SOME INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES IN THE NOVELS OF GEORGE ELIOT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is divided into two parts. In Part I we study George Eliot's life and the historical sequence of the novels from the following points of view: form and style and content. In Content the discussion is focussed on general development in her novels as well as on her limited and repetitive circle of invention. In Part II we indicate sources and give a general evaluation in terms of individuals and societies. In Societies we study how penetratingly George Eliot observes societies and the social bonds that hold them together. In Individuals we study why, in the interest of plot-construction and of centres for the reader's interest, the leading characters are set apart from the societies in which they live. My Conclusion places George Eliot in the perspective of nineteenth century writers, both English and European, and offers my judgement on her greatest merits.

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INTRODUCTION

A first reading of George Eliot's novels gives the clear impression that the writer has two main interests: one is the narration of events and the actions, together with description of the feelings and motives, of certain central figures; the other is in the presentation of a lively picture of society as being held together by general social bonds and individual human affections, this by no means being a mere background for the main figures of the stories.

These two interests are paramount. There are very few other interests affecting the content, form or style of the novels. Irony is found, as shrewd as the irony of Jane Austen but usually more directly expressed, either by an interpolated comment from the author or by the obvious "dramatic" irony of a given situation. The literary value of George Eliot's works, therefore, does not primarily depend on her use of irony; intelligence and sympathy are called for from the reader much more often than an appreciation of ironic wit. In George Eliot's novels there is no satire of the "Vanity Fair" kind nor is there any preaching to the public conscience as there is in Dickens. Furthermore, the desire to provoke a laugh, either by caricaturing personalities or by scenes of clowning, slapstick or bathos, beloved of Swift, Fielding, Sterne and Dickens, is also absent, though the author's humour emerges just as clearly and naturally as does her earnestness. There is no lack of amusing characters put in amusing situations among her works. The whims, caprices, quirks and oddities of people's speech

and behaviour delight us but they do not strike us as belonging to the "comic" literary genre. Each idiosyncrasy is integrated into a balanced picture of people playing a part in the development of the story or in the rounding-off of a picture of society. For the middle classes and the "gentry", Jane Austen is George Eliot's precurser when it comes to penetrating humour, and for the countrypeople--farmers and farm-labourers-- George Eliot has no precurser at all unless it be certain highland and lowland "types" in the "Scottish" novels of Sir Walter Scott, for instance , Meg Merrilees the gypsy, Dandy Dinmont the farmer and the rough-mannered tutor, Domimi Sampson, from Guy Mannering.

Many critics have remarked on certain meditative, discursive or philosophical passages in George Eliot's novels, which originate in the critical standpoint from which the author views life.[1] These passages, indicating certain trains of thought or preoccupations, do not outweigh the bulk of the content of the novels, which is of a straightforwardly narrative and descriptive nature. Individuals and societies are what clearly and chiefly matter in George Eliot's works. Even those who have censured her for being too "intellectual" have never suggested that her intellect was concerned with anything other than people and the social world they live in. It cannot for a moment be maintained that her intellectual bent leads her into a kind of non-literary philosophising, in terms of which a novel's characters are used merely as examples to illustrate some theory or other. Daniel Deronda, for instance, suffers from many boring pages of tendentious argument about race and religion, yet no one could

maintain that it is a roman à thèse.

No matter whether her characters are pondering a new concept or a moral issue, whether they are talking of art, music, genius, looking for an object of life-long dedication or whatever they are doing, the novelist's two basic interests never flag or vary: individuals and societies claim her attention and that of the reader.

A closer reading of George Eliot's novels reveals that the two main interests, which create such an immediate impression on the reader, are not and cannot be independent of each other. Certain stresses and strains exist between them. There is a problem of balance.

The problem presents itself in two ways. First, the author, as creator, faces a problem of composition. In composing a novel, each factor will have to compete for precedence. There must be a choice of sequence and emphasis for incidents or topics arising out of this interest or of that. The mood and even the style of writing must vary according to whether one interest or the other predominates, the interest in the individual or the interest in society. Second, the characters in the novels, who are created beings in a created world, are made to face a problem very similar to the author's, namely, the problem of "composing" their lives. Will it be the individual or the society which gets the upper hand? The characters must live so as to achieve as much self-fulfilment as can be tolerated by the feelings and expectations in the lives of other people.

