

Making Up Society

*The Novels
of
George Eliot*



Philip Fisher

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*To my parents,
Anna Walker Fisher and Leo Fisher*

All references to Eliot's work are to the Personal Edition (New York: Doubleday, 1901) and will be indicated by volume and page after the quotation.



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George Eliot and the Social Novel

Not every writer sets out to imagine society. Every work does imply a society, even in the limiting case where what it implies is that the public life is irrelevant, but to have the social component of reality as a goal, particularly in the novel, commits a writer to problems of both craft and thought. To imagine society implies that the public plane of our experience is in itself coherent, or, if obscure in part, at least legible on the whole. We read it as we read a handwriting where many letters cannot be deciphered, yet every sentence and, particularly, the drift of the whole can be understood. At the limit, society imposes the obligation on even the most interior or recalcitrant of events to take place in the terms of the community, to translate themselves, as passion does into marriage, into public forms to which the self feels as loyal as, or even more loyal than, it does to the source in private need and satisfaction. To imagine society is to imagine the possibility of this translation. Equally, it is to imagine that the moral life, with its vocabularily, can be viably interpreted by institutions, preserved in those impersonal forms of behavior we call customs, and made visible in the social drama of ceremony. Finally, it is to believe, or at least to hope, that the public judgments of criminal and hero, good man or pariah, stand close on the whole to the moral truth. Where this is possible we know that the truth about life must be consensual and not the reward of unique, personal quests; not the

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property of genius or of those who have lived in extremity, but close at hand, visible in the central relations and frictions of the everyday community.

This book is a study of the loss of society as a premise for the social novel. Consequently, it is also a study of the strategies for retaining the shaping effects of social demands in individual moral life once society itself has been lost as a moral term. By loss of society is meant the loss of faith in the way public life, the life of the community, registers, embodies, and interprets moral history. As the trust in community as a base of moral life weakens, decisive changes occur in the form of the social novel as it accommodates itself to the disappearance of society and to the change from the representation of individuals within a community to the description of selves surrounded by collections of unrelated others.

Many individual moments in the history of the social novel are decisive, but the novels of George Eliot restate the earlier terms of the problem, then risk a crucial experimentation with novelistic form that points toward the work of the modern writers who follow her. Eliot developed from a writer of social novels to a writer of social fictions. In her first triumphant phase she wrote, in rapid succession, three classic social novels: an epic and panoramic novel of society in *Adam Bede*, a social novel in the biographical form in *The Mill On the Floss*, and a mythic parable of society in *Silas Marner*. In each work, society is tested and affirmed in spite of its more and more puzzling and oblique distortions of individual moral histories. In her later works, Eliot no longer saw the community as a homeland chosen in those absolute moral situations where the only alternatives are, on the one hand, exile and isolation, and, on the other, full membership. Instead, she came to picture the social world as an ongoing invention, as, in many ways, science is—a collective, imaginative act that is proposed and tested piecemeal, defeated or established much as hypotheses are, maintained and revised continually by the common force of individual acts of choice and judgment.

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In two of her late novels, *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*, she created heroic figures. Savonarola and Daniel Deronda individually make up society, as utopian thinkers do, or—a far more important parallel—as authors do. In both novels, Eliot herself is making up an entire world: that of Florence in the 1490s and that of the Jews in Europe and London. Savonarola attempts to revive his society by recalling Florence and Christianity to its authentic past just as Eliot, by writing the novel, is recalling her own countrymen to the Renaissance roots of their own civilization. Deronda, as an early Zionist beginning to create the concrete national world for Jews, repeats Eliot's own act as an author who writes of Jewish life in order to create, for the first time, a representational space for Jews like the one created in America for blacks by Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

However, since the essence of even hypothetical societies rests on their being collective rather than individual, it is in *Middlemarch* that Eliot wrote her single great social fiction. Here the fictions, reputations, and possibilities are a shared invention. In *Middlemarch*, society is a hypothetical reality that is the responsibility and trust of every individual. Just as medicine is only the inventions, theories of disease, common beliefs (many of them incorrect), practices, and instruments of the present living set of doctors, so too the social fabric is made up both of and by individuals. Individuals author one another and authorize one another's acts. In *Middlemarch*, the characters make of living a social art because in living together they literally make one another up.

Throughout Eliot's later work, she alternated between a heroic, even apocalyptic, version of social fiction and a patient, collective version for which science and not art is the central parallel. The heroic and individual invention of fictions has as its models the artist and, more decisively, the liar. The morally troubling place of art in all of Eliot's works does not come simply from a moralizing fear of beauty. Rather, it has its source in the deep link she had created between the everyday acts of authorship and authority, by

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means of which social reality and personal identity are invented and then maintained, and the single-handed generation of the whole world of meaning for which the author of a novel is the central model, but for which, in actual life, the demagogue, the liar, the prophet, the madman, and the isolated scholar with his Key To All Mythologies are the telling instances.

