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The Role of the Narrator in Eliot's Fiction, Especially *Middlemarch*

I

Almost all readers of George Eliot's novels have tended to identify the narrator with the author herself. As early as 1872 Edward Dowden suggested that the narrator should be seen as the author's 'second self',¹ but in practice critics have been content to regard the narrator as George Eliot. For example, Michael Mason writes, 'George Eliot intervenes in her own person in *Middlemarch* more than in any previous novel.'² This attitude to the narrator has encouraged the view, still common among many readers, that 'George Eliot' intrudes too often in her own person and so interferes with the reader's response. These 'intrusions' are seen as signs of an excessive moralism or of a reluctance to let the novel speak for itself. The use of the term 'omniscient narrator' has encouraged the identification of the narrator with the author since only the author could possess 'omniscient' knowledge of her imaginary world. I shall argue, however, that the narrator should be seen as an integral part of the structure of her novels and that a fuller understanding of her fiction depends on this being taken into account.

One of the most important critical statements Eliot ever made and one which deserves frequent quotation is to be found in a letter she wrote to John Blackwood. It expresses her fear that Alexander Main's book of extracts from her work, which includes many passages in which the narrator addresses the reader, might make it appear that her novels were not artistic wholes:

If it were true I should be quite stultified as an artist. Unless my readers are moved towards the ends I seek by my works as wholes than by an assemblage of extracts, my writings are a mistake. I have always exercised a severe watch against anything that could be called preaching, and if I have ever allowed myself in dissertation or in dialogue [anything] which is not part of the *structure* of my books, I have sinned against my own laws. (*Letters*, V, 458–9, emphasis in original)

Significantly she refers to herself as an artist and not merely as a novelist. It seems clear that she intended the narrator's comments and 'intrusions' to be part of the overall artistic structure of her fiction. If this is a correct interpretation, then it is important to study the role the narrator plays in the structure of her novels rather than to identify the narrator with Eliot as author.

One fact which suggests that Eliot desired to separate herself from the narrator is that in *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* the narrator is clearly indicated to be male. In the novels that followed there are no gendered references to the narrator, though in her last work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, the narrator is openly dissociated from Eliot as author, being characterized as 'a bachelor, without domestic distractions of any sort' (*ITS*, 3). All of this suggests that throughout her work she intends the narrator to be separate from her as author. A more important fact related to this is that in her fiction the narrator is represented as a historical novelist writing about what for 'him' or 'her' are real people and events. This is so even in the notorious Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, 'In Which the Story Pauses a Little'. Although at first the author seems to be narrating in her own person and to be addressing the reader as if they both accept the novel as a pure fiction with imaginary characters, we read later in the same chapter, 'But I gathered from Adam Bede, to whom I talked of these matters in his old age' (*AB*, 179). Unless one regards Eliot as untypically confused, the narrator must be writing a novel about people 'he' has known or been told about. This is also true of the other novels. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the first chapter consists of the narrator remembering a historically real scene with real people: 'Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair, and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill, as it looked one February afternoon many years ago' (*MF*, 8–9). In *Silas Marner*, *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, the narrator refers to the novel as a history and himself or herself as a historian. In *Middlemarch*, for example, there is the following passage:

We belated historians must not linger after his [Fielding's] example; and if we did so, it is probable that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from a camp-stool in a parrot-house. I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe. (*M*, 139)

And in Chapter 9 of *Daniel Deronda*, the narrator states:

But let it be observed, nothing is here narrated of human nature generally: the history in its present stage concerns only a few people in a corner of Wessex – whose reputation, however, was unimpeached, and who, I am in the proud position of being able to state, were all on visiting terms with persons of rank. (*DD*, 76)

In *Middlemarch*, as in *Adam Bede*, the characters are real people for the narrator: '(pardon these details for once – you would have learned to love them if you had known Caleb Garth)' (*M*, 231).

Romola is especially interesting in this connection since the narrator obviously cannot appear both to be contemporary with the reader and to have known the characters as real people, as the action takes place in the

late fifteenth century. If the narrator is merely the ‘omniscient’ author, then this should present no problems. The period concerned should not affect the author’s intimate knowledge of the minds of her characters. But if, as I am arguing, the narrator is to be seen as part of the fiction, then there is a difficulty, for how could the narrator have gained such knowledge of the minds of characters who existed in a historically remote era? All of Eliot’s other novels were situated in periods which would have made it possible for a narrator contemporary with the novels’ first readers to have known the characters as real people or to have learned about them from others and to have written a novel about them, reconstructing their inner lives. The way Eliot deals with the narration in *Romola* suggests that she did see a problem in justifying the narrator’s knowledge of people the narrator could never have known. In ‘The Proem’ the narrator is contemporary with the modern reader but in order to tell the story conjures up the spirit of a dead Florentine who returns to visit scenes and people he had known and acts as a focus of consciousness for the novel. The narrator follows the Florentine’s gaze and interprets what he sees from the narrator’s own modern point of view. But it is significant that the first person is not used in the narration, although there is a great deal of comment and judgement by the narrator. Eliot may have seen such ‘intrusion’ in the first person in the manner of *Adam Bede* or *Middlemarch* as inappropriate if the narrator is only interpreting what the Florentine sees.

