects of loving Dorothea. Casaubon becomes ill, and in an attempt to complete his life's work, he tries to get Dorothea's promise to finish his labors if he should die. He dies without getting her promise because she realizes the worthlessness of his task. His will contains the condition that Dorothea is to be disinherited if she marries Ladislaw. The revelation of this clause results in gossip; Will, loving Dorothea, resolves to go away, not knowing that she returns his affection.

Rigg's stepfather, John Raffles, knows that the self-righteous Bulstrode is wealthy because of past misdeeds. When Bulstrode's first wife, who was Ladislaw's grandmother, died, Bulstrode neglected to trace Will's mother, the rightful heir. Raffles blackmails Bulstrode, who resolves to leave town in order to avoid the disclosure. Raffles becomes ill, and Bulstrode allows him to die. Bulstrode's past is revealed by gossip; consequently the town rejects him. During the time that Lydgate was attending Raffles, Bulstrode lent him money for his debts; the town naturally assumes that Lydgate had something to do with the blackmailer's death. Innocent Lydgate determines to stay and face the disgrace, for he knows that flight will be indicative of guilt. Dorothea wants to help him, but when she comes to his

home, she finds Rosamond and Will in each others' arms. Her feeling for Will weakens her previous resolution temporarily; nevertheless her desire to help Lydgate prompts her to return to give him money. Rosamond has meanwhile learned that Will loves Dorothea; touched by remorse and overcome with admiration for Dorothea's generous spirit, Rosamond tells her of Will's devotion.

Dorothea gives up her fortune to marry Will, and their life is a happy one, though she feels that there was something better she might have done had circumstances been different. Lydgate, now solvent, goes to London, where he becomes a successful physician. He dies at an early age, however, without accomplishing his aim to serve and thinking of himself as a failure. Mary and Fred marry and live a happy life in Middlemarch.

The story is in this way built around three major love interests: that of Dorothea and Mr. Casaubon; that of Rosamond and Lydgate; and that of Mary and Fred. That the editorial-writing, curly-headed Will Ladislaw, who seems to spend most of his time lying on the rugs of various Middlemarch parlors, becomes Dorothea's second husband is a major blemish of the novel and is in no particular way related to the principal conflicts. Although Dorothea never feels regret for her second marriage, the reader often thinks that she might better have remained single or married a man with whom she could rise to great altruistic heights. What are the conflicts of the three sets of lovers? All of their



actions are in part determined by the Comtist dichotomy of egoism and altruism. Let us look first at Dorothea and Mr. Casaubon.

The story is not very old before we learn that one of Dorothea's cardinal ambitions is to build cottages for the people of her community.<sup>57</sup> This passionate longing to "make her life greatly effective" is temporarily put aside when her interest in Mr. Casaubon is aroused. She feels that she could be a help to him in his intellectual labors, and when her dreams are realized by the letter in which he makes one of the most memorable proposals in English literature, she is quick to inform her uncle that she considers marriage "a state of higher duties" accompanied by trials. The discerning reader is not optimistic about this marriage, for he has been told that "Mr. Casaubon apparently did not care about building cottages." The marriage takes place, however, and Dorothea takes up her residence at Lowick with some disappointment that she is not in a "parish which had a larger share of the world's misery, so that she might have had more active duties in it."

This young woman who "was alive to anything that gave her an opportunity for active sympathy" and whose wish was "to make life beautiful--I mean everybody's life" concentrated her affection on the man she had chosen to be her husband. His every

---

57 Ibid., 21.

wish resulted in an outpouring of her altruistic nature, and she was especially desirous of entering "into some fellowship with her husband's chief interests."<sup>58</sup> Mr. Casaubon was not yet prepared for the type of help which might investigate the nature of his work; he was, in fact,

the centre of his own world; if he was liable to think that others were providentially made for him, and especially to consider them in the light of their fitness for the author of a 'Key to all Mythologies,' this trait is not quite alien to us, and, like the other mendicant hopes of mortals, claims some of our pity.<sup>59</sup>

The first rift between these two results from Dorothea's depression in the realization that her husband's mind is one "in which years full of knowledge seem to have issued in a blank absence of interest or sympathy."<sup>60</sup>

Why does Dorothea respond to the kindness of Will Ladislaw? She "felt a new sense of gratitude" because her heart "had always been giving out ardour and had never been fed with much from the living beings around her." Although Dorothea never even considers renouncing the duties of her life with Mr. Casaubon, "marriage, which was to bring guidance into worthy and imperative occupation, had not yet freed her from the gentlewoman's oppressive liberty: it had not even filled her leisure with the

---

58 Ibid., 20, 32, 25, 65, 179, 193, 177.

59 Ibid., 71.

60 Ibid., 174.

ruminant joy of unchecked tenderness." Because of this absence in her married life, she turns to Will; "she had the ardent woman's need to rule beneficently by making the joy of another soul," and Will was the only kindred spirit in her realm of activity. The result of Dorothea's interest in him is suspicion on the part of Casaubon and the consequent strangeness of his will. Why does her husband react in this manner? "There is a sort of jealousy which needs very little fire; it is hardly a passion, but a blight bred in the cloudy, damp despondency of uneasy egoism."<sup>61</sup> Once again Eliot first of all forms ideas of her characters; they react according to their natures; the plot grows out of the antipathy between the egoistic and altruistic personalities.

A character from a George Eliot novel cannot be fully understood by means of selected quotations; analytical and repeated readings are required in order to grasp the many observations of the author who contributed so much to the furtherance of psychological character study in the modern novel. Mr. Casaubon's outstanding trait can, nevertheless, be readily comprehended:

His experience was of that pitiable kind which shrinks from pity, and fears most of all that it should be known; it was that proud narrow sensitiveness which has not mass enough to spare for transformation into sympathy, and quivers threadlike in small currents of

---

61 Ibid., 195, 241, 318, 186.

self-preoccupation or at best of an egoistic scrupulosity.<sup>62</sup>

His failure in life is due to his faults in love and work. We have seen the reason for his failure in love; the same character defect brings about his unsuccessful intellectual labors. Dorothea realized that his accomplishments were of doubtful worth: "It was not wonderful that, in spite of her small instruction, her judgment in this matter was truer than his: for she looked with unbiassed comparison and healthy sense at probabilities on which he had risked all his egoism."<sup>63</sup>

After her husband's death Dorothea takes a renewed interest in the New Hospital, a means of helping the people she had been drawn away from. Her contact with Lydgate is thus increased, and when he falls into disrepute, she is the first to come to his defense: "What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult to each other?"<sup>64</sup> His need "preoccupied her desire with the yearning to give relief, and made her own ease tasteless."

The motivation of all of Dorothea's action has become obvious. She helps to clear Lydgate's name, lends him money, reassures Rosamond, helps her M,ddlemarch neighbors, and finally

---

62 Ibid., 246.

63 Ibid., II, 44.

64 Ibid., 273.

marries Will Ladislaw, whom she also assists in his work for reform, because "no life" was possible to her "which was not filled with emotion, . . . filled also with a beneficent activity."

Rosamond Vincy, who, like Tito Melema, "would never do anything that was disagreeable to her,"<sup>65</sup> is brought into intimate contact with the new doctor of high social rank through circumstance. Eliot explains Rosamond's position:

An eminent philosopher among my friends, who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact. Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles around that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egotism of any person now absent--of Miss Vincy, for example. Rosamond has a Providence of her own who had kindly made her more charming than other girls, and who seemed to have arranged Fred's illness and Mr. Wrench's mistake in order to bring her and Lydgate into effective proximity. It would have been to contravene these arrangements if Rosamond had consented to go away to Stone Court or elsewhere, as her parents wished her to do, especially since Mr. Lydgate thought the precaution needless.<sup>66</sup>

---

65 Ibid., II, 296; 361; I, 146.

66 Ibid., 232.

The ultimate result of Rosamond's ability to take advantage of the situation is her marriage to Lydgate.

