

George Eliot *Romantic Humanist*

*A Study of the Philosophical Structure
of her Novels*



R. M. Newton

GEORGE ELIOT: ROMANTIC HUMANIST

A Study of the Philosophical
Structure of her Novels

K. M. NEWTON

M

© K. M. Newton 1981

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without permission

First published 1981 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD

First published in the USA 1981 by
BARNES & NOBLE BOOKS
81 Adams Drive
Totowa, New Jersey, 07512

Printed in Hong Kong

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Newton, K M
George Eliot
1. Eliot, George – Criticism and interpretation
823'.8 PR4688

MACMILLAN ISBN 0-333-28101-2

BARNES & NOBLE ISBN 0-389-20081-6

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for reading all or part of this study at one stage or another of its composition and for making helpful suggestions for its improvement: Mr Geoffrey Carnall, Professor K. J. Fielding, Catriona Newton, Professor J. Norton-Smith, Dr J. A. Sutherland and Mr R. J. C. Watt. Thanks also to Dr D. C. Gervais for useful general discussions.

I am grateful to the editors and publishers of the *Durham University Journal*, *Neophilologus* and the *Journal of Narrative Technique* for permission to reproduce some material from articles originally published in their journals.

K. M. N.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
1 Introduction: George Eliot and Romantic Thinking	1
2 <i>Romola</i> and Nihilism	13
3 Egotism and Sublimation	28
4 Feeling	51
5 The Organic Society	79
6 Memory and <i>The Mill on the Floss</i>	97
7 <i>Middlemarch</i> I	123
8 <i>Middlemarch</i> II	144
9 <i>Daniel Deronda</i>	168
 <i>Notes</i>	 201
 <i>Index</i>	 211

1 Introduction: George Eliot and Romantic Thinking

George Eliot has a strong claim to be the most important and interesting of English philosophical novelists. By calling her a philosophical novelist I mean not merely that certain ideas find expression in her fiction, or that her work reflects a particular philosophy, but that she uses her fiction as a means of thinking about philosophical and moral issues. Previous critical studies of the intellectual aspect of her fiction have tended to see her as passively incorporating a moral or humanist philosophy into her work and have attempted to analyse the underlying beliefs and assumptions of that philosophy. But this is to present her as an ideologist or moralist rather than as a philosophical novelist who is concerned to think about and work out in concrete and dramatic terms problems of a broadly philosophical and moral nature. It is arguable that George Eliot is the only English novelist who deserves comparison with major European philosophical novelists such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky or Mann. Modern criticism has, however, been inclined to neglect this aspect of her work in favour of a more formalistic approach, and most of the claims that have been made for her as a major novelist have placed more emphasis on formal and artistic than on philosophical considerations.¹ This study tries to restore the balance by showing that the philosophical aspect of her work is not only an integral part of the structure of her novels but central to her literary achievement.

Most critical studies of George Eliot as a novelist concerned with ideas have given greatest emphasis to her connection with nineteenth-century rationalism and positivism.² In this study I shall argue that her fiction can be better understood if she is related to a Romantic tradition of thinking. It is not my intention to discuss fully her relation to Romanticism in general, which would require a different kind of study, but to suggest that she should be seen as an advanced Romantic in the philosophi-

cal sense. Commentators on the more philosophical side of Romanticism have stressed its radical anti-metaphysical implications. For example, Morse Peckham writes:

Men have always had world-views, or metaphysics. . . . But such metaphysics had been unconscious; that is, there had been no language in which to discuss them. There were arguments about this or that view of the world as it affected some aspect of human behavior; but these were arguments about metaphysics as truths which described the character and structure of the world. But the new way of thinking, the Romantic way, looked at itself from right-angles; saw itself as creating a world-view because the very character of the mind's relation to the world required it to have a metaphysic. At the same time, however, there was a conviction, at first but faint though deeply disturbing, that any world-view told the mind nothing about the world, but merely told it something about the mind. Any metaphysic was seen not as derived from the nature of the world but rather derived from the nature of the mind and projected onto the world. A single step was taken, and all the world was changed. All previous world-views had assumed that the mind had access, whether through revelation from God or from study of the world, to the real nature and character, the true essence, of what was not the mind; and this assumption was unconscious.³

