GEORGE ELIOT AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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The State University of New York at Binghamton

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In this innovative study Nancy Henry introduces a new set of facts that place George Eliot's life and work within the contexts of mid-nineteenth-century British colonialism and imperialism. Henry examines Eliot's roles as an investor in colonial stocks, a parent to emigrant sons, and a reader of colonial literature. She highlights the importance of these contexts to our understanding of both Eliot's fiction and her situation within Victorian culture. Henry argues that Eliot's decision to represent the empire only as it infiltrated the imaginations and domestic lives of her characters illuminates the nature of her realism. The book also reexamines the assumptions of post-colonial criticism about Victorian fiction and its relation to empire.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for frequently occurring references:

Deronda	*Daniel Deronda*
GE	George Eliot
GEL	*The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–5 and 1978)
GHL	George Henry Lewes
Impressions	*Impressions of Theophrastus Such*
Journals	*The Journals of George Eliot*, eds. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge University Press, 1998)
Pinney	Thomas Pinney, ed., *Essays of George Eliot* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963)
Yale	Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University
WR	*Westminster Review*

Texts

Page references to George Eliot's novels will be made internally and will refer to the Oxford World's Classics editions. References to *Silas Marner* and "Brother Jacob" will be to the Everyman edition, ed. Peter Mudford (1996), and references to *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* will be to the University of Iowa Press edition, ed. Nancy Henry (1994).

Page references to the *Westminster Review* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* will be to the American editions. Page references for the *Leader* will be to G. H. Lewes's bound personal copy in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Introduction

> For learning to love any one is like an increase in property: it increases care, & brings many new fears lest precious things should come to harm.
>
> George Eliot to the Hon. Mrs. Robert Lytton (*GEL*, 5:106)

Upon his arrival in Cape Town on October 14, 1866, George Henry Lewes's youngest son wrote to his parents in London that he had visited the local library: "I saw the *Fortnightly Review* and all Mutters Books. They had also Felix Holt."[1] Herbert (Bertie) Lewes was waiting in Cape Town for a steamer that would transport him to Durban, where he would join his older brother Thornton (Thornie) and begin a new life. Bertie would never return to England and would die in 1875 – six years after the death of his brother – at the age of twenty-nine.

During their time in South Africa, the Lewes boys wrote dozens of letters to their father and George Eliot. Though Marian Evans had been living with Lewes since 1854, Lewes did not tell his sons about her or about his estrangement from their mother Agnes Lewes until 1859. They began to write to Miss Evans – who now called herself Mrs. Lewes – as "Mother" and to Agnes – who was still married to their father – as "Mamma." Rosemarie Bodenheimer has written in detail about Marian Lewes's "struggle to answer to the demands of her stepmotherhood," arguing that "to love Lewes perfectly was both to nurture his sons and to ensure at least Thornie's and Bertie's absence from the life of 'dual egoism.'"[2] This crucial familial context for Eliot's fiction is part of a larger social pattern of English life in which the decision was made to expatriate these young men. In her stepsons' letters from South Africa, Eliot read descriptions of landscapes and peoples she would never see. She followed their failures with the care of one who had invested emotionally and financially in their success. She knew a great deal about life in South Africa, and she had possessions there as well: she was a shareholder in

the Cape Town Railroad, which gave her further cause to care about the South African colonies.

It is significant that one of Bertie's first sights in South Africa was the complete works of George Eliot, including the newly published *Felix Holt* (1866). These novels provided South African colonists with a nostalgic vision of England as well as a connection with the latest contemporary fiction. The *Fortnightly Review*, which Lewes edited from January 1865 through December 1866, brought them up to date on political and cultural issues at home. As a new and permanent emigrant, Bertie described the South African landscape and architecture to his parents. He also imagined sending someone home, as if in his place: "I should like to send you home a little niggar boy for a flunkey. They are such pretty little things."[3] The presence of new English writing and of new English colonists in South Africa is emblematic of the exchanges between England and its colonies in the 1860s – of books, people, and capital.

In 1870, when Eliot wrote to Mrs. Robert Lytton (Edith Villiers) – wife of the future Viceroy of India – that "learning to love anyone is like an increase in property," she confessed to a "proprietor's anxiety" for her friend's well-being. This metaphor in a letter that describes her sorrow over Thornie's death the year before highlights her association of ownership and affection at a time when her identity as a wealthy shareholder and stepmother was thoroughly established. The English had a proprietor's anxiety about their colonies – an emotional as well as material investment in life overseas – which matched in intensity, if not in character, the investment of English colonists at home.

There is no apparent warrant for associating Eliot's shares in Cape Town Rail with her stepsons' emigration or the sale of her novels to the colonies. Yet all are linked both to her domestic finances and to the consolidation of the South African colonies. The export of English literature, money, and sons to the colonies formed a pervasive and diverse culture of empire in mid-nineteenth-century England. But the systemic totality of that culture was not perceived or articulated by those who were implicated in it. *George Eliot and the British Empire* assumes the existence and coherence of nineteenth-century British imperialism, but only as a retrospective construction. In the years covered by this study (1850–1880), the Victorian experience of the empire was local and fragmented. The benign pursuit of caring for family by providing financial security through investments and finding colonial careers for young men helped to consolidate notions both of imperialism and of Englishness. The social conditions that permitted the Lewes boys to end their lives in South

Africa, and Eliot to amass a portfolio of colonial stocks, were the same social conditions in which she wrote her fiction – itself a valuable export to the colonies. Although there was no imperialist agenda behind either her actions or her writing, the empire and the domestic culture that sustained it are crucial to understanding both.