Lydgate and Rosamond seem less than the perfect match. Of course Rosamond's interest in a stranger who "offered vistas of that middle-class heaven, rank"<sup>67</sup> is fitting to her provincial character; Lydgate, on the other hand, is not thinking about marriage and is carried forward in life by

the conviction that the medical profession as it might be was the finest in the world; presenting the most perfect interchange between science and art; offering the most direct alliance between intellectual conquest and the social good. Lydgate's nature demanded this combination; he was an emotional creature with a flesh-and-blood sense of fellowship.<sup>68</sup>

Knowing that Lydgate possesses "a generous resolution that his action should be beneficent," we might be surprised at his interest in Rosamond did we not also know that his "mind is a little spotted with commonness." In what do these "spots of commonness" consist? Eliot tells us later that they are made up of "personal pride and unreflecting egoism." Lydgate's fate in the Comtist fictional world of Eliot is settled; he will fail in his medical labors for the good of others.

Turning to the married life of the Lydgates, we see that its partial failure is largely due to the "vague exactingness

---

67 Ibid., 145.

68 Ibid., 126.

of egoism" in Rosamond's personality. Their first child, for example, is born prematurely because Rosamond insisted on riding horseback when her husband had forbidden this folly. Why did she defy him by this apparently senseless act? "What she liked to do was to her the right thing, and all her cleverness was directed to getting the means of doing it." She has no appreciation for his scientific work and makes no effort to understand his ambitions; for these reasons she does not care for "his moodiness—a name which to her covered his thoughtful preoccupation with other objects than herself." The reason that Lydgate has such trouble explaining their mutual debts to her is that "she was quite sure that no one could justly find fault with her," that "no woman could behave more irreproachably than she."<sup>69</sup>

Much of Rosamond's difficulty in marriage stems from her interference with her husband's plans for economy. She secretly writes to his uncle, Sir Godwin, for example, and asks him for money. When he refuses her request in a letter to Lydgate, a scene results during which we are furnished with Rosamond's characteristic reaction:

Sir Godwin's rudeness towards her and utter want of feeling ranged him with Dover and all other creditors--disagreeable people who only thought of themselves, and did not mind how annoying they were to her. Even her father was unkind, and might have done more for them. In fact there was but one person in Rosamond's

150. 69 Ibid., I, 129, 130, 306; II, 153, 138, 139, 145,

world whom she did not regard as blameworthy, and that was the graceful creature with blond plaits and with little hands crossed before her, who had never expressed herself unbecomingly, and had always acted for the best-- the best naturally being what she best liked.<sup>70</sup>

It is this trait of her character which causes her dissatisfaction with marriage: Will Ladislav

would have made, she thought, a much more suitable husband for her than she had found in Lydgate. No notion could have been falsier than this, for Rosamond's discontent in her marriage was due to the conditions of marriage itself, to its demand of self-suppression and tolerance, and not the nature of her husband.<sup>71</sup>

Rosamond's inability to take up an existence outside her own marks her failure in life.

Lydgate's "spots of commonness" have not yet overcome his altruism, however, and he continues his work at the hospital after his marriage. His hospital work provides no income, his practice is not flourishing, his expenses are unnecessarily high, and his relationship with Rosamond is increasingly strained; the result is debt and discontent. This discontent was "the sense that there was a grand existence in thought and effective action lying around him, while his self was being narrowed into the miserable isolation of egoistic fears, and vulgar anxieties for events that might allay such fears." Yet Lydgate does not sink to exclusive preoccupation with self. After he has accepted the loan from

---

70 Ibid., 211.

71 Ibid., 290.



Bulstrode which appears to be a bribe following the subsequent death of Raffles, he refuses to attempt acquittal for himself by accusing another "crushed fellow-mortal." This refusal is motivated partially by pride but also by fellow-feeling.

Lydgate's resolution to explain to Rosamond the facts behind his disgrace is not carried out. "He had almost learned the lesson that . . . because she came short in her sympathy, he must give the more," but when she once again proposes that they go to London, he fails to speak. His sympathy is not strong enough; the conflicting qualities of pride and egoism win out. "Perhaps," says Eliot, "if he had been strong enough to persist in his determination to be the more because she was less, that evening might have had a better issue."<sup>72</sup> Perhaps indeed, but "spots of commonness" result in a weakening of such determination. What is the subsequent course of Lydgate's life?

He died when he was only fifty, leaving his wife and children provided for by a heavy insurance on his life. He had gained an excellent practice, alternating, according to season, between London and a Continental bathing-place; having written a treatise on Gout, a disease which has a good deal of wealth on its side. His skill was relied on by many paying patients, but he always regarded himself a failure: he had not done what he once meant to do.<sup>73</sup>

Dorothea and Lydgate are obviously the central characters of Middlemarch. Their lives take up the greater part of the

---

72 Ibid., II, 195, 279, 294, 295.

73 Ibid., 360.

book and engross most of the reader's attention. There is a third love affair, however, a courtship and alliance which, though not so deeply investigated as the other two, nevertheless shows the meeting of egoistic and altruistic natures.

When Fred tells Mary Garth that he will be unable to pay her father what he owes him and that Mary's savings will be needed at home, Mary's thoughts go not to her own changed position but to her family, "all the consequences at home becoming present to her."<sup>74</sup> Part of the following conversation between Mary and Fred shows both her character and her opinion of his:

'I am so miserable, Mary--if you knew how miserable I am, you would be sorry for me.'

'There are other things to be more sorry for than that. But selfish people always think their own discomfort of more importance than anything else in the world: I see enough of that every day.'<sup>75</sup>

Much of Fred's later action in assisting Mary's father and finding his place in the world can be traced to the upbraiding she gives him on this occasion: "How can you bear to be so contemptible, when others are working and striving, and there are so many things to be done--how can you bear to be fit for nothing in the world that is useful?"<sup>76</sup>

Many of Fred's doings, including the request for a

---

74 Ibid., I, 222.

75 Ibid., 223.

76 Ibid., 224.

loan from Mr. Garth, issue from his membership in that club of "young gentlemen whose consciousness is chiefly made up of their own wishes," and his conviction "that he at least (whatever might be maintained about mankind generally) had a right to be free from anything disagreeable."<sup>77</sup> After he has indebted himself to Garth, Fred feels confident that

he should meet the bill himself, having ample funds at disposal in his own hopefulness. You will hardly demand that his confidence should have a basis in external facts; such confidence, we know, is something less coarse and materialistic: it is a comfortable disposition leading us to expect that the wisdom of providence or the folly of our friends, or the still greater mystery of our high individual value in the universe, will bring about agreeable issues, such as are consistent with our good taste in costume, and our general preference for the best style of thing.<sup>78</sup>

Two elements serve to cause Fred's moral regeneration. They are the love that he has had for Mary since they were children (for "he was certainly an affectionate fellow"<sup>79</sup>) and the realization that he would have to stop thinking about himself and turn to some useful task. The second element comes from a specific event, Mrs. Garth's bitterness in hearing about his inability to pay the loan. The result of her reaction is that

she had made Fred feel for the first time something like the tooth of remorse. Curiously enough, his pain in the

---

77 Ibid., 104, 202.

78 Ibid., 200.

79 Ibid., 120.

affair beforehand had consisted almost entirely in the sense that he must seem dishonourable, and sink in the opinion of the Garths: he had not occupied himself with the inconvenience and possible injury that his breach might occasion them, for this exercise of the imagination on other people's needs is not common with hopeful young gentlemen. Indeed we are most of us brought up in the notion that the highest motive for not doing a wrong is something irrespective of the beings who would suffer the wrong. But at this moment he suddenly saw himself as a pitiful rascal who was robbing two women of their savings.<sup>80</sup>

After Mary and Fred have settled down in marital bliss, Fred is quick to admit that Mr. Farebrother, a Middlemarch curate, was worthier of Mary than himself. Mary agrees, saying, "To be sure he was, and for that reason he could do better without me."<sup>81</sup> The truth of this rather playful statement is seen in the influence of Mary's altruism on the partially selfish nature of Fred, a nature which, though affectionate, needed the love and encouragement capable of drawing its interests away from self.