In making the narrator seem to be writing a historical novel about real people, Eliot may have been following the example of Thackeray. In *Vanity Fair* the narrator claims that he was told the whole story by Dobbin, and in *The Newcomes* the following statement is made: ‘All this story is told by one, who, if he was not actually present at the circumstances here narrated, yet had the information concerning them, and could supply such a narrative of facts and conversations as is, indeed, not less authentic than the details of other histories.’²³

But the obvious question raised by this is why Eliot felt it necessary to present the narrator as a historical novelist writing about real people and events? Perhaps there are two important reasons: first, that as a writer who believed that ‘philosophy must renounce metaphysics’²⁴ she did not wish to suggest that the narrator possessed God-like omniscience but like a historian was an interpreter of the world, and second that it is a way of overcoming a common objection to realism in fiction. Since narration imposes a form on the world it purports to describe, the narrative being a construction of the world, it can be argued that the realist novel’s claim to represent reality truthfully or objectively is problematic. However, Eliot does not believe that the mind can have unmediated access to the real. In her short theoretical essay ‘Notes on Form in Art’, she expresses the view that form is derived from the mind of the artist and does not mirror external reality: ‘But what is fiction other than an arrangement of events or feigned correspondences according to predominant feeling? We find what destiny pleases; we make what pleases us – or what we

think will please others.⁵ By creating the illusion that the narrator is writing a novel about people and events that are regarded as real, she can overcome some of the formal and philosophical problems which faced her as a realist novelist. The form of the novel, its shaping of the reality it is dealing with, does not reflect an order which is immanent in the world but is rather the narrator's own ordering by means of a narrative that looks back on and interprets from the narrator's own point of view events and experiences which are real for the narrator. It is this narrator who is part of the fiction who chooses to begin at a certain point, shapes the narrative into the form of a novel and decides where to end. The narrator is not seeing events as they happen but viewing them from a future standpoint which shapes judgement of them. Clearly this use of a fictional narrator who is apparently writing a historical novel about real people is a logical solution to the problem of how the form a narrative imposes on reality in a realist novel is to be justified.

Eliot's concern with justifying the narrative form of her novels was perhaps heightened by her preference for a highly organized novel structure. Her fondness for analogy as a structural device has been pointed out,⁶ and in the later novels especially one can detect numerous relationships between characters and incidents which have thematic importance. In a novel with a very loose structure, the form of the narrative may not strike the reader as falsifying reality, but in a narrative based on a structure of analogy and on thematic relationships, the reader may feel that the form is false to reality, unless it is justified in some way. Barbara Hardy illustrates this point in her book on Eliot's fiction in a chapter entitled 'Plot and Form'⁷ in which she discusses what she calls Eliot's use of 'coincidence' as a formal device. This obviously raises the problem of reconciling realism and form. Although Barbara Hardy praises Eliot's artful use of 'coincidence' to create parallels and relationships between characters and situations, the word 'coincidence' suggests Eliot must sacrifice realism for formal purposes, for coincidence is habitually used in fiction to serve the needs of the plot and has the potential to undermine realism. Barbara Hardy does not discuss this point, but it would be easy to use the coincidences she cites to argue that Eliot's preoccupation with form and pattern is at odds with a convincing representation of the world in realist terms.

Eliot's critical writings would strongly suggest that she wished to preserve the connection between the novel and a persuasive representation of reality and would have been unhappy if the creation of a highly organized structure made her novels seem to imply that life and the world are part of a metaphysical order. By making her narrator claim to be a historian who is writing a novel about real people and events the reader need feel no sense of contradiction between the form of the novel and reality since the narrator is a novelist who is interpreting and shaping the reality he or she is dealing with and using novelistic devices and techniques in the representation of it. It has, of course, been argued that even conventional historians cannot avoid using techniques associated

with the novel. It is misleading, however, to refer, as Barbara Hardy does, to the parallels and relationships which give structure to a novel like *Middlemarch* as 'coincidences'. This suggests that chance or accident is responsible for the parallels and relationships that are embodied in the narrative when in fact it is the narrator who is structuring reality through narrative and selecting detail for artistic effect so that certain incidents and situations take on a particular significance. It is the narrator, for example, who is juxtaposing the deaths of Featherstone and Casaubon, what Barbara Hardy calls 'the most interesting coincidence in *Middlemarch*'. There is no reason why these events, considered as historical happenings in the real world, should have any relation to each other or significance, other than that the narrator sees parallels between them and structures the narrative to bring these out. But if one can conceive of the events of *Middlemarch* being narrated from a different perspective, there need not have been any relationship between these two deaths. In other words, the parallel between these events is one created by the narrator: there is no 'coincidence' in the usual sense of the term.