George Eliot and the British Empire reexamines some of the assumptions of post-colonial criticism about Victorian fiction. Among them is the notion that the author's experiences are irrelevant to understanding her writing. Another is that we can explain the presence of the empire in British fiction through the retrospective imposition of terms such as "imperialist ideology" or even the concept of imperialism itself. As Richard Koebner argued in his classic study of the word "imperialism," between 1852 and 1870 the British public "was not conscious of the idea that the problems of British rule could be surveyed or made the subject of criticism on the basis of so comprehensive a notion as the term *imperialism* implied."[4] Eliot's comments about various aspects of British colonial rule around the world in her letters, as well as her essays and fiction, support this claim. Imperialism was associated with others – the Turks, the Russians, the French. Even as they began to formulate the broad objectives of English rule, the English did not yet see their rule as imperialism. As C. K. Dilke wrote in his *Greater Britain* (1869), "not only is our government in India a despotism, but its tendency is to become an imperialism, or despotism exercised over a democratic people, such as we see in France, and are commencing to see in Russia."[5]

Eliot was aware of colonial reform movements, and of anti-colonialist views, such as those of the radical politicians Richard Cobden and John Bright.[6] Yet while she was critical of what she read about the empire, she could not formulate a critique of British "imperialism" as it would later be defined. Just as she reacted against fiction that seemed to depart fancifully from the observed details of daily life, her conscious response to the pervasive writing about the colonies confirmed her belief in realistic representation. The fact that she turned to the colonies to establish careers for her stepsons and to maximize her income from writing does not mean that she was subject to a monolithic "imperialist ideology." With the advantage of hindsight, *George Eliot and the British Empire* brings the various aspects of her experience together, and also elucidates the fragmentary nature of the empire as perceived by Victorians at home during her lifetime.

Eliot wrote her fiction between 1857 and 1878, during the phase of British colonialism that preceded the New Imperialism and "scramble

for Africa" that began in the decade after her death in 1880. She began "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton" in 1856 – a year in which she wearied of reading about "Indian mutinies" (*GEL*, 2:383). She published her last novel, *Daniel Deronda* in 1876, when Queen Victoria was crowned Empress of India. Colonial events such as the Indian Mutiny, the crowning of Victoria as Empress, and the Governor Eyre controversy (contemporary with the action of *Deronda*) receive just enough attention in her letters and fiction to assure us of her familiarity with them. While some critics have noted correspondences between British colonial activity and Eliot's fiction, the more immediate aspects of her colonial knowledge and experience have gone unrecognized.[7]

In 1860, she purchased her first shares in The Great Indian Peninsular Railway. In the same year, she helped Thornie Lewes to prepare for his Indian civil service examination, the failure of which would lead him to the colony of Natal. These domestic decisions influenced Eliot's perspective on English society and her portrayal of characters facing similar familial and financial pressures. Whereas her earliest use of the colonies as a narrative solution is the transportation of Hetty Sorrel to the penal colony of Botany Bay, Australia in *Adam Bede* (1859), characters such as David Faux in "Brother Jacob" (1864), Will Ladislaw in *Middlemarch* (1871–2), and *Daniel Deronda*'s Rex and Warham Gascoigne look to the empire – in all but the last case fancifully – as a career.

George Eliot and the British Empire argues for the importance of the colonial context to our understanding of Eliot's fiction and to a fuller and more accurate picture of her situation within Victorian culture. To this end, it combines cultural studies, literary criticism, and biographical analysis. All lives are unique; they are also typical. I read the particulars of Eliot's life as instances of patterns and habits among the upper-middle-class London society to which she gained access by virtue of her success as a novelist. Such a perspective on Eliot's quotidian relationship to the empire may demystify her status as an artistic genius, but it need not neglect or oversimplify the exquisite complexity that sustains our ongoing attempt to interpret her fiction. With a fuller understanding of her typicality, we can see more clearly her popularity among Victorian readers, who appreciated the realism of her representations in ways that are frequently lost to us.

It is my contention that biographical analysis is essential to any form of literary studies that seeks to place literature in historical context, and that evading facts and issues that are central to the author's life can lead to misinterpretations of both texts and contexts. Biographical analysis as I

use it makes no attempt to link an author to the interpretation of a text via psychological speculation, or to limit interpretations of her fiction to what we know about her "intentions." Though the "intentional fallacy" does not create the anxiety it once did, it is nonetheless a legacy, the effects of which literary scholars and critics continue to feel. The methodological developments of New Historicism and Cultural Studies, while breaking away from New Criticism and rediscovering history by acknowledging all forms of discourse as legitimate material for illuminating literary texts, have nonetheless incorporated a belief in the "death of the author," which persists even in literary criticism for which establishing historical context is the stated aim.