Sir Isaiah Berlin has taken a similar view of Romanticism:

Whatever the differences between the leading Romantic thinkers—the early Schiller and the later Fichte, Schelling and Jacobi, Tieck and the Schlegels when they were young, Chateaubriand and Byron, Coleridge and Carlyle, Kierkegaard, Stirner, Nietzsche, Baudelaire—there runs through their writings a common notion, held with varying degrees of consciousness and depth, that truth is not an objective structure, independent of those who seek it, the hidden treasure waiting to be found but is itself in all its guises created by the seeker.⁴

In this study, I shall try to show that George Eliot belongs to a Romantic tradition of thinking in the sense described above, and

indeed that she was an advanced Romantic who developed the anti-metaphysical implications of Romantic thinking to an extreme. For the advanced or later Romantic, subject and object, mind and world, exist in an asymmetrical relation; as Peckham puts it in a later essay: 'to the later Romantic the imagination, the unavoidable essence of man, constructs the object and relates the subject to the object but cannot comprehend or encompass the object; to the later Romantic the imagination reveals the anti-thesis of subject and object'.⁵ Thus for the advanced Romantic, subject and object always exist in a state of tension which can never be fully overcome. In order to support my view that George Eliot is best classified as an advanced or later Romantic, I shall look at her relationship to the thought of two philosophers, Feuerbach and G. H. Lewes.

The general influence of Feuerbach on George Eliot has been discussed in detail by previous critics.⁶ Here I wish only to stress Feuerbach's break with earlier metaphysical or rationalist ways of looking at religion. In his view religious beliefs are the projection into objective form of man's own feelings, desires and hopes, ordinary believers being unconscious of this projection. Some quotations from George Eliot's translation of *The Essence of Christianity* will illustrate the asymmetrical form of Feuerbach's thought which links him with advanced Romantic thinking:

In the object which he contemplates . . . man becomes acquainted with himself; consciousness of the objective is the self-consciousness of man. We know the man by the object, by his conception of what is external to himself; in it his nature becomes evident; this object is his manifested nature, his true objective *ego*. And this is true not merely of spiritual, but also of sensuous objects.

Hence the historical progress of religion consists in this: that what by an earlier religion was regarded as objective, is now recognised as subjective; that is, what was formerly contemplated and worshipped as God is now perceived to be something *human*.

Man—this is the mystery of religion—projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject.⁷

Feuerbach's anti-metaphysical view of Christianity must apply logically to all transcendent beliefs. If theology is really only the projection into objective form of psychological states, then all metaphysical systems which posit the existence of some transcendent reality must similarly be the projection of human subjective feelings into objectivity.

In a letter George Eliot expressed her agreement with Feuerbach—'With the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree'⁸—and the influence of his view of religion is apparent throughout her work. Any antagonism that she had previously felt towards Christianity disappeared, for it was now unimportant to her whether or not religions were true. She had no interest in undermining religious belief from a rationalist standpoint,⁹ and regretted that people were 'so incapable of comprehending the state of mind which cares for that which is essentially human in all forms of belief'.¹⁰ Her attitude to Christianity emerges clearly in a letter to François D'Albert-Durade: 'I have not returned to dogmatic Christianity—to the acceptance of any set of doctrines as a creed, and a superhuman revelation of the Unseen—but I see in it the highest expression of the religious sentiment that has yet found its place in the history of mankind, and I have the profoundest interest in the inward life of sincere Christians in all ages.'¹¹ It is not the objective truth of religion that is important to her, but its embodiment of valuable human feelings and ideals. She believes the individual must integrate the essential human content of religion into his life if he is to maintain what she regards as a truly human identity. In *Daniel Deronda*, Deronda feels able to commit himself strongly to his Jewish heritage with its religious background without giving any indication of accepting Judaism as objectively true, a point I shall discuss more fully later.