This interpretation of Eliot's narrator helps in responding to objections levelled against her work by critics. John Bayley,⁸ for example, believes that ideas about the world condition the representation of reality in her novels. He argues that her fiction cannot allow for the contingent in experience and that she must abolish history as a fact in the interest of ideas. But one can argue against this that no narrative can be true to history as pure fact; ideas are necessarily present relating and shaping the facts represented, and even the inclusion of the contingent would not be outside of ideas and representation. Any writer who believes he or she has no ideas about the world which are organizing his or her narrative is merely unconscious of them. One could perhaps go further and argue that writers who believed their narration was entirely neutral and objective would deprive the reader of reality since they would seem to be claiming that there was no separation between the reality created by the narrative of their novel and reality as such. But in making the reader aware that the narrator is constructing a particular picture of reality and interpreting it, Eliot allows the reader to recognize this separation. Clearly the narrator's own point of view was reflected by the narrative, and it would be bad faith not to make this plain to the reader. Thus *Middlemarch* is full of comments like the following:

Certainly this affair of his [Casaubon's] marriage with Miss Brooke touched him more nearly than it did any one of the persons who have hitherto shown their disapproval of it, and in the present stage of things I feel more tenderly towards his experience of success than towards the disappointment of the amiable Sir James. (*M*, 83)

Not only does the narrator have a particular viewpoint and expresses opinions and judgements, but there is also no attempt to conceal the fact that

the narrator is writing and shaping a novel, for example, when the reader is encouraged to interpret parts of the novel allegorically: 'Thus while I tell the truth about loobies, my reader's imagination need not be entirely excluded from an occupation with lords' (*M*, 337).

Some other passages in *Middlemarch* reflect on the narration in an interesting way. For example, Lydgate's pleasure in the construction of scientific theories seems similar to the narrator's construction of the novel:

Whereas Fever had obscure conditions, and gave him that delightful labour of the imagination which is not mere arbitrariness, but the exercise of disciplined power – combining and constructing with the clearest eye for probabilities and the fullest obedience to knowledge; and then, in yet more energetic alliance with impartial Nature, standing aloof to invent tests by which to try its own work. (*M*, 162)

The use of the word 'imagination' suggests a relationship between science and art, and one should also remember that Eliot called her novels 'a set of experiments in life' (*Letters*, VI, 216). Although a novel cannot, of course, submit itself to tests of verification, how realistically credible and convincing it seemed to the reader could be regarded as broadly equivalent.

One of the most interesting interventions by the narrator is the pier-glass passage at the beginning of Chapter 27 in which the narrator states that a philosopher friend 'who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact', that scratches on a mirror look concentric in form when a candle is held against them: '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 egoism of any person now absent – of Miss Vincy, for example' (*M*, 262). It would appear, however, that the narrator in constructing a narrative made up of a multitude of events is excluded from this or at least does not admit this would also apply to the narrative. But critics would be rash to accuse the novel of self-contradiction, for as I shall argue Eliot as author is well aware of the issue. The narrator, however, appears to assume that the reader will accept the statement that the scratches on the pier glass are 'going everywhere impartially' as an incontrovertible 'fact', based on science ('It is demonstrable'), which would imply that the language of science gives true and direct access to a world of fact. Critics influenced by Roland Barthes, who rejected what he claimed was science's transparent view of language as a window onto the world, such as Colin MacCabe, can therefore claim that Eliot's narration aspires to such transparency in its representation of reality, which is seen by Barthes as equivalent to complicity with ideologies that promote passive acceptance of the world as given.

The pier-glass passage is surely alluding to the common use in the eighteenth century of the mirror as an analogy for the mind's relation to reality, one which

was challenged during the Romantic period when that analogy was called into question and the comparison of the mind to a lamp was preferred.⁹ The scientific view that it is an illusion to believe that the scratches are concentric even though they appear to be when a candle is applied to them indicates that the lamp analogy for the mind's relation to the world is a distortion and that the mirror analogy is the true one. The narrator of *Adam Bede* states that his aspiration as a novelist is 'to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind' (AB, 175). So are the scientific account of the scratches as not concentric and the narrator's mirror-like 'account of men and things' objective fact and so independent of point of view? Presumably this objectivity in regard to the scratches is arrived at by examining them under ordinary daylight conditions and observing that they go in every direction. Though the narrator appears to identify the scientific view with 'truth', what the narrator actually shows is that whether the scratches are concentric or not depends on the light that is applied to them. One should note the pun on 'light' in the phrase 'serene light of science'. The scientific view of the pier-glass scratches can be identified with truth because science by the nineteenth century has become the most powerful of ideologies, refusing at the extreme to accord alternative perspectives on the world any validity. But though Eliot is a supporter of science, the pier-glass passage implies that scientific truth can only be a particular perspective on the world, one which is produced through its own procedures and rules of operation to serve certain purposes. Truth in science, unlike truth in a metaphysical or religious sense, cannot – and perhaps Eliot as author is implying that it should not – aspire to an absolute status, so what appears to be a categorical statement of fact by the narrator is not quite what it seems, though this does not mean that scientific 'fact' should not be respected. Also human beings with their 'inevitably self-interested desires' (M, 175) cannot avoid having a lamp-like relation to reality, and this applies equally to the narration, 'all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web' (M, 139). There is thus a recognition of relativism both at the level of the individual and also at the philosophical level as even scientific truth can be only a perspective on reality.