In questioning the assumption that the author is irrelevant to her writing, I want to make clear that the biographical facts that interest me are not the subjective marks of authorial personality. What can and should be gained from biography is an appreciation of the framework in which lives were led, issues debated, and decisions made. In the nineteenth century, colonialism is part of that framework. The known facts about Eliot's active role in her society's promotion of colonialism can provide insights into the knowledge and expectations shared by readers, writers, and even fictional characters.

We are fortunate to have a great deal of historical documentation of Marian Evans Lewes's life. Her daily activities and impressions are recorded in her surviving letters and journals. Bodenheimer argues that letters as well as novels are "acts of self-representation in writing" and both may be taken as fictions.[8] While letters and even private journals are acts of self-representation, they are also cultural artifacts – texts that provide clues to the broader cultural contexts in which authors wrote. Together with the letters and journals of Lewes, with whom she lived for twenty-four years, these documents show the continuity of private and professional lives – of Marian Evans Lewes and George Eliot. They reveal her concerns about family, friends, and finances, as well as her engagement with the intellectual and political issues of her time. The development of her art is central in this material, which has been mined for its relationship to her fiction since the publication of John Walter Cross's *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals* (1885). Certain events in her life have become canonical in the study of her work. "Originals" have been discovered for characters in *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* since their publication. Her break with her brother Isaac Evans over her relationship with the married Lewes is accepted as the impetus for her perspective on their childhood together as recalled in

The Mill on the Floss. The evangelical phase of her young adult life is thought to be a model for Dorothea Brooke's religious ardor. These sometimes reductive equations, which focus on her early life and assume that her memory of the past was more important than her experience of the present, draw on a standard biographical narrative that has become as familiar to contemporary students of her writing as any of her novels.[9] I am presenting a new George Eliot, whose imagination and aesthetic principles were shaped by her experiences as a reader and reviewer of colonial literature, a colonial shareholder, a stepmother to colonial emigrants, and, ultimately, a critic of colonial war. This new focus clarifies her metaphoric and her explicit references to the empire, as well as her realism, moral perspective, and sense of English identity.

Eliot's novels preserved a distinctive Englishness and provided a touchstone of national identity for colonial emigrants and readers throughout Great Britain. In her late works, she perceived this Englishness to be in a state of transformation under the pressures of colonial dispersion and cosmopolitanism at home. Her last book, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), self-consciously reconciles the fragmenting intrusions of colonial knowledge and the need to consolidate Englishness. Theophrastus, in making an analogy between Englishmen and Jews, observes that "our own countrymen who take to living abroad without purpose or function to keep up their sense of fellowship in the affairs of their own land are rarely good specimens of moral healthiness," yet the consciousness of having a motherland preserves these "migratory Englishmen from the worst consequences of their voluntary dispersion" (156). As Eliot's only contemporary fiction, *Impressions* defines character types as products of late nineteenth-century culture, assessing the future of England and Englishness in an era of "cosmopolitan indifference" and an English diaspora to the colonies of which she had direct experience.

Critics have noted the role Eliot's fiction played in consolidating English identity. Some have touched on the empire as a disruption to visions of rural England. Elizabeth Helsinger argues that Eliot's novels "contradict their own project of creating a cohesive national identity because they register painful memories of exclusion, and still more dangerously, of complicity in excluding others, at the center of images meant to bridge difference and construct new national communities."[10] In fact, Eliot's fiction is conscious of the distinctions between self and other. Theophrastus writes: "It is my way when I observe any instance of folly, any queer habit, any absurd illusion, straightway to look for something of the same type in myself, feeling sure that amid all differences there will be a certain correspondence" (104). And he extends the individual case to the general, the geographic and geological differences by which England defined itself – "just as there is more or less correspondence in the natural history even of continents widely apart, and of islands in opposite zones" (104).

Eliot's fiction was trained from the start on representing life in England, and the moral imperative of her realism had its nationalist component: to expand limited notions of Englishness by including "otherness." "The Natural History of German Life" (1856) is one of her most important aesthetic statements preceding the realist fiction she would begin writing in 1856. In it she describes the "picture-writing of the mind," the psychological process by which we associate images with abstract words or concepts. She is interested in *how* we imagine in relation to what we know, speculating that "the fixity or variety of these associated images would furnish a tolerably fair test of the amount of concrete knowledge and experience which a given word represents" (Pinney, p. 267). Although we are all in the habit of visualizing what we have not seen, such mental pictures depart from reality and are not to be trusted. To illustrate her point, she chooses a word familiar to all her contemporaries:

> The word *railways*, for example, will probably call up, in the mind of a man who is not highly locomotive, the image either of a "Bradshaw," or of the station with which he is most familiar, or of an indefinite length of tram-road; he will alternate between these three images, which represent his stock of concrete acquaintance with railways. But suppose a man to have had successively the experience of a "navvy," an engineer, a traveller, a railway director and shareholder, and a landed proprietor in treaty with a railway company, and it is probable that the range of images which would by turns present themselves to his mind at the mention of the *word* "railways," would include all the essential facts in the existence and relations of the *thing*. Now it is possible for the first-mentioned personage to entertain very expanded views as to the multiplication of railways in the abstract, and their ultimate function in civilization. He may talk of a vast network of railways stretching over the globe, of future "lines" in Madagascar, and elegant refreshment-rooms in the Sandwich Islands, with none the less glibness because his distinct conceptions on the subject do not extend beyond his one station and his indefinite length of tram-road. But it is evident that if we want a railway to be made, or its affairs to be managed, this man of wide views and narrow observation will not serve our purpose. (Pinney, pp. 267–8)

The tendency to entertain expanded views exists in inverse proportion to experience – that is, the less one has observed of a thing, the easier it is to generalize. In 1856 railways signified not only progress within Great Britain but the spread of "civilization" around the globe, particularly

in those parts where the British were laying the "lines." The familiarity of railways made them a conceptual link between the concrete and the abstract – the local tram-road and the vaguely imagined tracks emerging from jungles and passing through deserts.

The invocation of railways in an essay that argues for social realism in fiction reveals a connection between the geographical and imaginative expansion of England to the empire and Eliot's narrowing of the field of fictional representation to what has been observed by the author. The unlikely advent in 1856 of lines in Madagascar and the absence of railways in the Sandwich Islands (i.e. Hawaii) make her hypothetical first man's wide views an apt illustration of the inaccurate associations against which her theory and practice of fiction developed, as she goes on to suggest by comparing "railways" to "the masses" and elaborating on misconceptions about the peasant classes as presented in art.

With railway investment such a prominent part of English life, it is worth asking whether and how Eliot and others visualized the colonial railroads they were helping to build. Anthony Trollope, who owned colonial stocks and was a frequent traveler on colonial railways, described the South Central Pacific and Mexican Railway scam in *The Way We Live Now* (1875). Eliot's fellow realist took the consequences of misrepresentation to their logical extreme. His imaginary railway was invented to defraud English investors, who were only too willing to speculate on what did not exist. Eliot, too; was anxious about the English habit of imagining foreign places on the basis not of observation but of fanciful associations to which they were all the more susceptible for being ignorant.

Eliot's notion that images invoked in speech and writing are a test of "concrete knowledge and experience" raises the question of what counted for her as concrete knowledge. Her aesthetic position and its relationship to her own representations challenge us to understand the world she knew. The narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* remarks that, "our instructed vagrancy . . . is nourished on books of travel and stretches the theatre of its imagination to the Zambesi" (263). In her fiction, Eliot redirected the "theatre of the English imagination" to commonplace reality within England. The empire was an inherent if abstract part of that reality and thus was present even in Eliot's domestic fiction. The imaginative vagrancy of her contemporaries was extended through books of travel that Eliot read and reviewed. She could not hope to curtail that instruction, but sought rather to concentrate her readers' attention on the English landscape and on knowable ways of life overlooked in the vagrant passion for exploration and travel.

In Victorian culture and society, representations of the British colonies filled the imaginations of those at home with images that constituted a shared basis of knowledge. Beliefs about the indigenous inhabitants of colonies emerged into what Eliot, describing the traditions of representing the English peasantry, called "prejudices difficult to dislodge from the artistic mind" (Pinney, p. 269). The name that has been given to one form of nineteenth-century colonial discourse is "Orientalism." Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) argues that nineteenth-century British and French writers, in attempting to represent the East, unconsciously reproduced a self-referential set of images which became intransigent prejudices in Western thought and art, and, as Said writes, created "not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe."[11]

The representations of colonized people that post-colonial critics have shown to be instrumental in legitimizing imperialism were precisely the kind of romanticized misrepresentations that Eliot saw as distorting middle-class perceptions of the English peasantry. In *Adam Bede*, she wrote that the need to represent the "common, coarse people" as they really were was political and social: "It is so needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy, and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes" (Pinney, p. 178). Eliot applied the same analytic standards to representations of the empire, which she recognized as treacherous for readers who could not verify published accounts by their own observation. While she could not formulate her critique in the terms used by late twentieth-century post-colonial theorists, she saw the danger of looking to "literature instead of life" (Pinney, p. 269). She argued against English pastoralism as a "tradition" – the kind of cultural formation that Said, following Foucault, calls a "discourse."[12]

This book explores a disjunction between the expressed politics of a realist aesthetic that did not permit Eliot to represent what she had not seen, and life in a society that encouraged practical decisions based on abstractions – "the colonies." That is, contemporary sources of knowledge about the colonies were not reliable enough to form the basis of artistic representations but were sufficient to support the emigration of sons and the investment of capital. Eliot's knowledge of what she was investing in was abstract. The exile of her sons to an unrepresentable world abstracted them too, rendering them unknowable except through letters that were themselves a patchwork of colonialist discourses mediating their lived experience.