The Bulstrode episode shows the overpowering influence of the past on our present lives more directly than the story of Lydgate. In one of the marvelously apt mottoes with which Eliot prefaces her chapters, we are told that

Our deeds still travel with us from afar,  
And what we have been makes us what we are.<sup>82</sup>

---

80 Ibid., 218.

81 Ibid., II, 360.

82 Ibid., 245.

Bulstrode's action in lending money to Lydgate and allowing his servant to give liquor to the suffering Raffles arises from his past behavior and the consequent fear of exposure; it demonstrates the oneness of our lives and the consequences of evil deeds:

It was not that he was in danger of legal punishment or of beggary: he was in danger only of seeing disclosed to the judgment of his neighbours and the mournful perception of his wife certain facts of his past life which would render him an object of scorn and an opprobrium of the religion with which he had diligently associated himself. The terror of being judged sharpens the memory: it sends an inevitable glare over that long-unvisited past which has been habitually recalled only in general phrases. Even without memory, the life is bound into one by a zone of dependence in growth and decay; but intense memory forces a man to own his blameworthy past. With memory set smarting like a reopened wound, a man's past is not simply a dead history, an outworn preparation of the present: it is not a repented error shaken loose from the life: it is a still quivering part of himself, bringing shudders and bitter flavours and the tinglings of a merited shame.<sup>83</sup>

The Catholic Church teaches that the reward of the original Theresa is union with God in an eternal heaven; George Eliot rejects this reward, which she cannot "positively" prove, and states that the reward of her Theresa is to be found in the lives of those who follow her, in the subjective immortality which she gains by her altruistic conduct:

**T**he effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden

life, and rest in unvisited tombs.<sup>84</sup>

The fact remains that Dorothea partially fails in attempting to fulfil her high aims and that Lydgate almost completely fails in his. Is there an explanation for these reversals? Yes, despite the truth "that if we had been greater, circumstance would have been less strong against us,"<sup>85</sup> we are still young when we first feel "the hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity."<sup>86</sup> Two final remarks will indicate the way in which we must look upon these partial failures:

They [the determining acts] were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it.<sup>87</sup>

The standard by which to judge of action is always to be taken relatively to the social state in which the action takes place.<sup>88</sup>

The first quotation is from Eliot and the second from Comte. Dorothea and Lydgate are living in an imperfect social structure; they are in conflict with an imperfect humanity in which egoism is

---

84 Ibid., 364.

85 Ibid., 140.

86 Ibid., I, 158.

87 Ibid., II, 363.

88 Comte, General View, 41.

still rampant; the relativism of the Positive philosophy requires that individuals be judged in the light of existing circumstances. Here is a deterministic strain within Positivism, but its nature does not destroy free will: man's duty to humanity must be carried out voluntarily. Although our actions may be determined by surrounding circumstances, we can freely choose to labor for the improvement of these circumstances.

Eliot's last novel, Daniel Deronda, has received both praise and blame from the critics. The more common reaction is to mention the book in connection with its predecessor in a phrase such as "the interest of Middlemarch, and of its very inferior though still remarkable successor Daniel Deronda."<sup>89</sup> Ernest A. Baker refers to it as "all treatise" and says that "[I]t was as if she had written herself out, so far as fiction is concerned."<sup>90</sup> Oscar Browning, on the other hand, considers Eliot's last novel to be her greatest triumph:

To me 'Daniel Deronda' is one step further upwards in a career of a soaring genius who was destined, if life was spared, to achieve greater heights than any to which it had yet risen. It is the result of the normal and regular growth of unrivalled powers which were ever seeking subjects more and more worthy for their exercise. It is as superior to 'Adam Bede' as 'Hamlet' is superior to 'Much Ado About Nothing.' It is an effort to realize the highest purposes of art, to seize the strongest passions.

---

<sup>89</sup> Richard Holt Hutton, "George Eliot as Author," Essays on Some of the Modern Guides of English Thought in Matters of Faith, London, 1887, 237.

<sup>90</sup> History of the English Novel, VIII, 262.

the loftiest heights and the lowest depths of human nature. If it fails in execution it is because the task cannot yet be accomplished. But if the work is ever to be done, the way must be paved by partial failure. It is better to have tried and failed, than never to have tried at all.<sup>91</sup>

Mr. F. R. Leavis sees in this production a remarkable association of strength with weakness. After considering the *Deronda-Mordecai-Mirah* story as the bad side of the novel, he goes on to say:

By way of laying due stress upon the astonishingly contrasting strength and fineness of the large remainder, the way in which George Eliot transcends in it not only her weakness, but what are commonly thought to be her limitations, I will make an assertion of fact and a critical comparison: Henry James wouldn't have written The Portrait of a Lady if he hadn't read Gwendolen Harleth (as I shall call the good part of Daniel Deronda), and, of the pair of closely comparable works, George Eliot's has not only the distinction of having come first; it is decidedly the greater.<sup>92</sup>

Daniel Deronda traces a portion of the lives of Gwendolen Harleth and the hero who provides the book with its title. As the story opens, Gwendolen is playing roulette at a Continental gambling resort. The disapproving eyes of Deronda seem to change her luck, and she loses her earlier winnings. A letter announcing financial loss in her family calls her home; she leaves immediately without meeting Deronda. The reasons for her presence at the gaming table are then revealed. She is the young, spoiled, egoistic daughter of a Mrs. Davilow. Having rejected the suit of a neighbor, she becomes attracted to Henleigh Grandcourt, the

91 Life of George Eliot, 144.

92 Leavis, Great Tradition, 85.



nephew of Deronda's guardian, Sir Hugo Mallinger. Before she can accept his proposal, she is informed that he has four children by a Mrs. Glasher, who desires to marry him. Gwendolen flees from England, and for this reason is seen by Deronda on the Continent.

Deronda is ignorant of the details of his birth. He suspects that Sir Hugo is his father, but his love for him prevents direct questioning. Out of this wonder over his birth and the suspicion that he has been wronged arises his sympathy with all who have been wronged. Just before seeing Gwendolen for the first time, Deronda saves a young Jewess, Mirah Lapidoth, from committing suicide and entrusts her to the care of friends. She had returned to England looking for her mother and brother, from whom she had been separated by a cruel father many years before.

Meanwhile, Gwendolen has returned to her family and is shocked by their lack of money. She resolves to take up singing or acting, but her mind is changed by a professional friend who tells her that she will be no better than mediocre. She is resigned to becoming a governess when Grandcourt, who had followed her to Europe, returns to England and asks if he may see her. She grants his request, determined to refuse him, but the vision of a new life overcomes her resolution, and she accepts his proposal. She thereupon decides that she will see to it that Grandcourt's mistress is well-treated. Before her marriage she meets Deronda, and they get along well. On the night of the wedding ceremony

she receives a package from Mrs. Glasher. In it are diamonds belonging to Grandcourt and a note calling down a curse upon Gwendolen. From this time on she is completely in Grandcourt's power, not realizing that this consummate egoist is well aware that she possessed knowledge of his past life before she married him. She turns to Deronda for help; his advice is that she find interests outside herself.

In the interim Deronda has arranged for Mirah to give singing lessons as a means of supporting herself. In his search for her mother and brother he has met Mordecai, a fervent Jew who is seeking a young heir to receive the heritage of his mind and who refuses to believe that Deronda is not a Jew. Mordecai, who has a consumptive disease certain to bring early death, is convinced that Deronda is meant to fulfil his great ideal, a rejuvenation of the Jewish race, a rising up of the chosen people into a new nation which would reconcile the East and the West. Deronda soon learns that Mordecai is Mirah's long-lost brother and that their mother is dead. He unites the brother and sister, who rejoice in their new happiness.

Gwendolen continues her distant worship of Deronda. She is miserable in her submission to the iron will she had planned to rule. One of her private conversations with Deronda is interrupted by Grandcourt, who thereupon decides to take his wife away from Deronda. They leave for a Mediterranean yachting trip a

short time later.