A Barthes-influenced structuralist critic could respond that though the narration of *Middlemarch* may indirectly acknowledge relativism and recognize that language can never be a window onto the real but constructs it, this insight is not incorporated into the novel at the level of form. Though the narration may be only one perspective on the world, the reader is nevertheless denied any other perspective. Indeed, it might be argued that this apparent acknowledgement of relativism is a mere rhetorical device to disarm the reader into accepting passively the metalanguage of the narration. In contrast, later modernist fiction recognizes that relativism, or more precisely, perspectivism, is irreconcilable with the kind of dominating metalanguage that one finds in a novel like *Middlemarch*, and this leads such novelists as Joyce

and Virginia Woolf to incorporate that insight into fiction at a formal level through fragmenting narration and developing techniques such as stream of consciousness, interior monologue or a radical use of free indirect discourse which undermine the need for a narrator who is in overall control of the narrative. Of course, these techniques were not available within English fiction at the time Eliot was writing *Middlemarch*, but it may be that the underlying epistemological implications of the pier-glass passage eventually led to the development of new literary methods that attempted to take account of these epistemological implications.

Yet Eliot may still have preferred her approach to narration, for both artistic and philosophical reasons. As an intellectual novelist her form of narration allows for the incorporation of abstract reflection into the novel's artistic structure. Though Joyce, especially in *Ulysses*, is most associated with stream of consciousness, this of course is not sustained through the whole of the novel, perhaps because he recognized its limitations. As Eliot states at the beginning of 'Notes on Form in Art', form 'must depend first on the discrimination of wholes and then on the discrimination of parts', so that 'every difference is form'. It cannot therefore be eliminated from literary texts since it must encompass the whole text and so will act as a kind of unnoticed or hidden metalanguage. Can novels that adopt an impersonal narration escape from the 'omniscient' narrator and the metaphysics it implies? Such narration, especially in the modern era, employs free indirect discourse so that there is a shift from the impersonal third-person narrator to the consciousness of a particular character. If the impersonal narrator is separate from the characters whose consciousnesses are at times penetrated it is difficult to see any fundamental distinction from 'omniscient' narration. With Eliot's narration this problem does not arise since everything is mediated through the narrator's consciousness. Free indirect discourse is used in her fiction in a restrained way as a literary technique to oscillate between narrator and the minds of characters without implying, however, a metaphysical penetration of characters' minds. Eliot's form of narration does not prevent her, however, from destabilizing the narrator's metalanguage, as I shall go on to discuss, even if this is done less dramatically than in high modernist fiction such as *Ulysses*.

Eliot's major objection to neutral, objective or impersonal narration, however, is likely to have been philosophical since such narration implies that there is no gap between the form created by the narration and reality. Although more prominent in *Middlemarch* than in the other novels, Eliot's narrator is a powerful presence in all of them. But what was the objection to making the narrator admit that the characters and situations are fictional? It is likely that she felt that if the novel was openly acknowledged to be a work of fiction, this would create something of the effect of anti-art in the manner of Sterne. This might suit some author's purposes – Trollope's for example in some of his novels, much to the disapproval of Henry James whose narrator like Eliot's is

also conceived of as a historian though James does not draw attention to this in the text¹⁰ – but not Eliot's. The reader might feel that the representation of the world in the novel was not to be taken over-seriously if the narrator confessed that it was purely the product of the author's imagination. Eliot certainly did not wish to create this effect on the reader and may have felt that the realistic illusion was strengthened if the narrator was represented as believing that the characters and events of the novel were real. However, some critics still associate her with a simplistic form of realism that has been identified with the 'traditional novel'. Gabriel Josipovici writes,

It is not ... that art imposes form on the content of reality and so distorts it, but the act of perception or the act of consciousness itself is never a neutral one. Proust and Homer and Virginia Woolf are all aware of this, but the traditional novel appears to ignore it. As a result it implicitly assumes that the world and the world as we are made conscious of it are one. Proust and Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, by emphasizing the will to form that is characteristic of consciousness, allow us to sense both history and flux, and the gap that there will always be between them.¹¹

Two of the most notable 'traditional' novelists cited by Josipovici are Tolstoy and Eliot. I hope the previous discussion has shown that there is good reason to believe that Eliot at least was well aware of the gap between the forms created by the mind and reality itself, and that she tried to take account of this in the form of her novels. To be sure she does not, except perhaps in her short story 'The Lifted Veil', directly exploit this for subversive purposes or to explore epistemological questions in the manner of postmodernist fiction. The reader is not generally encouraged to adopt a sceptical attitude to the narrator's perspective on the world, even if often challenged by it, but the fact that it is an interpretation based on certain principles and assumptions is not concealed from the reader.