In the titles of Eliot's novels lies a statement of one feature of the problem of the social novel. Five novels are named for the hero: *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, *Felix Holt*, and *Daniel Deronda*. The two greatest novels are named for the community: *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*. What is at stake is the way in which the public and private honor or ironize each other and the extent to which inner experience repeats the forms stabilized within social life. In each of Eliot's novels, one motif for the growing difficulty of accommodation between private moral histories and community forms is the relation between individual transgression and the subsequent trials and judgments the community imposes as it discovers and then mobilizes itself in the face of the transgression. All of Eliot's novels include trials, but only *Adam Bede* and *Felix Holt* conclude with formal court procedures, and, even in these two cases, an intervention by magic prevents the court from acting as we know it would. The whole of *Silas Marner* occurs as the life of a man after an unjust trial and banishment. Both *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* conclude with the more devastating informal trials by rumor and community shunning. At the climax of *Romola*, Savonarola is tried as a heretic and burned at the stake, and in *Daniel Deronda* the moral circumstances in which Gwendolyn withholds rescue from her drowning husband are so complex that only the private trial before the moral authority of Deronda can occur. With the exception of *Felix Holt*, the trials become increasingly mysterious and inadequate to the issues of truth, responsibility, and atonement. The private moral fact eludes the social form and is ironized or betrayed by it.

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For Eliot, her experiments with different forms of the novel—and from *Adam Bede* to *Daniel Deronda* she shows an almost restless unwillingness to repeat the social form—amount to an exploration using different lenses for the representation of society and a search for a form loyal to both behavior and experience. She sought a way of imagining the legitimate pressure of public meanings that she could neither defy through rebellion nor disown through anonymity. Maggie, in *The Mill on the Floss*, could move to London, where she was unknown. The novel insists that living with one's reputation, the public account and judgment of one's acts, is essential not only to living in a community but also to self-intelligibility. The novel *Silas Marner* immediately follows *The Mill on the Floss* with a deep study of how far the loss of self-intelligibility can go once the choice of anonymity has been made or imposed. In a sense, *Silas Marner* is the alternative ending to the death by water that has always left critics unhappy with *The Mill on the Floss*. Community involves a visibility of acts even where only misinterpretations remain. Being misread is one cost of legibility. The alternative that Eliot represents in *Marner* and *Baldassare* is an inner blank in which the self cannot any longer remember how to read itself. The alternative is not solitude but self-absence.

Ideally, in a society there would be a harmony between an act good for the self and one good for the community; each benefit would give health on each of the many levels between the self and the society. An act would be tempered by the many levels on which it has to give an account of itself. Maggie Tulliver's relationship with Philip Wakem is an example of an experience impeded by the irreconcilable claims of different levels of loyalty. The love is, first, a tangled set of feelings that we understand through our sense of Maggie's psychology. Second, the affair has a completely different set of meanings as one further element of the family ties between the Tullivers and Wakems. Third, since the families themselves embody the historical tensions of two

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stages of the development of British industrialization, the love between the children is the possible token of a compromise that allows quiet transition. An act is even the sum of the possible misunderstandings that it lends itself to in different contexts, and it is partly through misinterpretation that the meaning of Maggie's day on the water with Stephen Guest has its value in her life.

To imagine society is also, in part, to represent the public reality itself with its institutions. These include the life of work and ambition, the life of human relationships not chosen for their own sake: doctor to patient, employer to worker, the relations of neighbors as well as of those who pass one another in the streets. Along with these relationships are the formal settings and ceremonial patterns of church and services, law courts and trials, schools or workshops. Within this sector of life arises an element of the self that is structured by professional demands and tempered by impersonal moods and formulas of behavior. The life of a doctor or a weaver, a clergyman or a carpenter, prints itself across the individual details of personal history and character.

Such relations and patterns are completely absent in a writer like Henry James. The public, formal details of life are never represented because the complex, interior relations that he does depict exist with a subtlety that the gross, absolute public life of funerals and weddings, legal judgments and professions, would totally obscure. Even the one undeniable social symbol that appears everywhere in James—money—is never present in fact, only as psychology. Money is felt as power or freedom or corruption. It does not exist in quantities but in those ways that we have of speaking of someone having "too much money for his own good," or "not enough to do the things he would like to do." Money is seen relative to desire or to one's ability to imagine uses. Throughout Eliot's work, but especially in *Middlemarch*, money, in its hundreds of concrete manifestations, stands as one of the key elements of social bonding, an element as important as love or family.