George Eliot's attitude to philosophical systems is similar to her view of religion. Though sympathetic to much of the content of Comte's and Spencer's philosophies, she was decidedly sceptical about the truth of philosophical systems. She makes this plain in a letter to Sara Hennell about Spencer's philosophy:

I wish you did not find yourself so repelled by Herbert Spencer's writing. He has so much teaching which the world needs, and with all systems one is justified in doing what Goethe mentions satirically in relation to dramatic or other art

as the universal practice of audiences—‘If you give them a whole they will straightway take it to pieces. Each seeks what is adapted to him.’¹²

This way of looking at religions and systems of thought differs markedly from the rationalist–Enlightenment tradition of thinking, which believed in objective truth. In contrast, for George Eliot it was the essential human content of religions and systems that was important and not their objective truth.

It is, I believe, possible to illuminate further George Eliot’s thinking by looking at her relationship to the philosophy of George Henry Lewes, with whom she lived for more than twenty years. Previous critics have disagreed over the relevance of Lewes’s ideas to George Eliot. George Willis Cooke, a nineteenth-century critic, took the view that Lewes was a major influence: ‘There was an almost entire unanimity of intellectual conviction between them, and his books are in many ways the best interpreters of the ethical and philosophical meanings of her novels.’¹³ But Cooke also believed that George Eliot had as great an influence on Lewes as he had on her. P. Boul’honne, however, in his study of her intellectual background, believed that Lewes’s thought had little effect on her mind or her novels.¹⁴ In my view, there are strong grounds for believing that George Eliot was in general agreement with Lewes’s philosophical position. From her letters it is clear that she read his writings with great interest, and after his death she organised his notes into the last two volumes of his *Problems of Life and Mind*. She herself said there was ‘thorough moral and intellectual sympathy’¹⁵ between them, and a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe shows her keen interest in his work and her sense of intellectual partnership with him:

When we come back from our journeying I shall be interesting myself in the MS.S and proofs of my husband’s third volume of his *Problems*. . . . My studies have lately kept me away from the track of my husband’s researches and I feel behindhand in my wifely sympathies. You know the pleasure of such interchange—husband and wife each keeping to their own work, but loving to have cognizance of the other’s course.¹⁶

Though Lewes’s mature philosophy was not written until the 1870s, many of his most important ideas are already present in his

book *Aristotle*, published in 1864, which George Eliot read before publication and which gave her 'great delight'.¹⁷ It is justifiable, therefore, to see his philosophy influencing her thinking during most of her career as a novelist. One should not, however, forget Cooke's point that George Eliot may also have influenced Lewes's philosophy since she was interested in the subject and had read Feuerbach before she met Lewes.

Though Lewes has been generally considered to be a Comtean positivist or a disciple of Spencer, in my view he is best seen as a philosopher who belongs to a Romantic tradition of thinking and who attempts to develop the extreme anti-metaphysical implications of that tradition. He opens the second volume of his *Problems*, for example, in the following manner: 'The Universe is mystic to man, and must ever remain so; for he cannot transcend the limits of his Consciousness, his knowledge being only knowledge of its changes.'¹⁸ All through his writings, particularly from *Aristotle* onwards,¹⁹ one of Lewes's major concerns is to show that what we take to be objective reality is an interaction between the mind and otherness. Knowledge of the world does not derive from passive description and observation of external reality; the mind plays an active role in the relation between mind and world:

Psychological investigation shows that the objects supposed to *have* forms, colours, and positions within an external hemisphere, have these only in virtue of the very feelings from which they are supposed to be separated. The *visible* universe only exists *as seen*: the objects are Reals conditioned by the laws of Sensibility. The space in which we see them, their geometric relations, the light and shadows which reveal them, the forms they affect, the lines of their changing directions, the qualities which distinguish them,—all these are but the externally-projected signs of feelings. They are signs which we interpret according to organised laws of experience; each sign being a feeling connected with other feelings.²⁰

A passage in his *History of Philosophy* shows his connection with Romantic thinking more directly in its rejection of the idea that the mind is a mirror:

The radical error of those who believe that we perceive things *as*

they are, consists in mistaking a metaphor for a fact, and believing that a mind is a mirror in which external objects are reflected. . . . Consciousness is no mirror of the world; it gives no faithful reflection of things as they are *per se*; it only gives a faithful report of its own modification as excited by external things.²¹

This general philosophical position had an important effect on Lewes's view of science, with which George Eliot can be shown to be in agreement. The orthodox view of science in the nineteenth century was that it describes the true structure of the reality that exists independently of the human mind; it finds an order in the world which is prior to perception and language. This view of science naturally brought consolation to many, for even if there was no supernatural order, scientific laws gave order and meaning to the external world. But though Lewes was one of the strongest advocates of science and scientific method, his conception of science was quite different. He rejects the view that science is the simple description of the structure of the external world. Science, he says, is 'no transcript of Reality, but an ideal construction framed out of the analysis of the complex phenomena given synthetically in Feeling, and expressed in abstractions', and 'its truths are only truths of symbols which approximate to realities'.²² In *Aristotle* he denies that there is any fundamental difference between science and metaphysics: 'a theory may be transferred from Metaphysics to Science, or from Science to Metaphysics, simply by the addition or the withdrawal of its verifiable element'.²³ It is a mistake to believe 'that Science deals solely with facts, and Metaphysics with ideas. Both deal largely with both. The difference lies in the *authenticity* of the Method by which the facts are collected, and co-ordinated.'²⁴ He asserts that the basic ideas of science are as transcendental as metaphysical ideas: 'The fundamental ideas of modern science are as transcendental as any of the axioms in ancient philosophy. Who will say that the Law of Causation, or the Laws of Motion, although *suggested* by experience, and found to be *conformable* with it, do not transcend it?'²⁵ Even in science there is a tendency to anthropomorphise nature: 'We animate Nature with intentions like our own. We derive our ideas of Cause, and Force, from our own experience of effort; and the changes we observe are interpreted as similar in origin to the changes we effect.'²⁶

In *Problems of Life and Mind* these ideas are taken further. He regards certain scientific hypotheses, which he calls 'auxiliary hypotheses', as fictional creations: '*An Auxiliary Hypothesis is a conscious fiction by which Imagination pictures what would be the effect of a given Agent, or Agency, if present.*'²⁷ Though he regards verification as basic to science, he denies that it can necessarily prove the truth of a hypothesis: 'A hypothesis may be false, yet help us to a truth; but no demonstration of the truth of any process proves that the hypothesis which explains the process is true. . . . This caution is the more needful because of our tendency to consider the verification of a result as a proof of the independent truth of the hypothesis.'²⁸ He admits that the atom may be an indispensable conception for physicists but regards this as no proof of its objective existence: it is 'only an artifice, by which we introduce congruity into our symbols, and bring a variety of phenomena under one set of quantitative dynamic symbols. The utility of such hypotheses is not affected by any scepticism as to the reality of atoms.'²⁹

We can infer George Eliot's agreement with Lewes's view of science from the following quotation, the epigraph to the first chapter of *Daniel Deronda*:

Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even Science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars' unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought. His less accurate grandmother Poetry has always been understood to start in the middle; but on reflection it appears that her proceeding is not very different from his; since Science, too, reckons backwards as well as forwards, divides his unit into billions, and with his clock-finger at Nought really sets off *in medias res*. No retrospect will take us to the true beginning; and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out.³⁰