II

But can one go further and persuasively apply postmodernist thinking to the interpretation of her fiction, for example, by interpreting the narrator as 'unreliable' in the manner especially of narrators in postmodernist-influenced fiction even if this was not consciously intended? Dorothea Barrett in her book *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* is critical of what she sees as the conservative ideology being promulgated by the narrator. She identifies this conservative narrator with Marian Lewes but discerns a more radical ideology in the subtext of the novel, which she attributes to the artist George Eliot, who remains in contact at an unconscious level with the radicalism of the earlier self of the author. In effect then the narration becomes 'unreliable' even if Eliot

as author did not intend it to be: 'Marian Lewes clearly intends to recommend [submissiveness], but the texts themselves subvert her intention.'¹²

Clearly a problem with 'reliable' narration for critics like Barrett is that the reader is expected to be passive before the text, but for her Eliot's narration can and should be read 'against the grain' as 'unreliable', which has the advantage of making the reader active rather than passive. But what may be distinctive in Eliot's fiction is that this assumed polarity between 'reliable' and 'unreliable' narration is subverted, typical of her treatment of oppositions, as I shall discuss in Chapter 12. The terms 'reliable' and 'unreliable' are philosophically problematic as they raise the question, 'reliable' or 'unreliable' in relation to what? Reality? This, of course, has been a problem for philosophy since at least Plato, who famously compared the reality we think we perceive by means of the senses with mere shadow play generated by the effect of light on the walls of a dark cave. Although there has been centuries of philosophical debate on this issue one of the most influential views is Kant's, that human beings can have no direct access to the 'real', the 'thing in itself', but only to the apparent world of phenomena. Any representation of the world that claims to be 'true' or 'real' is therefore problematic. This may be another reason why Eliot did not employ neutral or unmediated forms of narration in which the narrator is not personalized, and the reader is expected to accept the reality of what is being narrated without question. But for Eliot, though narration may not be able to aspire beyond interpretation of the world, this does not necessarily mean it is unreliable: the opposition between 'reliable' and 'unreliable' breaks down if there is no secure ground against which reliability can be judged. Eliot's narrator does not try to hide the fact that all forms of narration must be mediated by a consciousness that is interpreting the world or that any judgements of or comments on the characters on ethical, political and philosophical grounds by the narrator will reflect a set of principles or beliefs. This does not make the commentary 'unreliable' in the conventional sense, but it does not conceal from the reader that the commentary is an interpretation governed by certain interests, principles, assumptions and may also reflect divisions in the mind of the narrator. Is it legitimate for the reader, however, not necessarily to share the narrator's interpretation and viewpoint, and does the novel's discourse incorporate the potential for difference in interpretation between narrator and reader?

What Barrett's argument points to is that the partiality of the narrator in Eliot's fiction presents a problem for readers who do not share the narrator's interpretation of the world or moral judgements or political sympathies. If these readers have fundamental commitments that seem to them irreconcilable with the perspective of Eliot's narrator, then they may at the extreme reject her fiction. Obvious readers of that type would include those with strong religious convictions, Marxists, hard-line feminists – that is, readers who, unlike Barrett, have been unable to discern a subtext that calls into question the narrator's

contentions and judgements. The tendency to reject Eliot's fiction by those who reject the ideology they believe governs the narration has been seen in feminist criticism, particularly in the 1970s, exemplified by declarations that *Middlemarch* 'can no longer be one of the books of my life' and titles like 'Why Feminists Are Angry with George Eliot'.¹³ More recently certain post-colonial influenced critics have adopted a similarly negative attitude, especially in regard to *Daniel Deronda*. Thus the attraction of Barrett's attempt to rescue Eliot's fiction from such negative critique by claiming that the overt perspective of the narrator is subverted unintentionally within the text. I will suggest that a different defence of Eliot's fiction is possible.

I have argued that the narrator is within the text and therefore central to the structure of Eliot's fiction. Although the narrator claims to be the author of the novel being narrated, the author is rather the 'implied author' who stands between the narrator and Eliot herself as the person who physically writes the book: 'As an imaginary entity, [the implied author] is to be distinguished clearly from the real author ... The implied author is also to be distinguished from the narrator, since the implied author stands at a remove from the narrative voice, as the person assumed to be responsible for deciding what kind of narrator will be presented to the reader; in many works this distinction produces an effect of irony at the narrator's expense.'¹⁴ By standing 'at a remove from the narrative voice', the implied author in Eliot's novels does not necessarily subvert the narrator but gives the reader the opportunity to recognize that the narrator's perspective need not be identified with 'reality' or the 'truth' and to realize that other perspectives are possible. As the narrator of *Middlemarch* freely admits, 'interpretations are illimitable' (*M*, 25). This entails that the reader – at least a reader not fundamentally committed to an ideology irreconcilable with that of the narrator – is entitled to take a different view from that of the narrator without necessarily undermining either the novel's discourse or the credibility of the narrator's principles and judgements. What Barrett sees as 'the subconscious subversive in George Eliot' which unintentionally undermines the narrative voice is, I would argue, potentially included in the novel since Eliot's texts are dialogical in nature. This does not mean that Eliot as an author does not write from a particular set of philosophical, ethical or political principles, but different or opposed sets of principles also circulate in the text and are given their own discursive space.

