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Introduction

This study will argue that George Eliot stands virtually alone among British writers since Milton in aspiring not only to be a literary artist at the highest level but also to be an intellectual of the first rank who could engage through the medium of literature with the most significant cultural, ethical and political issues of her time. Most of these issues, such as Darwinism, colonialism and racism, the problem of moral choice in the absence of any metaphysical grounding for it, still play an important role in contemporary debates in the twenty-first century, which makes Eliot perhaps the most significant Victorian writer at the present time. Her primary aim was to embody her intellectual interests and concerns within her novels without compromising artistic integrity, thus unifying intellectual thought and art. I hope to show that this ambition was to a considerable degree successfully realized, largely through the adoption of innovatory literary methods that anticipate those developed later by modernist writers.

Although Eliot's canonic status has been securely established since at least the middle of the twentieth century – and the numerous books and articles that continue to be written about her work indicate that academic interest in it shows no sign of diminishing – more than most canonic writers she has been subject to a wide range of critical questioning. A recent commentator on Eliot's 'critical heritage', Kathleen Blake, has remarked, 'I had not thought to find so much critical depreciation.'¹ Her reputation suffered greatly following the end of the Victorian era when she was identified with what were seen as the excesses of Victorian moralism and high seriousness, and for some commentators, especially those outside academia, this remains a critical issue and is seen as compromising the artistic credibility of her work. It has been suggested that this perception of 'high seriousness – perhaps solemnity ... can help account for the way in which modernist artists rejected her'.² Although Virginia Woolf famously described *Middlemarch* as 'the magnificent book that, with all its imperfections, is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people',³ her admiration for Eliot as an artist was very qualified, and she placed little emphasis on anticipations of modernism in her fiction. The New Critics, with their formalist principles, showed little interest in Victorian fiction before the emergence of Henry James, for whom form, or more exactly a particular conception of form, was the most important aspect of serious fiction. They would have noted James's famous or notorious comment on *Middlemarch*, that it was 'a treasure house of detail' but 'an indifferent whole'.⁴ Mark Schorer, one of the first critics to apply New Critical principles to the study of fiction, noticed the intricacy of *Middlemarch*'s construction but still found it wanting in relation to Jamesian criteria: 'The dramatic structure is not very taut, yet one feels, on finishing the book, that this is a superbly constructed work ... What makes it so is thematic rather than dramatic unity.'⁵

Critical perceptions were significantly changed by the publication of Gordon S. Haight's edition of Eliot's letters, seven volumes appearing in the mid-1950s and a further two volumes in 1978. This was a major scholarly resource and has underlain the great number of critical books and articles on her work that have been published in the latter half of the twentieth century, continuing into the twenty-first century. However, F. R. Leavis's study *The Great Tradition*, first published in 1948, in which Eliot, together with James and Conrad, was elevated to the highest rank of English novelists, is generally acknowledged as a major turning point in regard to Eliot's reputation. Leavis claimed that the moral dimension of her fiction was fully reconcilable with the highest artistic integrity, and in the late 1950s and early 1960s well-received studies by Barbara Hardy and W. J. Harvey defended the form of Eliot's fiction against Jamesian influenced objections.⁶ Thus Eliot's status as a major novelist was fairly firmly established. This is not to say that all critical worries over form were fully allayed, for certain aspects of her novels still attracted negative criticism, such as the dominance of the 'omniscient narrator' or what was seen as an unresolved tension between a commitment to realism and an idealism that affected both the representation of character and plots which have been accused of imposing a moral structure on the world. Leavis was particularly critical of the Jewish part of *Daniel Deronda*, which for him was flawed in terms of its characterization and plot, making the novel for him an artistic failure even though he judged the English part as among Eliot's greatest literary achievements, and this has led to *Daniel Deronda* generating more critical debate than any of Eliot's other novels.