Here we can see strong similarities between George Eliot's view of science and Lewes's, for example her reference to make-believe and pretence in science is obviously similar to his emphasis on the role of conscious fiction and artifice. The connection she sees between science and poetry is also an idea which can be found

throughout his writings. The influence of Lewes's view of science is particularly clear in *Middlemarch*. Lydgate's scientific practice corresponds closely to Lewes's conception of the scientist's procedure. The scientist for Lewes imaginatively creates his hypothesis, his 'ideal construction', and then devises rigorous tests for it to pass. In the sixteenth chapter of *Middlemarch* we see Lydgate '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'. George Eliot even uses the phrase 'ideal construction', so often used by Lewes to define scientific procedure, in drawing an ironic contrast between Lydgate's approach to science and his unscientific attitude where women are concerned: 'The reveries from which it was difficult for him to detach himself were ideal constructions of something else than Rosamond's virtues' (Chapter 27).³¹

If George Eliot agreed with Lewes's view of science, it seems very likely that she would also have accepted the philosophical premises, deriving I believe from advanced Romantic thinking, on which it was based. One can see more clearly the radical nature of Lewes's philosophical position in his disagreement with John Stuart Mill over causality and the laws of nature. In *Aristotle* Lewes had questioned the tendency even in science to turn 'cause' into a metaphysical concept: 'The metaphysical conception of a cause, the *producer* of effect, needs limitation.'³² He sees cause as a purely mental concept which is useful for understanding phenomenal processes: 'we say the earth's attraction *causes* the weight of the apple; but the weight *is* the attraction: they are two aspects of one unknown reality'.³³ In his disagreement with Mill in *Problems of Life and Mind* he argues that 'the common distinction between a cause and conditions is to be accepted only as a logical artifice, which throws especial emphasis on *one* out of many co-operants'.³⁴ He similarly attacks metaphysical thinking in questioning the notion that every process is governed by laws: 'The law *is* the process; and there is no other *must* in the case than is involved in the identical proposition that the process must be the process.' He regards Mill's 'Ultimate Laws' as 'subjective constructions having no corresponding objects'.³⁵ His difference from Mill emerges clearly in the following comment: 'We are not to suppose that Law is an objective real acting in phenomena. . . . The invariability we find in Nature is what we

have put there.’³⁶ It is interesting to compare these ideas of Lewes, with which it is reasonable to believe that George Eliot agreed, since they follow logically from his philosophy of science, with the following passage from Nietzsche, probably the most radical of advanced Romantic thinkers:

One should not mistakenly *objectivize* ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ in the manner of the natural scientists (and whoever else nowadays naturalizes in his thinking). . . . One should make use of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ only as pure *concepts*, i.e. as conventional fictions for the purpose of designation and mutual understanding, *not* for explanation. . . . there *is* no ‘law’ which rules phenomena. It is *we*, we alone, who have dreamed up the causes, the one-thing-after-anothers, the relativity, the constraint, the numbers, the laws, the freedom, the ‘reason why’, the purpose. And when we mix up this world of symbols with the world of things as though the symbols existed ‘in themselves’, then we are merely doing once more what we have always done: we are creating myths.³⁷

This is more strongly stated than anything to be found in Lewes but is fundamentally similar.

The connection that can be drawn between the thought of Lewes and George Eliot and that of Nietzsche shows the potential dangers of advanced Romantic thinking, since Nietzsche was able to use such thinking to undermine the basis of Christian moral values and to support nihilistic and anti-moral views. Even if George Eliot had no knowledge of the writings of Nietzsche, she must have been aware that the ideas she accepted as valid could have dangerous implications and that these implications were perhaps the most obvious ones. Yet she is rightly recognised as one of the most morally responsible and socially concerned of nineteenth-century writers. How can these two sides of George Eliot be reconciled? Does she choose to ignore the dangerous and subversive potential of advanced Romantic thinking or does she believe that it can be reconciled with the moral and social values to which she was so deeply committed? I hope to show that the latter is the case and that this makes her one of the most significant writers in the Romantic tradition.