Written in 1860 when she had just begun to invest the profits from *The Mill on the Floss* in Indian railways and was considering colonial careers for her stepsons, Eliot's story "Brother Jacob" displays a striking self-consciousness about the forms of representation we now call Orientalism. "Brother Jacob" addresses the consequences of false conceptions about the colonies. Under the assumed identity of Edward Freely, David Faux is able to dupe the Grimworth people on the basis of his experience in Jamaica. What they know of the West Indies comes from books, and Eliot registers the tendency of provincial villagers to conflate explicitly Orientalist images in ways that prepared them to believe canny travelers. For example, Freely's customer, Mrs. Steene, "knew by heart many passages in 'Lalla Rookh,' the 'Corsair,' and the 'Siege of Corinth,'" and regrets that her husband was "not in the least like a nobleman turned Corsair out of pure scorn for his race, or like a renegade with a turban and crescent" (245–6). In "Brother Jacob," Eliot not only refuses to represent what she does not know (Jamaica), but makes ignorant and false representations the subject of her fiction. Rather than encouraging stereotypes, she mocks them and suggests the immorality of exploiting them. David Faux is not only a thief and an imposter: this would-be colonizer and fortune-seeker is an absolute failure whose preposterous assumptions about Jamaican culture clash with colonial reality. Yet his fabrications are validated by his equally ill-educated listeners at home.

As examples of realism, Eliot's novels have come under criticism for generic properties which allegedly evince complicity in imperialism. In the late twentieth-century critique of realism, the realist novel is thought to have given form to the ideologies of bourgeois individualism, capitalism, and imperialism. The narrator who views the world as from a panopticon is thought to concentrate control in a single omniscient English individual in a manner that reflected and subsequently encouraged the control that England exerted over its empire. Firdous Azim summarizes the post-structuralist premise of this argument by explaining that the novel is "an imperial genre, not in theme merely, not only by virtue of the historical moment of its birth, but in its formal structure – in the construction of that narrative voice which holds the narrative structure together."[13] In addition to such formalist claims, there is an argument about representation: middle-class novelists unwittingly represented the world in a way that validated the politics and practices of British colonialists, even when their novels are not explicitly imperialist. Said argues: "It is striking that never, in the novel, is that world beyond seen except as subordinate and dominated, the English presence viewed as regulative and normative."[14] But seen by whom? By "seen" Said means the references to or glances at colonial spaces in domestic novels. In Eliot's case, such spaces are not seen at all, though they are alluded to in revealing ways. Both the formalist and the representational arguments fail to consider what the author might have known about the multifaceted ways in which the British interacted with the cultures and peoples in the world beyond their novels.

While "The Natural History of German Life" and "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" are acknowledged to be important statements about her realism, her reviews of colonial literature by authors such as C. J. Andersen and Richard Burton have gone unexamined as evidence of the development of her aesthetic. In chapter 1, I explore a variety of colonial discourses that were evaluated by Eliot in the years before she began writing her fiction. In one review, for example, she measured the impact of myths and erroneous information on both British society generally and her own imagination in particular. African explorers, she believed, were slowly correcting the images of Africa drawn from the Arabian Nights and familiar from "our childhood."[15] She recognized the commingling of science and fiction, fact and fancy, that filled in the blanks of the English imagination with intriguing images of Africa. She looked forward to the clarifications of scientific discovery, but remained vigilantly skeptical of all the popular accounts she read and reviewed.

Lewes's thinking and writing about colonial exploration and emigration provide an immediate context for Eliot's fiction. His sons, whose colonial ventures Eliot supported, were an important though dubious source of her information about colonial life in South Africa – dubious because their failure to turn supposed colonial opportunities to their advantage called into question their reliability as accurate narrators of their experiences in Africa. Thornie and Bertie wrote intermittent but substantial letters to Lewes and Eliot throughout the 1860s, Bertie's continuing into the early 1870s, and the texts of these letters are the basis for chapter 2. In considering the South African letters, we must imagine Eliot as a reader of unsettling accounts of colonial warfare, poverty, and failure. Thornie and Bertie were "bad colonists."[16] They failed to become bureaucratic functionaries, and they succeeded neither as explorers/hunters nor even as self-supporting emigrants. Thornie in particular evinced enthusiasm for a genre – the colonial adventure novel – that Eliot's fiction directly challenged and sought to displace. His unrealistic expectations and inability to see beyond the romance of his situation as a settler colonist epitomize the dangers she recognized

as resulting from a diet of unrealistic fiction. I examine the relationship between boys' adventure fiction and Thornie's colonial experiences as narrated in his letters home, to argue that Eliot's domestic experience of colonialism reaffirmed her commitment to realism.