When Barrett asserts in a discussion of the 'subconscious fecundity' produced in *The Mill on the Floss* by Maggie's elopement – 'Whether or not Marian Lewes intended this [that the elopement arises out of an unconscious desire to avenge herself against Tom for replacing her in her father's affections], George Eliot has sown evidence for it throughout the text'¹⁵ – 'sown evidence' in the text is surely a sign of narrative control and intentionality on the part of the implied author. Another doubtful example Barrett cites as an unintended divergence between Marian Lewes and George Eliot as conscious and unconscious authors

concerns Ladislav in *Middlemarch* who, for Barrett, is constantly idealized in the narration, for example, by being associated with sun imagery. She points out that Max Müller had seen all myths as allegories of the sun, but that the scene which unites Dorothea and Ladislav takes place in a thunderstorm. She goes on to claim that there is an allusion here to Adalbart Kuhn's rival theory to Müller's, that all myths are allegories of thunderstorms: 'the thunderstorm is introduced to put Will as sun god, that is Will as solution, into question once more.'¹⁶ I tend to agree with Barrett that there is interplay between Müller and Kuhn, but how could such allusions to these writers and the implications of these allusions be a sign of the conscious author's loss of control in regard to the idealization of Ladislav? On the contrary, it is surely an indication of the implied author suggesting that more than one view of the Dorothea-Ladislav relationship is possible.

Both the negative Eliot critics mentioned above and Barrett read the narration of the novels as monologic in its intention, believing it enforces a single perspective which blanks out alternative perspectives, compelling the reader either to reject the narrator's perspective on the world on ideological grounds or attribute complexities in the text to the author's subconscious rather than to the implied author's artistry and intellectual subtlety. It may be that certain readers of Eliot will always respond to the narration monologically, and nothing much can be done to change their minds. But how should readers who are less monologically inclined and unconvinced by the claim that the narration is unconsciously subverted relate to the interventions and judgements of her narrator?

Although the implied author is not to be identified with the narrator, this does not, I would argue, call the narrator's interventions and judgements into question in a radical way or ironize them. The narrator almost invariably deserves the respect of readers who are not committed to a fixed set of beliefs or principles, though this does not mean the reader needs to agree passively with everything the narrator says. For example, the description of Dorothea at the beginning of the first chapter of *Middlemarch*, relating her plain dress and the form of her hand and wrist to representations of the Virgin Mary by Italian painters, creates an image which has interpretive overtones, implying that unconsciously she is playing a role for religious effect which indirectly questions her identification with the ideal of selflessness. Most readers are likely to see the narrator's reference to Dorothea's 'poor dress' as a neutral fact and the comparison between her and paintings of the Virgin Mary as going beyond shared fact to a particular interpretation of the character. One should point out, however, that even the mention of Dorothea's 'poor dress' is not objective fact, but implicated in interpretation, since it is selected by the narrator from a multitude of other features about Dorothea that could have been chosen. The character presented to the reader is an interpreted figure, and though the reader can potentially question the narrator's interpretation, there

is no access to the 'real' Dorothea. Any description will be an interpretation, but what is different about Eliot's narration from more conventional narration is that there is no attempt to disguise this. It would be legitimate for a Christian reader to be critical of the narrator's description on the grounds that it exhibits anti-Christian prejudice, as it appears to take a sceptical view of a sincere Christian's aspiration to selflessness. But it is clear from the very first chapter that the narrator is presented to the reader as an interpreter of the world, not a neutral observer of it whose description and commentary assume access to an objective reality the reader is expected to accept without demur.

While this aspect of the narration as description overlaid with interpretation may not present much difficulty to the relatively open-minded reader, the same might not be true in relation to the narrator's numerous 'intrusive' comments of a more philosophical nature, such as the following from Chapter 21 of *Middlemarch*: 'We are all of us born into moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves' (M, 208). This appears to be a constative statement – one which can be characterized as either true or false – which demands that the reader respond to it in such terms. At the very least the reader may want to question its absoluteness: 'We are all of us', no exceptions being acknowledged. Nor is there any supporting argument; it is merely asserted. Many readers of Eliot's fiction in the past have felt that this kind of discourse is both moralistic and artless. But is it really a constative statement? As Roman Jakobson essentially argued in his essay 'Linguistics and Poetics', the constative function of language in a literary context interacts with the poetic function and creates an interplay between the two which prevents the constative any longer having priority over the poetic. As Jakobson famously, if somewhat obscurely, puts it, 'The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination',¹⁷ which can be taken to mean that in poetic or, more broadly, literary contexts words do not relate to each other linearly or syntagmatically as in constative discourse – which would make them open to paraphrase and application to practical situations – but paradigmatically in that they relate to each other non-linearly or in the same temporal frame and are thus resistant to paraphrase or contextualization outside of the literary discourse within which they exist.