There are two important elements or tendencies that one can discern in the Romantic tradition as it develops through the

nineteenth century, what one may call the 'egotistic' and the 'organicist' sides of Romanticism. It is not possible to place every Romantic writer precisely in either one category or the other: many writers seem to occupy a position between the categories or to move from one to the other and then back again. But it is nevertheless useful to employ these terms to define a tension which was always present in the Romantic tradition. Though all the Romantics accepted with varying degrees of consciousness that the ego played an active role in the relation between mind and world and recognised the tension that was always part of that relation, the 'egotistic' side of Romanticism laid greatest stress on the role of the ego and refused to accept that anything beyond the ego, in either the spiritual or the material world, could claim superiority and could thus impose definition on it. The 'organicist' side of Romanticism, on the other hand, attempted to move beyond the nihilism and assertive egotism associated with egotistic Romantics such as Byron and searched for a positive philosophy or belief which could provide the ego with definition. The move from an egotistic to an organicist position receives classic formulation in the three chapters of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* entitled 'The Everlasting No', 'The Centre of Indifference' and 'The Everlasting Yea'. Other figures one could describe as organicist Romantics would be Wordsworth, Coleridge, Schelling and Schleiermacher, while the egotistic Romantic tradition would include, in addition to Byron, Chateaubriand, Lenau, Stirner and Nietzsche.³⁸ But the development of advanced Romantic thinking, as Nietzsche's philosophy shows, seemed to support the egotistic Romantic tradition rather than the organicist one. Given their metaphysical basis, it was difficult to reconcile the positive philosophies of organicist Romanticism—for example the nature philosophies of Wordsworth and Schelling or the various attempts to combine Romanticism and Christianity—with advanced Romantic thinking which was radically anti-metaphysical. What makes George Eliot a particularly important figure in the Romantic tradition, in my view, is that she is an advanced Romantic thinker who sympathises almost entirely with the aims and values of the organicist Romantics, and what makes her a major philosophical novelist is that her work can be seen as an attempt to support much of the positive philosophy of the organicist Romantic tradition from an advanced Romantic standpoint.

I shall try to show that George Eliot has two main aims as a philosophical novelist: first, to attack the nihilistic and egotistic philosophies that could be derived from the set of ideas that she herself accepted, and, second, to support a humanist philosophy similar in many respects to the moral and social thought of the organicist Romantics without denying that set of ideas. In the earlier chapters of this study, 'Romola and Nihilism' and 'Egotism and Sublimation', I discuss the negative side of her aim, and in the following three chapters, on 'Feeling', 'The Organic Society', and 'Memory and *The Mill on the Floss*', I discuss the positive side. The final chapters, on *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, look more broadly at what are probably the two most important of her works in the light of the issues raised in the previous chapters.

Although my prime concern in this study is with the philosophical structure of George Eliot's novels, it is not my intention to neglect more purely literary issues. Her intellectual concerns had both good and bad effects on her as a novelist. When she succeeded in integrating her interest in philosophical and moral issues with convincing dramatic presentation, the result was a remarkable intellectual and artistic achievement, as *Middlemarch* testifies. But when she was not as successful in achieving this integration, though the results are always intellectually interesting, the artistic achievement was of course less. In my view, though George Eliot was strongly committed both to her philosophical interests and to the art of the novel, the former had priority. She was not the kind of intuitive writer who would allow a novel to develop according to its own logic with the exertion of little conscious control on her part. As a result, at times one feels her intention is achieved at the expense of art. In this study I shall discuss where I think this happens and why. However, in my view she has sometimes been unfairly criticised because of a failure to grasp the philosophical or moral structure of a novel, and I shall discuss this also.