The value of children is related for Eliot to predictions about the future. In Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846–8), offspring are assessed in monetary terms. Girls, in Mr. Dombey's view, are debased currency: "In the capital of the House's name and dignity, such a child was merely a piece of base coin that couldn't be invested – a bad Boy – nothing more."[17] Eliot's ambivalence about assessing individual worth in this manner is seen in parent–child relationships in her fiction. As Mr. Tulliver says of Maggie, "an over-'cute woman's no better nor a long-tailed sheep – she'll fetch none the bigger price for that" (12). Gwendolen is viewed similarly by her uncle Gascoigne – worth an investment only because she promises to pay off in a successful marriage. In "Debasing the Moral Currency," Eliot's Theophrastus uses a financial metaphor to decry contemporary English attitudes toward literary traditions that convey the moral values of society. Failing to respect the inherited texts transmitted over the ages amounts to a desecration of the moral sentiments that bind a people and a culture – a debasing of the moral currency that lowers "the value of every inspiring fact and tradition" and impoverishes "our social existence" (84). In his concern for English children and posterity, Theophrastus wonders where parents "have deposited that stock of morally educating stimuli which is to be independent of poetic tradition" (84). Teaching our children is an investment that will pay dividends far into the future, and failing to invest wisely, Theophrastus argues, could have disastrous consequences for the nation.

The dire projections of Theophrastus (who is notably childless) for the moral future of the nation synthesize anxieties about English identity during a period in which colonial markets were expanding and foreign cultural influences multiplying. Chapter 3 investigates the forms of empire-building with which Eliot's investments made her complicit. With her first purchase of shares, she began to accumulate a portfolio of domestic, foreign, and colonial stocks that gave her an investment in British colonialism and distanced her material interest in the progress of imperial expansion from the moral problems that expansion entailed. I argue that the conflict of personal and, more broadly, social interests was significant in shaping the moral outlook of her fiction. The choice between material comfort and moral rectitude is one faced repeatedly by women in Eliot's novels, including Esther Lyon, Dorothea Brooke, and Gwendolen Harleth. In these fictional situations Eliot idealized behavior that she herself could not emulate: renouncing money that was in some way tainted.

In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot went furthest to investigate the experiences of people who lived beyond the bounds of her personal lot. She studied Jewish history, culture, and religion to better know the "other" within England. She made herself an expert on Jewish subjects, but upheld her notion of realism to the extent that she demurred from representing places, specifically "the East," which she had not seen. In chapter 4, I examine how Eliot aligned her knowledge about contemporary Jews and their nascent nationalism with her realist aesthetic. The complexity of her artistic and political motivations in *Deronda* challenges readings of the novel that are limited to critiques of its alleged imperialist ideology. Said accuses Eliot of perpetuating in the novel a myth of empty land: "On one important issue there was complete agreement between the Gentile and Jewish versions of Zionism: their view of the Holy Land as essentially empty of inhabitants."[18] His condemnation, which transforms Eliot into a Zionist and an imperialist, has played a key part in subsequent criticism of *Deronda*, and its impact exceeds his own limited yet repeated claims.

Because of Said's influence, I evaluate his position and those of his followers, not as a defense of Eliot, but rather to clarify an understanding of the colonial and aesthetic contexts in which she wrote. When we look at her statements about fiction as well as at her work as a whole, we can see that her treatment of "the East" at the end of *Deronda* is analogous to that of "the Indies" in "Brother Jacob." Said argues that Eliot writes about the East as if the Arabs do not exist, that she represents the land as available for the taking. This criticism would have more validity had Eliot actually represented any part of "the East" and had she been less aware of the fallacies of representations that merely reproduced other representations. Mordecai's conception of the Holy Land is dependent upon discursive constructions and traditions – a combination of religious texts and accounts by contemporary travelers. When he speaks of Israel, his "voice might have come from a Rabbi transmitting the sentences of an elder time" (636). His visions are hallucinatory combinations of textual fragments bearing virtually no relationship to contemporary reality, and Daniel's plans are contingent upon what he will find in a future beyond the text.

Understanding these and similar aspects of Eliot's fiction depends upon an awareness of the language and knowledge available to her. In my conclusion I bring together the issues discussed in the book as a whole by focusing on the synthesis of economic, colonial, and literary discourses

represented by Eliot's relationship with her banker John Walter Cross. Cross was an intimate friend throughout the 1870s, during which time he also wrote a number of essays on finance, emigration, and literature. He wrote about railroads from his direct experience in the United States and Australia and it was on his advice that Eliot invested heavily in New World railways. His influence was both directly personal and discursive.

With Cross to guide her, Eliot knew more about her investments than most ordinary shareholders. This raises the question of how her decisions about participation in the affairs of empire, specifically emigration and investment, differed from decisions about representing colonial spaces in fiction: could the economy and the society of England be extended overseas without the sympathy that realist fiction generated? In *Impressions*, Theophrastus contrasts the effects of railroads on the English landscape to "those grander and vaster regions of the earth" (24). Offering an image of foreign "lines," he asks: "What does it signify that a lilliputian train passes over a viaduct amidst the abysses of the Apennines, or that a caravan laden with a nation's offerings creeps across the unresting sameness of the desert?" (24–5). What does it signify? Having "learned to care for foreign countries" (26), Theophrastus projects the railroad – symbol of British technology and progress – into romantic landscapes familiar to his readers through literature. His phrase "learned to care" echoes Eliot's letter to Lady Lytton, in which "learning to love is like an increase in property." The foreign scenes had become part of the English theatre of imagination, just as railroads had become part of the English landscape. The incorporation of the foreign into English culture was an occasion for the reassessment of that culture. Following the examination of an inextricable relationship between English and Jewish cultures in *Deronda*, *Impressions* tightens that association and points forward to a new, less insular Englishness that Eliot might have represented, had she lived to see it.