With the emergence of structuralism and post-structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s, Eliot's fiction again came under scrutiny, but the emphasis switched from form in the Jamesian sense to language. Her fiction was singled out as exemplifying the 'classic realist text' by certain British critics influenced by Roland Barthes' critique of realism.⁷ It was argued that whereas Eliot's modernist successors radically interrogated the relationship between language and the phenomenal world, the fundamental assumption of the realist tradition of the novel to which Eliot was seen as belonging assumed that language passively reflected the world. The language of realism was thus complicit in maintaining the dominant ideology rather than questioning or undermining it. This view of Eliot had links with Marxist criticism, which saw her fiction as reinforcing bourgeois ideology.⁸ This book will question the view that the language of Eliot's fiction operates in such terms, and it will be argued in particular that there are significant anticipations of modernism in her work, especially in *Daniel Deronda*.

The shift in criticism from the emphasis on form or language towards history and politics that took place in the later decades of the twentieth century, with feminist criticism, new historicism and post-colonial criticism becoming increasingly dominant, led to an increased scrutiny of the politics of Eliot's work. Many feminist critics saw Eliot as at best half-hearted about feminism and its political aims, and thus failing to provide in her fiction the hope and inspiration that many feminists saw as politically necessary.

Post-colonial-influenced criticism was particularly critical of Eliot and argued strongly that her writing was supportive of imperialism and colonialism, with *Daniel Deronda* and the final chapter of *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!', being the major focus of this claim.

Eliot has, of course, been defended against these attacks, but in this book a more radical position is adopted, namely that Eliot was a much more ambitious and experimental writer than critics have generally realized and more than any of her Victorian contemporaries anticipates significant aspects of writing in the twentieth and indeed twenty-first century in regard to both art and ideas. The final essays in particular explore links between her mode of thinking and that of Jacques Derrida, especially in relation to the ethical and political tendency of the later Derrida. If these Derridean affinities are taken into account, what many previous critics have seen as contradictions or incoherences in her work or in her thought can be seen as mainly derived from reading her as a writer who, in her approach to art, her philosophical outlook and her ideology, predominantly reflects her Victorian context. This book argues that Eliot's work cannot be contained within that Victorian frame, that her ambition as an artist and the complexity and range of her thinking in regard to philosophy, ethics and politics make her perhaps the only Victorian writer who can be seen as a fully modern figure. Indeed if the term 'modern' is extended beyond the twentieth into the twenty-first century, Eliot as artist and thinker in some respects even moves beyond most of her 'modernist' successors. This can be seen in the relevance of her work to recent theoretical discussion in which there has been particular emphasis on such concepts as identity, nationalism, colonialism and cosmopolitanism,⁹ all of which are central concerns of her writing, especially in *Daniel Deronda*, which is why it is discussed at length in several chapters of this study.

The study has three main sections. The first section focuses on Eliot as an intellectual. Though critics have admired her intellectual scope she has seldom been seen as an original thinker but generally as someone who borrows from a range of sources without making a significant contribution of her own. I shall try to refute this view. Eliot as an intellectual was a product of the dominance of German thought in the nineteenth century, and she deserves to be seen in that European context. The books she translated from German, Strauss's *The Life of Jesus* and Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, were among the most influential written in the nineteenth century, and Eliot's familiarity with German and European intellectual developments generally is evident to anyone who has read her essays and letters. Arguably European modernism, as distinct from its Anglo-American form, had its beginnings within German Romanticism, especially Jena Romanticism in which literature and philosophy were to a considerable extent imbricated, which made it significantly different from Anglo-American modernism. Writers and critics associated with the latter seem to have been largely ignorant of the European origins of modernism, especially the radical innovations of Jena Romanticism at both the level of literary practice and theory.¹⁰ They tended to see twentieth-century literary

modernism as a radical departure from Victorian writing, perceiving the latter as comparatively unsophisticated, especially at a formal level. Such a view did not take into account sufficiently Victorian writers whose intellectual and philosophical roots were deeply European, notably Eliot whose knowledge of and interest in nineteenth-century German literature, thought and culture from Goethe onwards was probably unsurpassed by anyone, except possibly Carlyle.