Deronda is called to Genoa by a letter from his mother. He learns that his father, who is dead, was a Jew and that his mother wanted to save him that ignominy. He exults in being able to embrace his heritage and duty, but before returning to Mordecai and Mirah, he meets the Grandcourts. Later the same day Grandcourt is drowned while boating with Gwendolen; she accuses herself of guilt because of her desire for his death. Deronda comforts her by saying that her evil thoughts were momentary and that she could in no way have saved him. Deronda returns to England, where upon he goes straight to Mordecai, whom he tells that he will devote his life to the Jewish race. He learns that Mirah loves him, and they are married. In the meantime he has given further comfort to Gwendolen; accordingly on his wedding day he receives a letter from her in which she repeats her desire to make her life better and her gratitude for having known him. Mordecai dies confident that he has breathed his soul into Deronda and that they will live together. Mirah and Deronda leave for Palestine to try to make true the dream of a restored Jewish nation.

We can easily see that there are two strands of plot: the Gwendolen, Grandcourt, Deronda theme is eminently good and characteristic of Eliot, but the Mirah, Mordecai, Meyrick theme is "consistently forced and false."<sup>93</sup> One critic tells us that

---

93 Bullett, George Eliot, 205.

"the cold, deadening, snaky qualities of Grandcourt's egoism become repellent to Gwendolen only as the opposing warm, vivifying, sympathetic altruism of Deronda begins to stream upon her."<sup>94</sup>

These three characters will be our principal interest.

When the present writer read Daniel Deronda for the first time, he had just completed Eliot's earlier novels. Before he started the second chapter, he knew that the book would be centered on an egoism-altruism conflict between Gwendolen and Deronda, that much of his attention would be directed to "the struggling regenerative process in her which had begun with his action."<sup>95</sup>

Let us investigate the character of Gwendolen Harleth.

This young girl who "rejoiced to feel herself exceptional" and who was filled with the "inborn energy of egoistic desire" is obviously going to be a character of momentous and self-centered action. Her deep "sense that so exceptional a person as herself could hardly remain in ordinary circumstances or in a social position less than advantageous" prepares us to believe her statement on her life's plan: "My plan is to do what pleases me."<sup>96</sup> Not so obvious in the early pages of the story is Eliot's hint that Gwendolen's character is capable of

---

94 Bonnell, "George Eliot," Charlotte Bronte, etc., 160.

95 George Eliot, Daniel Deronda, Warwickshire ed., Boston, 1909, III, 329.

96 Ibid., I, 71, 54, 27, 94.

regeneration; speaking of her feelings, Eliot says:

We cannot speak a loyal word and be meanly silent, we cannot kill and not kill in the same moment; but a moment is room wide enough for the loyal and mean desire, for the outlash of a murderous thought and the sharp backward stroke of repentance.<sup>97</sup>

Eliot is subject to criticism for mentioning Gwendolen's egoism over and over again in the early pages of the book. Two examples, at least one of which is strikingly done, indicate this repetitiousness:

And if she had heard her immediate acquaintances cross-examined as to whether they thought her remarkable, the first who said 'No' would have surprised her.

. . . . .  
This maiden had been accustomed to think herself blameless; other persons only were faulty.<sup>98</sup>

Part of the possible justification for this emphasis on Gwendolen's egoism is Eliot's desire to explain her marriage to Grandcourt. Why does Gwendolen marry the man whom she had flown from when first informed of his mistress and children? Her motives are mixed. The bad ones are egoistic: "That intoxication of youthful egoism out of which she had been shaken by trouble, humiliation, and a new sense of culpability, had returned upon her under the newly fed strength of the old fumes." The basic reason for acceptance is seen in her words, "Everything is to be as I

97 Ibid., 55.

98 Ibid., I, 339; II, 53.

like."<sup>99</sup> She is also thinking of her mother, however; there is love in her heart. She speaks to Deronda:

'Perhaps you may not quite know that I really did think a good deal about my mother when I married. I was selfish, but I did love her, and feel about her poverty, and what comforted me most at first, when I was miserable, was her being better off because I had married.'<sup>100</sup>

Other statements show us conclusively that she had her mother's interest in mind when she married.<sup>101</sup> Was she consequently unaware of personal guilt? Certainly not:

And Gwendolen, we know, was thoroughly aware of the situation. She could not excuse herself by saying that there had been a tacit part of the contract on her side--namely, that she meant to rule and have her own way. With all her early indulgence in the disposition to dominate, she was not one of the narrow-brained women who through life regard all their own selfish demands as rights, and every claim upon themselves as an injury. She had a root of conscience in her, and the process of purgatory had begun for her on the green earth: she knew that she had been wrong.<sup>102</sup>

Gwendolen's regeneration begins after her realization of Grandcourt's egoism:

And all the while this contemptuous veto of her husband's on any intimacy with her family . . . was rousing more inclination towards them. . . . And here perhaps she was unconsciously finding some of that mental enlargement. . . .<sup>103</sup>

99 Ibid., II, 113, 41.

100 Ibid., III, 322.

101 Cf. ibid., I, 134, 329; II, 39.

102 Ibid., III, 181.

103 Ibid., 6-7.

From Grandcourt she turns to her family and most of all to Deronda: "If you despair of me, I shall despair. Your saying that I should not go on being selfish and ignorant has been some strength to me."<sup>104</sup> She turns to him after her husband's drowning; these comments show the effect his sympathy has had upon her:

He held it likely that Gwendolen's remorse aggravated her inward guilt, and that she gave the character of decisive action to what had been an inappreciably instantaneous glance of desire. But her remorse was the precious sign of a recoverable nature; it was the culmination of that self-disapproval which had been the awakening of a new life within her; it marked her off from the criminals whose only regret is failure in securing their evil wish.<sup>105</sup>

By the end of the story she is

experiencing some of that peaceful melancholy which comes from the renunciation of demands for self. . . . There is a way of looking at our life daily as an escape, and taking the quiet return of morn and evening--still more the star-like out-glowing of some pure fellow-feeling, some generous impulse breaking our inward darkness--as a salvation that reconciles us to hardship. Those who have a self-knowledge prompting such self-accusation as Hamlet's can understand this habitual feeling of rescue. And it was felt by Gwendolen as she lived through and through again the terrible history of her temptations, from their first form of illusory self-pleasing when she struggled away from the hold of conscience, to their latest form of an urgent hatred dragging her towards its satisfaction, while she prayed and cried for the help of that conscience which she had once forsaken. She was now dwelling on every word of Deronda's that pointed to her past deliverance from the worst infliction of it on others,

---

104 Ibid., 28.

105 Ibid., 221-222.

and on every word that carried a force to resist self-despair.<sup>106</sup>

On the day of Deronda's wedding to Mirah, Gwendolen writes to him: "I have remembered your words--that I may live to be one of the best of women, who make others glad that they were born. . . . It is better--it shall be better with me because I have known you."