In *Impressions*, Theophrastus's denunciation of false outward vision recalls the statements about realism in Eliot's early essays, which worried about the neglect of the marginal English classes and the English preference for images of foreign places. In the years between "The Natural History of German Life" and *Impressions*, Eliot's life and art changed in many ways that were reflective of its colonial and imperial contexts. Her reading about the spaces of empire in travel writing and newspapers, her direct involvement in the emigration of her stepsons, and her extensive colonial investments amounted to a multifaceted engagement with the material reality of imperial expansion and contributed to transformations in her political, moral, and aesthetic perspectives.

CHAPTER 1

Imperial knowledge: George Eliot, G. H. Lewes, and the literature of empire

> . . . and yet, how little do we still know of Africa.
>
> George Eliot[1]

Like many of her contemporaries, George Eliot looked to the empire for solutions to poverty and unemployment in England. In January 1851, she moved from Coventry to London, and between 1851 and 1854 she edited the *Westminster Review* for its publisher, John Chapman. On December 20, 1851, her brother-in-law Edward Clarke died, leaving her sister Chrissey with six children and a considerable debt. Although Eliot had emigrated to London rather than to a colony to escape the "moral asphyxia" of the Midlands, she thought Australia was just the place for her widowed sister and six orphaned children. Chapman had traveled to Australia before becoming a publisher and he was at the time engaged in preparing Sophia Tilley, the sister of his mistress, Elisabeth Tilley, to emigrate to Australia (*GEL*, 2:93). Writing to her friends Charles and Cara Bray in Coventry, Eliot asked: "What do you think of my going to Australia with Chrissey and all her family?" According to this plan, Chrissey was to relocate permanently because she seemed to have so few alternatives in England; it may have been the one way to keep the family together. Eliot did not intend to stay, merely "to settle them and then come back" (*GEL*, 2:97). Chrissey's emigration would give her a chance to travel, see the world, and return home, perhaps to write for an English audience about what she had seen in Australia.

Eliot's vision of Australia as a salvation from the physical hardships and the social disgrace of poverty into which Chrissey had fallen derived from the reading and reviewing that made her life so radically different from that of her sister. Her position as editor of the *Westminster* was transforming her into a member of the London literary elite, the type of person who would never emigrate, but who would express opinions about the emigration of others. Several books about Australia had been

reviewed recently in the *Westminster*, including "the book of books for the emigrant," Samuel Sidney's *The Three Colonies of Australia*.[2] Samuel Sidney and his brother published many books on Australia, as well as articles in Charles Dickens's *Household Words*. In 1850, Dickens wrote to his friend Miss Burdett-Coutts that he had gained from guidebooks some little knowledge of the state of society in New South Wales "of which one could have no previous understanding, and which would seem to be quite misunderstood, or very little known, even in the cities of New South Wales itself."[3] Dickens felt that this and other sources of second-hand information provided a sufficient basis for understanding and knowing Australia. His "little knowledge" was enough for him to support the emigration of others – of "fallen women" as part of the Urania House project beginning in 1847 and of his own sons in the 1860s.

Similarly, in 1850 Eliot looked to the popular guidebook for justification in urging the emigration of her sister, who had "fallen" in a different sense. Her plight was more like that of the Micawber family in Dickens's *David Copperfield*. The initial plan had been to send Chrissey's son Edward to Australia, where an acquaintance had "offered to place him under suitable protection at Adelaide" (*GEL*, 2:88). Eliot "strongly recommended" that Chrissey accept the offer and, perhaps under Chapman's influence, continued to push the idea of the whole family's emigration. She bought Sidney's book and sent it to Chrissey "to enlighten her about matters there and accustom her mind to the subject" (*GEL*, 2:88). Sidney advocated "an influx of well-disposed, educated, intelligent families, prepared to carry on colonization by cultivation," and clearly this was the image Eliot had of orderly settlement and a new life in the colonies.[4] But Chrissey refused to go. She died in 1859, and her sons Edward and Charles eventually emigrated to Australia and New Zealand.

This moment of enthusiasm in 1853 was the closest Eliot ever came to visiting a colony. In 1854 she began living with G. H. Lewes and embarked on a shared intellectual life in which the two often read the same books. Their reading formed a common basis of knowledge, including knowledge about the empire, on which they drew to make joint decisions about issues such as emigration and investment. This reading included theories of, as well as practical advice about, the colonies. The case that colonization was regenerative for some Germans was made in W. H. Riehl's *Die Naturgeschichte des deutschen Volkes* (1854). In her review essay "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), Eliot notes that Riehl "points to colonization" for the peasant class as the remedy for the

degenerative effects of civilization. She seems to concur that on "the other side of the ocean, a man will have the courage to begin life again as a peasant, while at home, perhaps, opportunity as well as courage will fail him" (Pinney, p. 281). Just as Riehl believed that the peasants were the most successful of German agricultural colonists, so Sidney remarks that British attempts to "fill ships with the higher and middle classes" have failed because "they are not the class who, in a body, can succeed" under colonial conditions in Australia.[5]