As an intellectual she belongs, in my view, among the ranks of the major European figures, and I support this in the first three chapters by considering her intellectual contribution in three significant areas of cultural debate and controversy, where her analysis and power of critique were especially acute: Darwinism, the Byronic and Kantian moral philosophy. Eliot stands apart from many of her contemporary intellectuals by being almost as knowledgeable about science as she was about philosophy, psychology and sociology, and this gives her treatment of Darwinism particular authority. Darwinian theory permeates her writing and she was both thoroughly acquainted with it at the scientific level and cognisant of its subversive potential at a cultural level. I shall suggest that her critique of Darwinism is more powerful than that of any of her contemporaries. One distinctive feature of it is that it does not deny the validity of Darwinism on the grounds that a theory with such dangerous implications cannot or, at least, should not be true.

The Byronic, like Darwinism, also permeates her writing. Byron's sceptical view of the world, his elevation of the ego and rejection of limits or boundaries, inspired an alternative Romantic tradition, particularly in Europe, that was prepared to take scepticism, egotism and irony to an extreme. Though Eliot had no respect for Byron as a man, she was thoroughly acquainted with his work and was not unsympathetic to all aspects of the Byronic, being for example an enthusiast for the work of another writer associated with irony, Heinrich Heine (Eliot in her essay on Heine remarks that he had been 'proclaimed ... as the Byron of Germany'¹¹) who is associated with 'Romantic irony', a type of irony first developed by Friedrich Schlegel, one of the main figures within Jena Romanticism. But the combination of egotism and scepticism that was inspired by Byron and influenced the thought of writers like Schopenhauer and Stirner needed to be confronted at an intellectual level. Like Darwinism, the Byronic is viewed critically throughout most of her writing, but her most sustained critique is in her dramatic poem of ideas, *The Spanish Gypsy*, a work which deserves critical analysis though it has been largely neglected. Eliot's critical treatment of the Byronic in its various aspects – emphasis on the ego, pessimism about life, the belief that values can be created purely on an individual basis – is the more powerful because, as with her critique of Darwinism, it is genuinely critical and does not invoke metaphysical ideas or an absolutist moral position.

Eliot is of course generally associated with moralism. But can she be legitimately seen as a moral philosopher, that is, as someone who does not only have moral views but is aware of philosophical argument and whose engagement with ethics is governed by a defensible philosophical perspective? Few previous critics have taken Eliot seriously as a moral philosopher and there

has been much criticism of her as being merely moralistic. This is especially the case in discussion of moral dilemmas such as that which confronts Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* after she in effect elopes with Stephen Guest. Though this episode is one of the most humanly powerful episodes in the novel I try to show that philosophy cannot be left out of account since Kant's moral philosophy underlies the debates between Maggie and Stephen. Eliot has great respect for Kant's ethical philosophy but she does not merely apply it passively. She engages with Kant on her own terms with her own ideas and deserves to be considered as a moral philosopher in her own right.

This raises a question that is often posed in regard to Eliot: does her intellectuality diminish her power as an artist? As I have suggested above, this is not a problem in a German literary and cultural context, but Anglo-American critics have tended to be unconvinced by her attempt to combine the two and in practice have often concentrated on one or the other: 'not until we learn to deal with her simultaneously in these two roles will we be able to do full justice to her work.'¹² She was as devoted to literature as art as she was to the play of ideas. For her the highest art fused the intellectual and the artistic, and this is what she tries to emulate in her fiction. In the chapters following the discussion of her in which the main focus is on her as writer/intellectual, I shift the emphasis to artistic aspects of her writing – narration, symbolism, formal experiment, radical allusiveness – and argue that in certain respects she anticipates twentieth-century modernism, self-consciously drawing on myth, particularly Jewish myth and mysticism in *Daniel Deronda*, as well as incorporating and adapting various elements from texts by her major predecessors. This may be seen as an anticipation of Joyce's use of Homer's *Odyssey* as the basis for the narrative structure of *Ulysses*, while at the same time, like Joyce, not abandoning realism at the level of 'story'. The creation of layered literary texts in which a realist representation of life interacts with myth, symbolism and allusion anticipates not only Joyce but also T. S. Eliot, and she would have been sympathetic to his aim of fusing thought and feeling in literature. *Middlemarch*, *Silas Marner* and especially *Daniel Deronda* are discussed in that context.