One consequence of this in relation to the narrator's comment on egoism is that it does not stand alone as constative statement but interacts with both the dramatic and descriptive aspects of the novel as a literary text so that its effect is integrative. One can illustrate this by showing how the narrator's philosophical comment is congruent with the narrator's description and implied interpretation of Dorothea in the first chapter. Even someone with a strong Christian faith who aspires to transcendence of self and is determined to serve the needs of others cannot transcend the egoism that human beings are born into – though the narrator goes on to hold out the prospect that at least some emergence from it may eventually be possible – and if that is the

case with Dorothea it must apply to all the characters in the novel. Another way in which the narrator's comment cannot be reduced to the constative lies in the expressive and poetic power of its language in which figural linguistic elements such as metaphor combine with sound effects, rhythm and cadence to prevent the constative breaking free from or dominating the poetic. This makes it immune from or at least resistant to conventional analysis or critique. It would be wrong to say that the constative has no force, but it can be argued that it is not legitimately read as if it were a normal piece of philosophical discourse. It can thus give pleasure to the reader of literature independently of the reader's particular beliefs and opinions. However, if a reader disagrees with the constative element sufficiently strongly the poetic function can be ignored or neutralized so that the statement then becomes open to paraphrase and abstract discussion like standard philosophical discourse, but I would suggest that if the philosophical comments by the narrator in *Middlemarch* are treated in such a manner the novel would be at risk of being taken out of literary discourse and thus seriously deprived of its literary power.

Virtually all of the philosophical or intellectually reflective passages in *Middlemarch* can be viewed in a similar manner, but perhaps discussion of another philosophical statement is required to support further that critical position. In Chapter 10 the narrator writes in regard to Casaubon's expectations in relation to marriage 'that his long studious bachelorhood had stored up for him a compound interest of enjoyment', which leads the narrator to reflect: 'for we all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them' (M, 83). Again this is an absolute statement which claims universal application and no supporting evidence is provided. As with the reflection on egoism, however, the constative element interacts with the poetic function, and it would be easy to demonstrate how this statement is integrative in its effect since it can be applied to the thinking of virtually every character in the novel, not just to Casaubon on marriage but to his life work, his search for the 'key' to all mythologies. Metaphor is also evident in Dorothea's thinking. She is unable at first to view Casaubon critically as 'he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor twopenny mirror' – initiating the 'mirror' motif – and which leads her to see 'his whole experience' as 'a lake compared with my little pool!' (M, 24). Those characters who are disgusted by the marriage resort to metaphors that associate Casaubon with death or sterility, with Sir James Chettam claiming he is 'no better than a mummy' (M, 56) and Mrs Cadwallader seeing marriage to Casaubon as 'as good as going to a nunnery' (M, 57). Even scientists are subject to metaphorical thinking, Lydgate's scientific research being driven by the search for the 'primitive tissue' (M, 147).

Naïve critics of *Middlemarch* might find contradiction in the fact that metaphorical thinking seems to be viewed negatively as one can get 'entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them'; yet metaphor is a notable feature of the narrator's own discourse, most obviously the use of 'web' as

a metaphor which A. S. Byatt has called ‘one of the most complicated and brilliantly worked metaphors anywhere in fiction’.¹⁸ But the ‘implied author’, if not the narrator, is well aware that there can be no metaphor-free language, and therefore it will inevitably permeate human thought. Allowing metaphors to be unthinkingly projected onto reality may be a danger, but the novel implies that they can ultimately serve the human good as they are a means of imaginatively changing human perceptions of the nature of reality. The narrator’s use of the web metaphor encourages the reader to notice the myriad links that connect individuals both with each other and with the social medium, which is the product of historical and cultural forces that seemingly have little to do with the self. The double aspect of the web metaphor has been much commented on by critics since the experience of connection can potentially lead to a sense of liberation from narrow egoism, but if that fails the converse is a sense of being entrapped in a social version of a spider’s web.

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

As *Middlemarch* is, as I have argued, a novel that subverts the opposition between ‘reliable’ and ‘unreliable’ narration, it does the same with the opposition between the ‘passive’ and the ‘active’ reader, even if readers have generally failed to notice this. What this means is that in reading *Middlemarch* without such an opposition being in place the reader will oscillate continually from being relatively passive in relation to the narration to being relatively active and at times questioning the narrator’s judgements or reflections. Given the assumption that the world can only be interpreted, it would be illogical to expect the narrator’s interpretation and judgement of the characters and their situations to elicit complete agreement on the part of the reader. Engaging with the narrator is one of the pleasures of reading *Middlemarch*. One might argue that what is important is not necessarily sharing the narrator’s viewpoint or judgement but dialogic interaction between narrator and reader. And even if the reader may sometimes take a different point of view from the narrator, the literary power of the narration is pleasurable for its own sake. If the reader may be less eager than the narrator to dismiss Casaubon’s speech following Dorothea’s acceptance of his proposal of marriage as ‘frigid rhetoric’ (*M*, 49), the description of it as ‘sincere as the bark of a dog, or the cawing of an