Is Gwendolen's regeneration in any way attributable to dogmatic religion? Obviously not; Deronda is her priest, and his altruism is her newly found creed: "Mrs. Grandcourt . . . was, so far as pastoral care and religious fellowship were concerned, in as complete a solitude as a man in a lighthouse."<sup>107</sup>

Let us look briefly at the character of Grandcourt, "ice-cold in his egoism, ice-cold and self-sufficient, a walking death. . . . His own will is the one law of his being. He is a pure egoist, and therefore incapable of love."<sup>108</sup> Grandcourt, whose mind has become "reduced to the barrenness of a fastidious egoism," "was not jealous of anything unless it threatened his mastery--which he did not think himself likely to lose." His marriage to Gwendolen is marked by this iron will, and their life together is a failure largely because "he had no imagination of anything in her but what affected the gratification of his own

---

106 Ibid., 363-364.

107 Ibid., 384, 87-88.

108 Bullett, George Eliot, 209.



will."<sup>109</sup> People who do not bow to his desires are classified as brutes:

He did not care a languid curse for any one's admiration; but this state of not-caring, just as much as desire, required its related object--namely, a world of admiring or envying spectators: for if you are fond of looking stonily at smiling persons, the persons must be there and they must smile--a rudimentary truth which is surely forgotten by those who complain of mankind as generally contemptible, since any other aspect of the race must disappoint the voracity of their contempt.<sup>110</sup>

"Like all proud, closely-wrapped natures" Grandcourt's "view of things was considerably fenced in by his general sense, that what suited him, others must put up with. There is no escaping the fact that want of sympathy condemns us to a corresponding stupidity." Grandcourt, in summary, "had all his life had reason to take a flattering view of his own attractiveness, and to place himself in fine antithesis to the men who, he saw at once, must be revolting to a woman of taste."<sup>111</sup> His contempt for his fellow man had given rise to an affinity with Gwendolen's feelings before their marriage,<sup>112</sup> but her better nature is gradually reasserting itself at the end of the story.

Daniel Deronda's sympathy is so extensive that it

---

109 Eliot, Daniel Deronda, II, 3, 69; III, 16.

110 Ibid., 59.

111 Ibid., 73, 75-76, 183.

112 Ibid., 183.

almost prevents his acting in a forceful manner:

His early-wakened sensibility and reflectiveness had developed into a many-sided sympathy, which threatened to hinder any persistent course of action: as soon as he took up any antagonism, though only in thought, he seemed to himself like the Sabine warriors in the memorable story--with nothing to meet his spear but flesh of his flesh, and objects that he loved.<sup>113</sup>

His belief that "affection is the broadest basis of good in life" grows out of a youthful "fervor of sympathy, an activity of imagination on behalf of others, which did not show itself effusively, but was continually seen in acts of considerateness that struck his companions as moral eccentricity." His nature is such that when Gwendolen pours forth her guilty thoughts to him, he enters into her conflicting feelings: "he was in one of those moments when the very anguish of passionate pity makes us ready to choose that we will know pleasure no more, and live only for the stricken and afflicted."

Deronda's action is directed to three ends: Gwandolen, Mirah, and Judaism. His feeling after preventing Mirah's attempted suicide and helping her recover her faith in man is described by his creator: "Our pride becomes loving, our self is a not-self for whose sake we become virtuous, when we set to some hidden work of reclaiming a life from misery and look for our triumph in the secret joy--'This one is the better for me.'" The

---

113 Ibid., II, 126-127.

main function in his action of caring for Mirah is of course to lead to his meeting with Mordecai.

Out of his contact with Mirah's brother comes "the blending of a complete personal love in one current with a larger duty"; he considers it his duty "to identify myself, as far as possible, with my hereditary people, and if I can see any work to be done for them that I can give my soul and hand to I shall choose to do it."<sup>114</sup>

Deronda's nature requires that he find his Jewish heritage. In the days before his meeting with Mordecai:

[a] too reflective and diffusive sympathy was in danger of paralyzing in him . . . his wandering energy. . . . But how and whence was the needed event to come?--the influence that would justify partiality, and make him what he longed to be yet was unable to make himself--an organic part of social life, instead of roaming in it like a yearning disembodied spirit, stirred with a vague social passion, but without fixed local habitation to render fellowship real? To make a little difference for the better was what he was not contented to live without; but how make it? It is one thing to see your road, another to cut it.<sup>115</sup>

After he has cut his road

[i]t was as if he had found an added soul in finding his ancestry--his judgment no longer wandering in the mazes of impartial sympathy, but choosing, with that noble partiality which is man's best strength, the closer fellowship that makes sympathy practical--exchanging that bird's-eye reasonableness which soars to avoid preference and loses all sense of quality, for the generous reasonableness of drawing shoulder to shoulder

<sup>114</sup>, 170. <sup>114</sup> Ibid., II, 206; I, 255; III, 217; II, 147; III,

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., II, 128-129.

with men of like inheritance.<sup>116</sup>

Deronda recognizes his new fellowship as an inheritance from the past. He says to his mother: "The effects prepared by generations are likely to triumph over a contrivance which would bend them all to the satisfaction of self."<sup>117</sup>

The effect of Mordecai's ideas on Daniel Deronda should not appear strange to a student of the earlier novels. As one critic points out in an excellent summary of the tedious speeches of Mordecai and their effect on Deronda:

The higher, the religious life is that which transcends self, and which is lived in submission to the duties imposed upon us by the past, and the claims of those who surround us in the present and of those who shall succeed us in times to come. To be the centre of a living multitude, the heart of their hearts, the brain from which thoughts, as waves, pass through them--this is the best and purest joy which a human creature can know.<sup>118</sup>

This is not only a joy; this is Comte's human solidarity. Further, Deronda is to be the fulfilment of Mordecai's life; Mordecai's immortality is to be found in Deronda's discipleship. Mordecai says to his follower:

'You will be my life: it will be planted afresh; it will grow. You shall take the inheritance; it has been gathering for ages. The generations are crowding on my narrow life as a bridge: what has been and what is to be are meeting there; and the bridge is breaking. But

---

116 Ibid., III, 291.

117 Ibid., 173.

118 Edward Dowden, "George Eliot II: 'Middlemarch' and 'Daniel Deronda,'" Studies in Literature 1789-1877, 5th ed., London, 1889, 302.

I have found you. You have come in time. . . . You  
will take the sacred inheritance of the Jew.'<sup>119</sup>

Let us close this discussion of character with Deronda's relation to Gwendolen. He it is who stimulates in her heart the desire to regenerate her character from its depths. What is the advice he gives her? It reads like an excerpt from Comte:

'Look on other lives besides your own. See what their troubles are, and how they are borne. Try to care about something in this vast world besides the gratification of small selfish desires. Try to care for what is best in thought and action--something that is good apart from the accidents of your own lot.'<sup>120</sup>

The following critical opinion will serve not only to conclude this discussion of Eliot's last novel but also to anticipate part of the material for the final chapter:

She takes religious patriotism for the subject of her last great novel, but is at some pains to show that her hero may be religious without any belief in God, and patriotic without any but an ideal country. This reflective vacuum, which she pumps out behind all noble action, gives to the workings of her great imagination a general effect of supreme melancholy.<sup>121</sup>

We have investigated Romola, Felix Holt, Middlemarch, and Daniel Deronda. The point has become clear: Eliot's later novels possess structure, character, and thought which have been drawn from the philosophy of Auguste Comte.

---

119 Eliot, Daniel Deronda, II, 324.

120 Ibid., 249.

121 Richard Holt Hutton, "George Eliot," Brief Literary Criticisms, London, 1906, 181.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE EFFECT OF POSITIVISM ON ELIOT'S NOVELS

The reader of Eliot's novels requires only a short time to note her excellence in the psychological analysis of character. Although her emphasis on human solidarity often results in a many-stranded plot, there is more than a suggestion of truth in the following remark: "In George Eliot's world nothing ever happens, one is tempted to say; certainly less, very much less, than in the world of any other writer of the first rank."<sup>1</sup> The reason for this critic's opinion can probably be traced to her mode of writing: "She did not have a vision of Barchester or Cranford and then invent situations on which to hang her picture of this vision; she had a vision of human society as the expression of certain principles, and then embodied it in a picture of a specific place--Middlemarch."<sup>2</sup> John Morley tells us how Eliot explained

---

1 W.C. Brownell, "George Eliot," Victorian Prose Masters, London, 1902, 105-106.

2 David Cecil, "George Eliot," Early Victorian Novelists, London, 1934, 286.

her process to him:

In a letter to Mr. Harrison . . . George Eliot describes her own method as 'the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me first in the flesh and not in the spirit.' The passage recalls a discussion one day at the Priory in 1877. She was speaking of the different methods of the poetic or creative art, and said that she began with moods, thoughts, passions, and then invented the story for their sake, and fitted it to them.<sup>3</sup>