The dilemma for most of the central figures of the novels

largely hinges on the degree that they fit in with or stand out from the society that surrounds them. Usually these figures can do no other but stand out from society, either from inner convictions, being religious, political or idealistic zealots, or from force of circumstances, being outcasts from the average English, Christian family -- orphans, Jews or, embittered victims of injustice. In every case the character of these figures reacts to the surrounding social situation in a most natural way and yet the author leaves room for highly individual thoughts and acts. This places George Eliot far away from determinism or Zola's type of naturalism.

One result of having recognised the problem of achieving a balance is, therefore, that the novels must be judged as works of art since the balance of interests, which is the basic problem for the author, is a question of artistic choice. It will not do to assume that George Eliot's novels have most value as social tracts, moral sermons or even as interesting examples of a stage in the history of the novel. Primarily they are literary works depending on the author's skill in blending or contrasting material offered her by observation and reflection. As her skill increases, the cruder contrasts and harsher blendings are refined and the interweaving of these effects produces the masterpiece, Middlemarch .

On the level of the world of the characters inside the story, the author intends the issue to be one of moral choice. She specifically leaves room for distinctive individuality in her created world and intends that actions and motives should be

connected with a degree of personal responsibility. This degree of responsibility is part of the artistic effect of the books. It varies enormously from person to person. It is measured by how much or how little sympathy the reader can find for any given character. When heredity or environment play the major part, our sympathy will be almost unbounded. When, however, an evil action is deliberately committed and the issue is shown to have been a genuine choice between good or evil, then our sympathy will be reduced almost to nothing. Hetty's crime and Grandcourt's cruelty are contrasting examples of individual responsibility, the former producing pity and horror in the reader, the latter condemnation and revulsion. This sympathy, in turn, depends, of course, on the degree of understanding (empathy) which the reader has been able to achieve from narrative and descriptive passages relevant to that specific character. Thus the moral issue and the artistic quality of the books go hand in hand. The former will not strike us as being humanly significant if the latter has failed in its task of convincing us that the characters are men and women in a believable world. This aspect of George Eliot's work will be be discussed together with the new ideas about sociology, particularly those of Herbert Spencer.

Interpreting the main interest and significance of George Eliot's work in the light of what has been said above, the lack of emphasis placed on Romola in this study becomes explainable. The central figures of the book remind us of other characters in other of George Eliot's novels, as will be pointed out later,[2] but the setting cannot be judged in the same way as for the rest of her books.

Historical novels convince by skilful manipulation of many carefully collected facts and an admixture of emotions and situations which are common to all men in all ages. People praise a historical novel largely because the author has created an impressive world of life by means of learning and imagination. This is a world in which the reader seems a kind of tourist, marvelling at the reality of everything. He tends to be gullible. In the main stream of novels of character, however, reality is not accepted in such a credulous way. Reality is only grudgingly admitted to exist in novels where the reader can test the world portrayed directly from his own experience. Such is the case in all of George Eliot's novels from Adam Bede to Daniel Deronda, the one exception being Romola. Moreover, the relationship between environment and character, force of circumstance and individual responsibility, is also within the intimate knowledge of the reader of novels with a contemporary setting. False motivation, exaggerated sentiment, naive explanation of character will immediately be felt and the story rejected as artificial. The burden of proof of reality, the obligation to convince, rest squarely with the author. In historical novels, the reader is called upon to make some imaginative effort, which he is usually prepared to do because of curiosity about the past; in other words, the "distance lends enchantment to the view". The present calls forth no such willing suspension of criticism. Where there is no conviction that the novel's world is the one the reader knows so well, the novel becomes a complete failure. Although the settings in George Eliot's novels are now more than a hundred years away from us in time, her

writing still has the power to convince. It has not dated (except in certain very minor stylistic matters such as the omniscient author convention and the taste for pedantry, which will be mentioned later) and the worlds of each book still appear real to us even though our own age is very different. But, of course, we do not read George Eliot for historical data or sociological information on Victorian England any more than we read Fielding for facts on the Georgian period or, for that matter, Chaucer for light on the reign of Edward III.

What follows is a detailed examination of George Eliot's novels in which it is hoped that the broader issues brought up in this introduction will emerge even more clearly and forcefully.

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