amorous rook' has an appeal at the literary level that is relatively independent of agreement or disagreement with the judgement expressed. Although *Middlemarch* is concerned with major themes of an ethical and philosophical type which continue to provoke discussion, the power of the novel's literary discourse in which abstract thought interacts with figural language and an artful selection of realistic detail (which may have thematic significance or it may be difficult to decide so that the reader is denied mastery over the text) is what makes one continue to read it and reflect on it both at the human level of character and situation and at the ethical and philosophical level.

One should also point out that Eliot was surely attracted by the aesthetic possibilities of an active narrator, even though many readers and critics have felt that the narrator's 'intrusions' are artistically indefensible, being the product of the author's moralism or of her reluctance to let readers form their own conclusions. George Steiner in one of his early essays wrote of *Middlemarch*: 'By interfering constantly in the narration George Eliot attempts to persuade us of what should be artistically evident.'¹⁹ Even a defender of her use of the narrator, W. J. Harvey, 'take[s] it as axiomatic' that the narrator 'becomes objectionable when the author intrudes directly into her fiction either by way of stage-directions or of moral commentary'.²⁰ Both these critics identify the narrator with Eliot herself and suggest implicitly – perhaps influenced by Jamesian tenets regarding fiction – that art should be dramatic. But these criticisms overlook the aesthetic purpose that can be served by such an anti-dramatic device as the intrusive narrator: namely that it detaches the reader from the dramatic action and holds back emotional identification in order that the reader is more actively involved in the narrative rather than being merely a passive consumer of it. In other words, these 'intrusions' by the narrator act as a form of alienation effect: they are designed to perform the anti-dramatic function of detaching and distancing:

One morning some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea – but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will get faded, and will know the older and more eating griefs which we are helping to neglect. (*M*, 275)

This is presumably the kind of passage W. J. Harvey would have found objectionable because the 'author' intrudes by way of moral commentary. But surely this passage is carefully designed to pull the reader up sharp in any easy identification with Dorothea. Readers have been led into a trap. They have been encouraged to see the marriage from Dorothea's point of view in the previous part of the novel, and suddenly this passage cuts the ground from under their feet. Instead of identifying with Dorothea, the reader is urged to think of the matter from Casaubon's standpoint and is implicitly accused of prejudice.

The abruptness of the shift in the narrative is appropriate for two reasons. First, it is an important thematic concern of the novel to show the variety of points of view that are possible in relation to any particular situation or state of affairs, and also that each point of view is shaped by certain interests. The sudden change from Dorothea's to Casaubon's viewpoint makes this strikingly clear to the reader. Second, it is very much Eliot's aim to undermine readers' stock responses and to encourage them to examine their own attitudes as well as responding to the narrative in the usual way, and this change in viewpoint helps accomplish this.

There are several other passages which perform similar functions. For example, following Sir James Chettam's outburst on learning that Dorothea is engaged to Casaubon, "Good God! It is horrible! He is no better than a mummy!" (The point of view has to be allowed for, as that of a blooming and disappointed rival.)' (M, 56). The narrator goes on to attack Sir James's, Mrs Cadwallader's and Celia's views of Casaubon:

I protest against any absolute conclusion, any prejudice derived from Mrs Cadwallader's contempt for a neighbouring clergyman's alleged greatness of soul, or Sir James Chettam's poor opinion of his rival's legs, – from Mr Brooke's failure to elicit a companion's ideas, or from Celia's criticism of a middle-aged scholar's personal appearance. I am not sure that the greatest man of his age, if ever that solitary superlative existed, could escape these unfavourable reflections of himself in various small mirrors. (M, 82)

Since the reader will tend to share these attitudes towards Casaubon in the light of the novel's previous depiction of him, the narrator's attack on them for being based on a prejudiced point of view is heightened in its effect. The reference to 'various small mirrors' also links up with the pier-glass passage in Chapter 27. The reader is forced to confront the complexity of the reality of the situation and is encouraged to view more sympathetically a character for whom it is easy to feel contempt. The increasing use of epigraphs in the later novels also shows Eliot's interest in creating some distance between the reader and the dramatic action so that he or she can view the narrative with greater critical awareness.

Although I have argued that the narrator should not be identified with Eliot herself and should be seen as an integral part of the structure of her novels, it would of course be going too far to say that the narrator had no connection with her in all respects. But though she may not disagree with the views or ideas (at least most of them) expressed by her narrator at the level of content, the important point is that the narrator is a persona who is integrated into the fiction with a tone of voice separate from that of the author. As I have tried to show, she is a self-conscious artist who aims to reconcile artistic form with realism without one or the other being compromised, which may suggest that her fiction has more in common with that of her modernist successors than her critics have tended to think.