Characters facing moral problems and making decisions about them receive the main emphasis in an Eliot novel, an emphasis which prompts one critic to say that "Matthew Arnold thought that conduct was three-fourths of life: George Eliot went further, she thought it was four-fourths."<sup>4</sup> Henry James also feels that she is working from the moral to the concrete world, "that her figures and situations are evolved, as the phrase is, from her moral consciousness, and are only indirectly the products of observation."<sup>5</sup> This engrossment with moral choice has much to do with her place in the history of the novel: "It is as a moralist that she is a real contributor to literature, that she is at her best, that she is of the first class, and that, among novelists at least, she is, if not unrivalled, at all events, unsurpassed."<sup>6</sup>

---

3 John Morley, "The Life of George Eliot," Critical Miscellanies, III, London, 1886, 107.

4 Cecil, "George Eliot," Victorian Novelists, 302.

5 Henry James, "The Life of George Eliot," Partial Portraits, London, 1888, 51.

6 Brownell, "George Eliot," Victorian Prose, 139.

Much of Eliot's attitude and approach toward the creatures of her novels and the moral problems they face can be seen in this statement of the Positive moral basis for character:

It [Positiv̄ism] sets forth social feeling as the first principle of morality; without ignoring the natural superiority in strength of the personal instincts. To live for others it holds to be the highest happiness. To become incorporate with Humanity, to sympathize with all her former phases, to foresee her destinies in the future, and to do what lies in us to forward them; this is what it puts before us as the constant aim of life. Self-love in the Positive system is regarded as the great infirmity of our nature; an infirmity which unremitting discipline on the part of each individual and of society may materially palliate, but will never radically cure. The degree to which this mastery over our own nature is attained is the truest standard of individual or social progress, since it has the closest relation to the existence of the Great Being, and to the happiness of the elements that compose it.<sup>7</sup>

This statement does not, of course, purport to say that all men are either egoistic, bad, or altruistic, good. The majority of men, says Comte, are alternately governed by these two driving forces and oscillate between them.<sup>8</sup>

What are the effects of Comte's influence on Eliot?

First of all, we have seen that the structure of her novels is largely controlled by the egoism-altruism theme. She consequently draws characters to illustrate the clash of these moral forces.

---

7 Comte, General View, 259-260.

8 Lewes, Comte's Philosophy, 224.



When she attempts to create altruistic spirits, she fails--at least in part--to gain reality and to convince her reader. Adam Bede, Dinah Morris, Felix Holt, and Daniel Deronda often seem too far above the reader in their almost exclusive preoccupation with what they can do for others. Mr. F.R. Leavis finds even the character of Dorothea, certainly a more realistic person than those just mentioned, to be an artistic blot on the excellence of Middlemarch:

Intensely alive with intelligence and imaginative sympathy, quick and vivid in her realization of the 'equivalent centre of self' in others--even in a Casaubon or a Rosamond, she is incapable of morose indifference or the normal routine obtuseness, and it may be said in a wholly laudatory sense, by way of characterizing her at her highest level, that no life would have been possible for her that was not filled with emotion: her sensibility is directed outward, and she responds from deep within. At this level 'emotion' is a disinterested response defined by its object, and hardly distinguishable from the play of the intelligence and self-knowledge that give it impersonality. But the emotional 'fulness' represented by Dorothea depends for its exalting potency on an abeyance of intelligence and self-knowledge, and the situations offered by way of 'objective correlative' have the day-dream relation to experience: they are generated by a need to soar above the indocile facts and conditions of the real world. They don't, indeed, strike us as real in any sense; they have no objectivity, no vigour of illusion. In this kind of indulgence, complaisantly as she abandons herself to the current that is loosed, George Eliot's creative vitality has no part.<sup>9</sup>

In the world of realistic fiction in which man presently finds

---

9 Leavis, Great Tradition, 79.

himself, there is an ardent desire to learn of life as it is actually lived. The somewhat cynical, justifiably confused, and war-irritated reader of today cannot be labeled Mandevillian simply because he refuses to accept altruistic characters such as Felix Holt and looks upon a person such as Arthur Donnithorne with greater sympathy. If Eliot had drawn more of her altruistic characters with just a few of the "spots of commonness" she portrays in Tertius Lydgate, the appeal of these good characters would have been enhanced. The reader of her novels gains a new insight into man and perhaps an increased sympathy towards him not by contemplating the goodness of Deronda but by joining Eliot in her sympathy for Mr. Casaubon. Yes, there are, unfortunately, more Arthur Donnithornes than Adam Bedes in our world. And the novelist, in order to appeal to and make imaginative contact with this majority, must direct his writing to it.

Yet we have that sparkling galaxy of unforgettable people: Janet Dempster, Arthur Donnithorne, Maggie Tulliver, Silas Marner, Romola, Harold Transome, Rosamond Vincy, Tertius Lydgate, Gwendolen Harleth, and many more. George Eliot's signal triumph is her ability to recognize and analyze the complexity of life, to draw great characters despite her preconceived notions that they are largely directed by egoistic or altruistic natures. She almost always (Grandcourt is a key exception) prompts her reader to sympathize with the characters before him; she almost always

presents him with truly human and not uncommon or unrecognizable qualities in her personages:

Rosamond Vincy can move us to pity her still in an hour of trouble; and this is a sign that George Eliot, though making her marvelously inhuman, has not crossed the boundary drawn by right instinct, to search out some monstrous thing in the gloom where the grotesque and the ghastly of late romance have their fit abode.<sup>10</sup>

This wonderful power gives Eliot the position she occupies in the history of the form in which she wrote, for

If we read a novel in order to clarify our minds about human character, in order to pass judgment on the effect of character on the world outside itself, and to estimate the ideas people have lived by, then George Eliot is one of the first to give such an intellectual direction to the English novel.<sup>11</sup>

A reader of the criticism of Eliot's work will find in almost every selection some comment on the sadness pervading her novels. The cause of this melancholy tone is undoubtedly not one specific fact or belief. Marjorie A. Bald<sup>12</sup> is a member of that group which says that Eliot never ceased regretting her loss of faith and that this lack of confidence in the future left its traces in the sadness of her novels. Another school of thought attributes this quality of her work to the time in which she lived

---

10 Barry, "The Genius of George Eliot," Heralds, 6.

11 Pritchett, "George Eliot," Living Novel, 91.

12 Marjorie A. Bald, "George Eliot," Women Writers of the 19th Century, Cambridge, 1923, 174-179.

Large and noble as was her own spiritual nature, George Eliot intellectually was not above her age, but of it; and it is in this fact that we see the explanation of the underlying sadness in all her books, which it is impossible for those who have received the most good from them to ignore.<sup>13</sup>

Two great controversialists of our time find themselves in agreement on the sadness of Eliot's novels. Bernard Shaw explains his reaction in the following manner:

But the impression she made was not encouraging. The effect of the fatalistic determinism into which the scientific thought of that day had driven her was distinctly depressing and laming. Her characters seemed the helpless victims of their environment and inherited dispositions, contributing nothing except a few follies and weaknesses to the evolutionary struggle, if the word struggle can be used when there is no real resistance to what Darwin called natural selection. Now a fatalist, as George Eliot proved, can write so well that a capable man of letters like the late Lord Bryce, in a public eulogy of Tolstoy, could think of nothing more complimentary to say of him than that as a novelist he was second only to George Eliot. But, for all that, she discouraged many noble spirits.<sup>14</sup>

Although the present writer is convinced that Eliot's work, taken collectively, is not fatalistic, he can at least record Mr. Shaw's opinion that the Victorian Age controlled Eliot's thought. Shaw's eminent opponent G. K. Chesterton, in speaking of the "general moral atmosphere of the Victorian Age," analyzes its tone in characteristic style:

---

13 Marie Louise Henry, "The Morality of Thackeray and of George Eliot," Atlantic Monthly, Boston, LI, Feb., 1883, 247.

14 Bernard Shaw, "How William Archer Impressed Bernard Shaw," Works of Bernard Shaw, London, 1931, XXIX, 24.

It is impossible to express that spirit except by the electric bell of a name. It was latitudinarian, and yet it was limited. It could be content with nothing less than the whole cosmos: yet the cosmos with which it was content was small. It is false to say it was without humour: yet there was something by instinct unsmiling in it. It was always saying solidly that things were 'enough'; and proving by that sharpness (as of the shutting of a door) that they were not enough. It took, I will not say its pleasure, but even its emancipations, sadly. Definitions seem to escape this way and that in the attempt to locate it as an idea. But everyone will understand me if I call it George Eliot.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the novels themselves seem to indicate some more specific reason for this depressing quality.