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Both public time and public space are further elements of the imagination of society. Time, whether the Christian year or the rural cycle of seasons, imposes a set of impersonal moods and anticipations that overlay private rhythms. The happiness of a holiday creates experience in a different way from personal accomplishment or pleasure. By public space is meant practically the entire world of *Adam Bede* or Joyce's *Ulysses*, that communal space of church, jail, hospital, school, library, restaurant, street, and brothel. This world, again, is almost completely absent from a novelist of the private life like James. The paradox of *Ulysses*, that public space is available only as a component of an utterly private monologue, or, to put it in reverse, that a book concerned with the self at its most intimate and invisible should take place so completely in the public streets—this paradox points to the extent to which *Ulysses* is about the failure of community and of continuity between public and personal. The failure is marked in the choice of an outsider, a Jew, as everyman. The outsider, by his incomprehension, makes the symbols of public life, like the mass interpreted by Bloom, glaringly absurd. The device of an outsider narrator, popular during the French Enlightenment, amounts to a protest against the peculiarities of any concrete society in the name of an abstract brotherhood of man; a universality, that, as Bloom illustrates it, is ideal in the negative sense—without content. A further example of the lack of content is the abstractness or impersonality of the public events. Bloom goes to the hospital to check on the birth of another child to Mina Purefoy, “just anybody,” a person with whom he has no particular relationship. At the funeral of Dignam, the mourners seem to consist of men who hardly knew him at all.

A brief comparison of three events—the funeral of *Adam Bede*, Dignam's funeral in *Ulysses*, and the death of Milly Theale in James's *The Wings of the Dove*—will illustrate the contrast between the harmony of public and private so urgent in Eliot's work and the two defective halves of the lost harmony: the completely

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private and the blankly public. The private becomes all-meaning, and the feeling of concrete life has evaporated to the point where it is merely a symbol, while the public involves an objectivity and concreteness secured by draining the event, in advance, of any personal relation to the person through whom it is imagined.

Paddy Dignam was, in the only sentence spoken about him by those with Bloom at the funeral, "as decent a little man as ever wore a hat." None of the mourners recalls a single detail of Dignam's life, nor does Bloom in his stream of thoughts mention one of Dignam's qualities or experiences. No one seems to have known him at all. The immediate family are not seen by Bloom, and no sound of mourning or emotion is recorded. When Bloom thinks of him, it is the corpse he is curious about, not the man. Bloom is at any funeral; anyone is dead. The chapter, in its encyclopedic manner, is about death and only incidentally about Dignam. These mourners have come, as they would say, to pay their respects. The procedure is automatic at the grave: Bloom knows that the priest says the same consoling words, "Today in Paradise," over saint and sinner alike.

The importance of the outer event rests on its blankness of emotion. Bloom's thoughts are not taken back to the particulars of Dignam's life. Abstract as it is, the funeral can therefore more completely be ideal. It represents death itself. Bloom's experience can create itself around, but remain independent of, the details in front of him. Death calls up his father's suicide and the death of his son Rudy. But equally, the abstractness lets the mind play, in reverie, over death itself: burial customs, murder, suicide, the death of Parnell, decay, and transformation. The two poles of private memory and free speculative play are both linked to the event in front of him by analogue. In psychological terms, analogue—resemblance by detail or structure—is the key to association. As a result, what is essential appears through analogue, a secondary reality in the memory or imagination, and this analogue has force because of the emotional emptiness of the world of fact, a world

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unable to compel attention. The world of events and behavior appears as chatter and observed detail, running parallel to a world of reverie made up of memory and speculation. The two worlds interrupt each other and relate through accidental details that resemble, often by peculiar matches between incidental aspects, a kind of continuous punning. At bottom, the two streams are split.

Thus Joyce finds normal the division that, in the famous county fair scene in *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert presents as an ironic and desperate breakdown. The public life Flaubert gives through the fatuous oratory and then the almost comic awards for prize pigs and long service to the republic. Here is a public life that has no relation even to its own truth and needs, let alone to the inner life. The private worlds of *Madame Bovary* and Rodolphe present themselves in equally clichéd and rhetorical trivializations about the world of feeling. On the pages of the novel the two alternate, and the technique of juxtaposition creates a shock. By Joyce's time, this synchronization is a normal technique, and in its own way it yields effects of pathos and beauty. But in Flaubert the stark drama includes an awareness of the loss that underlies the trivialization of both worlds in isolation. The irony is itself a form of protest that declares the split was not inevitable. In Joyce there is no such protest.

At the other extreme is the death of Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*. The event exists only through the notice of it that reaches Kate and Densher, and it is given meaning by the twist that her final generosity in leaving her money to Densher creates in the plans of Kate and her lover. Milly's death, like the vague illness that preceded it, has a quality of choice and doom at the same time. In the terms of the book, it would be as accurate to say that she dies because she is too good for this world as it would be to say she dies of a heart condition. The metaphoric is real and the real mixes itself in symbol. The kind of equivocation found in a sentence like "she died of a broken heart" is the natural play between levels in the novel. But the reality of the death is not general, not