If, as I argue, Eliot's commitment was to the integration of intellectuality and art with formal experiment being central to that commitment, then this may provide a different critical perspective from the negative critique that emerged in the late twentieth century in which the critical climate was one in which literary interpretation, cultural theory and political issues tended to merge. Indeed Eliot is a particularly significant figure in this context, since for her art should not avoid engagement with the major cultural issues of its time, and the fact that such issues as imperialism, colonialism, racism, cosmopolitanism play a significant part in Eliot's writing has led to interpretations of her work in which the dominant focus has been political. A negative critique of Eliot was initiated by Edward Said in his brief discussion of her in his book *Orientalism*, which he later elaborated on in his essay, 'Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims', which saw her work as supporting Western imperialism and colonialism. This led to a considerable number of post-colonial critiques of her,

generally going much further than Said. These readings are called into question in the chapters on Said's critique of *Daniel Deronda*, and post-colonial critics' claims that both that novel and especially 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' support racism, where it is argued that such critiques do not take sufficient account of the literary sophistication of Eliot's discourse.

In Chapter 12, Eliot's relation to the political and ethical is further explored. Like Derrida she is distrustful of conceptual oppositions, and I discuss connections between their modes of thinking that enable her to be defended against accusations of contradiction, particularly on the part of political critics who align her with conservative thought. Chapter 13 brings together the various aspects of this study in a further analysis of her most ambitious novel, *Daniel Deronda*, through looking at the role of luck, which affects all elements of the novel, influencing its form and being central to its philosophical, political and ethical themes, Eliot's intellectual power being again confirmed by her anticipation of Bernard Williams's concept of moral luck. These interact with the narrative and psychological treatment of the characters at the level of realism, so that the force of the novel's human dimension is undiminished while at the same time its significance is enlarged.

I have not directly discussed Eliot as a woman writer or in relation to feminist issues, but there is a feminist undercurrent to my argument. Feminist critics have tended to be at best grudging in their admiration of Eliot. Her seeming reluctance to commit herself explicitly to feminist causes in her own time and what is seen as her failure in her writing to provide direct inspiration to modern feminists struggling to achieve equality have provoked much criticism. She has often been contrasted unfavourably with a writer like Charlotte Brontë, who creates characters with whom women readers can identify: 'heroines [who] are exemplars of female assertion'.¹³ She can be defended against these attacks on the grounds that her realist aesthetic is not reconcilable with creating any kind of exemplar for non-literary reasons, and I shall argue that even those characters who are almost always seen as exemplars in her fiction, notably *Daniel Deronda*, are misinterpreted as such. Eliot's feminism lies deeper than creating female exemplars or bolstering the morale of feminist activists.¹⁴ The term 'woman writer' would probably have been problematic for her. Her ambition was to be both a thinker and artist of the highest standard irrespective of gender, which involved taking the novel into new territory through literary innovation and experiment as well as intellectually confronting the major issues of her era like Darwinism or the ethical and political implications of materialist thinking, such as Bentham's form of utilitarianism. Yet she was, of course, a woman writer and she would have been well aware that no woman writer had been seen as comparable to figures such as Dante, Milton¹⁵ or Goethe, writers she particularly admired and who combined art, intellectuality and engagement with their own times in such a way as to resonate also with future times. Eliot's main contribution to feminism was not only to aspire to that but also to achieve it, as this study will try to show, and thus prove that a woman writer can be equal at every level with even the greatest male writers.