The present writer thinks that we leave such characters as Dorothea and Gwendolen with pity in our hearts because they have nothing to look forward to but subjective immortality. Neither of them can cling to a personal God; both are left only with Humanity. Their personal renunciation, a prerequisite for social duty, is not convincingly motivated. It is impossible to renounce self without an end outside self; further it is impossible to embrace happily the lives of people outside self when one has nothing to hope for except a future life in their memory. Again, Christianity commands man to love his neighbor for the love of God; it directs man's altruism first of all to one being, that being divine; Positivism has only the collective and faulty race to offer. The

---

<sup>15</sup> G. K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, New York, 1913, 103.

reader consequently feels that Eliot's universe is a melancholy one; on the other hand her attempt to inculcate sympathy is a plea for a better, if not a happier, world.

Again, the philosophy of Comte and Eliot does not count upon moral victory. Lydgate and Dorothea partially fail in their desires. Comte did not expect them to emerge in triumph; egoism cannot be completely put down:

And yet, with all this, comprehensive as our organization of moral force may be, so great is the innate strength of the selfish instincts, that our success in solving the great human problem will always fall short of what we might legitimately desire. To this conclusion we must come, in whatever way we regard the destiny of Man; but it should only encourage us to combine our efforts still more strongly in order to ameliorate the order of Nature in its most important, that is, in its moral aspects, these being at once the most modifiable and the most imperfect.<sup>16</sup>

But despite Eliot's efforts to encourage her readers and herself, there remains certainly not a complacency towards life, nor even a serious doubt or despair, but perhaps a wonder, a questioning, too weak a hope that man will ever reach that "best of all possible worlds!"

Without any doubt Eliot's goal in writing was "the extension and deepening of human sympathy."<sup>17</sup> That this sympathetic point of view, this expression of Positivism in her novels, became

---

16 Comte, General View, 240-241.

17 Bald, "George Eliot," Women Writers, 186.

increasingly manifest as she continued to write is the consensus of critical opinion. Such critics as W. C. Brownell, who contends that her earlier novels are the superior ones, would logically say that Positivism had a bad effect on her progress. Brownell believes that her scientific and Positivistic interests brought her away from the excellence of The Mill on the Floss to the "jejune artificiality of 'Daniel Deronda,'"<sup>18</sup> Such critics as F.R. Leavis,<sup>19</sup> who points to her later novels as superior, would logically say that Positivism had a good effect on her profound and analytical characterization. The later works, especially Middlemarch, are coming to be more and more accepted as great landmarks in the history of fiction. Whether or not this trend of critical opinion continues, the fact remains that George Eliot's novels, the later ones to a greater extent than the earlier, would not be formed as they are were it not for the influence of Positivism.

In conclusion, then, George Eliot's novels have the structure which they possess because of her attempt to exemplify the Comtist dichotomy of egoism versus altruism, her endeavor to make these "ideas thoroughly incarnate" in her stories, her successful portrayal of the resulting conflict. That she succeeded in creating great characters despite the encumbrances contained in

---

18 Brownell, "George Eliot," Victorian Prose, 137.

19 Great Tradition, 33-35.

such a dichotomy is her signal triumph, the triumph which marks her as the forerunner of the psychological novelist.

George Eliot's novels have the melancholy which they possess not only because she was a product of the ethical century, not only because with Ibsen, Arnold, and Tolstoy she was among the dramatis personae of what has been called the drama of atheist humanism, but also because she was writing under the influence of Comte (who is one of the chief dramatis personae of Henri de Lubac's work).<sup>20</sup> She failed to sound the depths of human experience because she lacked a transcendental religion which might have revealed man to her in the fulness of his nature; Dorothea Brooke, Felix Holt, Romola, and Gwendolen Harleth leave a melancholy impression because their yearning after the infinite is rewarded only with subjective immortality. Despite her success as a novelist, her altruism, and her many personal admirers, and certainly because of her admiration for Comte, George Eliot can only, rather weakly and awkwardly, cry out:

O May I join the choir invisible  
 Of those immortal dead who live again  
 In minds made better by their presence: live  
 In pulses stirred to generosity,  
 In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn  
 For miserable aims that end with self,  
 In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,  
 And with their mild persistence urge man's search  
 To vaster issues.<sup>21</sup>

20 The Drama of Atheist Humanism, 75-159.

21 George Eliot, "O May I Join the Choir Invisible," The Poems of George Eliot, New York, 1887, 231.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### I. PRIMARY SOURCES

- Comte, Auguste, General View of Positivism, translated from the French by J.H. Bridges, 2nd ed., London, 1880.
- Comte, Auguste, Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, freely translated from the French and condensed by Harriet Martineau, New York, 1855.
- Cross, J.W., ed., George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals, 3 vols., Edinburgh, 1885.
- Cross, J.W., ed., George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals, Rosehill Limited ed., 3 vols., Boston, 1895.
- Eliot, George, The Best-Known Novels of George Eliot, Modern Library ed., New York, n.d.
- Eliot, George, Daniel Deronda, Warwickshire ed., 3 vols., Boston, 1909.
- Eliot, George, Felix Holt: the Radical, Rosehill Limited ed., 2 vols., Boston, 1893.
- Eliot, George, Middlemarch, Everyman ed., 2 vols., New York, 1948.
- Eliot, George, The Poems of George Eliot, New York, 1887.
- Eliot, George, Scenes of Clerical Life, Rosehill Limited ed., 2 vols., Boston, 1894.
- Lewes, George Henry, Biographical History of Philosophy, London, 1857.
- Lewes, George Henry, Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences: Being an Exposition of the Principles of the Cours de Philosophie Positive of Auguste Comte, London, 1853.

- Lewes, George Henry, History of Philosophy, Vol. II, London, 1867.
- Stuart, Roland, ed., Letters from George Eliot to Elma Stuart: 1872-1880, London, 1909.

## II. SECONDARY SOURCES

### A. BOOKS

- Baker, Ernest A., The History of the English Novel, Vol. VIII, London, 1937.
- Bennett, Joan, George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art, Cambridge, England, 1948.
- Bentley, Phyllis, The English Regional Novel, London, 1941.
- Blind, Mathilde, George Eliot, Famous Women Series, Boston, 1885.
- Bourl'honne, P., George Eliot: Essai de Biographie Intellectuelle et Morale 1819-1854, Paris, 1933.
- Browning, Oscar, Life of George Eliot, Great Writers Series, ed. Eric S. Robertson, London, 1892.
- Bullett, Gerald, George Eliot: Her Life and Books, New Haven, 1948.
- Cazamian, Madeleine L., Le Roman et Les Idées en Angleterre: L'Influence de la Science (1860-1890), Strasbourg, 1923.
- Chesterton, Gilbert K., The Victorian Age in Literature, New York, 1913.
- Cooke, George Willis, George Eliot: A Critical Study of Her Life, Writings, and Philosophy, London, 1883.
- Euwema, Ben, The Development of George Eliot's Ethical and Social Theories, University of Chicago dissertation, Chicago, 1936.
- Geddes, Patrick, George Eliot: Moralists and Thinker, The Round Table Series, Edinburgh, 1884.
- Haight, Gordon S., George Eliot and John Chapman, New Haven, 1940.
- Haldame, Elizabeth, George Eliot and Her Times, London, 1927.

- Kitchel, Anna T., George Lewes and George Eliot, New York, 1933.
- Leavis, F.R., The Great Tradition, London, 1948.
- Lonsdale, Margaret, George Eliot: Thoughts Upon Her Life, Her Books, and Herself, London, 1886.
- Lubac, Henri de, S.J., The Drama of Atheist Humanism, translated from the French by Edith M. Riley, New York, 1950.
- May, J. Lewis, George Eliot: A Study, London, 1930.
- Mill, John Stuart, Auguste Comte and Positivism, Philadelphia, 1866.
- Morize, Andre, Problems and Methods of Literary History, Boston, 1922.
- Mudge, Isadore G., and M.E. Sears, A George Eliot Dictionary, London, 1924.
- Shaw, Bernard, Works of Bernard Shaw, 33 vols., London, 1931.
- Stephen, Leslie, George Eliot, English Men of Letters Series, New York, 1902.
- Ward, Wilfrid, The Clothes of Religion: A Reply to Popular Positivism, London, 1886.
- Williams, Blanche Colton, George Eliot, New York, 1936.

#### B. ARTICLES IN BOOKS

- Bald, Marjorie A., "George Eliot," Women Writers of the 19th Century, Cambridge, 1923, 162-208.
- Barry, William, "The Genius of George Eliot," Heralds of Revolt: Studies in Modern Literature and Dogma, London, 1902, 1-29.
- Beach, Joseph Warren, "Psychology: Fielding, Eliot," The Twentieth Century Novel, New York, 1932, 25-34.
- Bonnell, Henry H., "George Eliot," Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Jane Austen: Studies in Their Works, New York, 1902, 131-322.

Bridges, Horace James, "George Eliot: A Centenary Tribute (1919)," As I Was Saying, Boston, 1923, 86-106.

Brownell, W.C., "George Eliot," Victorian Prose Masters, London, 1902, 99-144.

Cecil, David, "George Eliot," Early Victorian Novelists, London, 1934, 283-328.

Chevalley, Abel, "Victorian Woman Novelists," The Modern English Novel, translated from the French by Ben Ray Redman, New York, 1925, 38-56.

Cross, Wilbur L., "The Psychological Novel," The Development of the English Novel, New York, 1899, 234-262.

Davies, Ruth Gwen, "George Eliot: A Study in Mid-Victorian Pessimism," Ohio State University Abstracts of Dissertations, No. 19, Columbus, Ohio, 1936, 27-33.

Dawson, W.J., "George Eliot," The Makers of English Fiction, New York, 1905, 145-163.

Dowden, Edward, "George Eliot," Studies in Literature 1789-1877, 5th ed., London, 1889, 240-272.

Dowden, Edward, "George Eliot II 'Middlemarch' and 'Daniel Deronda,'" Studies in Literature 1789-1877, 5th ed., London, 1889, 273-310.

Gosse, Edmund, "George Eliot," Aspects and Impressions, New York, 1922, 1-16.

Harrison, Frederic, "George Eliot," Studies in Early Victorian Literature, London, 1895, 205-223.

Harrison, Frederic, "Introduction," The Philosophy of Auguste Comte, by L. Levy-Bruhl, translated from the French by Kathleen de Beaumont-Klein, London, 1903.

Hinkley, Laura L., "Marian," Ladies of Literature, New York, 1946, 279-351.

Hutton, Richard Holt, "George Eliot," Brief Literary Criticisms, London, 1906, 175-182.

Hutton, Richard Holt, "George Eliot as Author," Essays on Some of the Modern Guides of English Thought in Matters of Faith, London, 1887, 145-258.

- James, Henry, "The Life of George Eliot," Partial Portraits, London, 1888, 37-62.
- Johnson, R. Brimley, "A Professional Woman," The Women Novelists, London, 1918, 204-225.
- Kempis, Thomas à, "Translator's Preface," The Imitation of Christ, translated from the Latin by Edgar Daplyn, New York, 1950, 1-12.
- Lovett, Robert Morss, and Helen Sard Hughes, "George Eliot (1819-1880)," The History of the Novel in England, Boston, 1932, 293-303.
- Moore, Virginia, "George Eliot," Distinguished Women Writers, New York, 1934, 203-218.
- Morley, John, "Auguste Comte," Critical Miscellanies, Vol. III, London, 1886, 337-384.
- Morley, John, "The Life of George Eliot," Critical Miscellanies, Vol. III, London, 1886, 93-132.
- Myers, F.W.H., "George Eliot," Essays--Modern, London, 1883, 251-275.
- Pritchett, V.S., "George Eliot," The Living Novel, New York, 1947, 89-101.
- Scott, William T., "George Eliot," Chesterton and Other Essays, Cincinnati, 1912, 247-275.
- Turner, William, "Positivism," History of Philosophy, Boston, 1903, 608-612.
- Wagenknecht, Edward, "The 'New' Novel: George Eliot," Cavalcade of the English Novel, New York, 1943, 319-335.
- Weygandt, Cornelius, "The Higher Provincialism of George Eliot," A Century of the English Novel, New York, 1925, 172-194.
- Willey, Basil, "Auguste Comte," Nineteenth Century Studies, London, 1949, 187-203.
- Willey, Basil, "George Eliot: Hennell, Strauss, and Feuerbach," Nineteenth Century Studies, London, 1949, 204-236.
- Willey, Basil, "George Eliot, Conclusion," Nineteenth Century Studies, London, 1949, 237-249.
- Woolf, Virginia, "George Eliot," The Common Reader, New York, 1925, 229-242.

## C. ARTICLES IN PERIODICALS

The Athenaeum, London, December 7, 1872.

Bacon, Jane, "George Eliot Who Walked with Intellectual Kings and Lost the Common Touch," The Dickensian, London, XXXIV, Sept., 1938, 264-267.

Bassett, John J., "The Purpose in George Eliot's Art," Anglia, Halle, Saale, LIV, Nov., 1930, 338-350.

Curtis, Georgina, "The Ethics of George Eliot," Catholic World, New York, LXXVI, Nov., 1902, 217-222.

"Eliot's Novels," Quarterly Review, London, CVIII, 1860, 469-499.

"George Eliot and Comtism," London Quarterly Review, XLVII, Jan., 1877, 446-472.

Harrison, Frederic, "The Positivist Problem," Fortnightly Review, London, VI, New Series, Nov. 1, 1869, 469-493.

Henry, Maria Louise, "The Morality of Thackeray and of George Eliot," Atlantic Monthly, Boston, LI, Feb., 1883, 243-247.

Hough, Graham, "George Eliot: Novelist-Philosopher," Horizon, London, XVII, Jan., 1948, 50-62.

"Middlemarch," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, Edinburgh, CXII, Dec., 1872, 727-745.

Naumann, Walter, "The Architecture of George Eliot's Novels," Modern Language Quarterly, Seattle, Washington, IX, March, 1948, 37-50.

Parlett, Mathilde, "George Eliot and Humanism," Studies in Philology, Chapel Hill, XXVII, Jan., 1930, 25-46.

Parlett, Mathilde, "The Influence of Contemporary Criticism on George Eliot," Studies in Philology, Chapel Hill, XXX, Jan., 1933, 103-132.

Swinny, S.H., "Positivism," Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Edinburgh, 1918, X, 116-122.

Stephen, Leslie, "Harriet Martineau," Dictionary of National Biography, ed. Sidney Lee, New York, 1909, XII, 1194-1199.

- Wade, Mabel Claire, "George Eliot's Philosophy of Sin," English Journal, New York, XIV, April, 1925, 269-277.
- Williams, Blanche Colton, "George Eliot: Social Pressure on the Individual," Sewanee Review, Sewanee, Tennessee, XLVI, April-June, 1938, 235-241.
- Wright, Walter Francis, "George Eliot as Industrial Reformer," Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, New York, LXI, Dec., 1941, 1107-1114.

APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by James Donald Barry has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

June 5, 1951  
Date

Martin J. Svaglic  
Signature of Adviser