In the early 1850s, Eliot believed that emigration would enhance the development of the English race. She was thrilled at the thought of the "great Western Continent, with its infant cities, its huge uncleared forests, and its unamalgamated races" (*GEL*, 2:85). She recalled these early impressions of North America in an 1872 letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, in which she confessed that she "always had delight in descriptions of American forests since the early days when I read 'Atala.'" She enjoyed the primeval setting of Chateaubriand's 1801 romance about French colonizers and the American Indians they encountered in the Louisiana territory at the end of the eighteenth century, even though it was "half-unveracious" (*GEL*, 5:279–80). In the same letter, Eliot recalled admiring Stowe's descriptions of the American South in *Dred, a Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, which she had reviewed when it appeared in 1856. The freshness of her early reading had faded by 1872, when she knew that she would never see the New World except, as she wrote to Stowe, "in the mirror of your loving words" (*GEL*, 5:279).

REVIEWING COLONIAL LITERATURE

Throughout the nineteenth century, the expanses of Australia, Canada, Africa, India, or "the East" were colored for those at home by the accounts of explorers, missionaries, emigrants, colonial officials, and novelists. Among the many categories of books Eliot read, travel and exploration narratives comprised a significant portion. Because she reviewed extensively in the 1850s, she read many classics of travel writing, such as Captain James Cook's *Voyages around the World* and Alexander von Humboldt's *Travels and Discoveries in South America*, as well as the most recent accounts of David Livingstone, Richard Burton, John Hanning Speke, and others. This reading established the groundwork of her knowledge about the empire, and textual information was infused later with personal experience of the imperial bureaucracy at home and correspondence with friends and relatives in the colonies.

In the 1850s, Eliot's writing negotiates the uneven ground of her knowledge about the empire in ways that contributed to her developing realist aesthetic. Like any other genre, colonial literature demanded critical evaluation. Her standard for the judgment of such books was not personal experience: she could not assess the descriptions of geography, natural life, and indigenous peoples based on her own travel. She could ask only, as she would of any book, whether it was well-written, informative, and consistent with similar accounts. In her 1856 review of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (vol. III), she defined "realism" as "the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature." While the objectives of travel and exploration literature were to inform and entertain rather than to achieve "truth and beauty," we find her suspicious that travel writing, like painting and fiction, could fail by "substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality."[6]

The social need for realistic representation was especially great in the descriptions of unfamiliar, foreign places. With the expansion of the empire through exploration and colonization, the observations of travelers had considerable cultural significance.[7] In 1854, Eliot reviewed the Rev. N. Davis's *Evenings in My Tent; or, Wanderings in Balad Ejjareed*. "In comparison with other quarters of the globe," she wrote, "Africa may be considered almost as a *terra incognita*."[8] Ever precise in her expression, Eliot summarizes the received wisdom about Arabs, neither crediting nor doubting it on her own authority: "Modern travellers concur in representing the Arab as singularly cunning, rapacious, and cowardly, apparently incapable of truth, and sunk in abject superstition; in fact, as exhibiting all the vices of an oppressed race."[9] The depressed state of the Arabs is made known to her by Davis's account of their moral failings. As she would do later in her fiction, Eliot looks immediately to the conditions that created the alleged demoralization. She speaks against the negative effects of Christian missionaries, referring to the "evil that has been done by an *ill*-organized missionary system in some of our colonies, the irreparable injury to progress and to real civilisation."[10] Real civilization resists the "narrow bigotry and intolerance" of missionaries and depends on "progress" of a more scientific nature.

Two years later, she made a similar case about representations of moral degeneration in her review of Stowe's *Dred*. According to Eliot, Stowe's social criticism is weakened (she commits "argumentative suicide") because her Negro characters are too good and fail to capture "the Nemesis lurking in the vices of the oppressed." Stowe "alludes to

demoralization among the slaves, but she does not depict it; and yet why should she shrink from this?"[11] A strict commitment to what Eliot sees as the realistic condition of demoralization among American slaves would show readers the consequences of slavery. Unflinching realism would lead readers to condemn slavery all the louder, just as Davis's account of the Arabs led Eliot to criticize the missionary system.

From her reviews in the 1850s through her last book, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Eliot expressed the conviction that oppression leads to a collective degeneration, whether in slaves, in the English working classes, or in colonized peoples. In *The Mill on the Floss*, her narrator observes of Philip Wakem: "Ugly and deformed people have great need of unusual virtues," but "the theory that unusual virtues spring by a direct consequence out of personal disadvantages, as animals get thicker wool in severe climates, is perhaps a little overstrained" (331). Similarly, in "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" Theophrastus observes: "An oppressive government and a persecuting religion, while breeding vices in those who hold power, are well known to breed answering vices in those who are powerless and suffering" (152). Together with realistic descriptions of landscape, architecture, or physiognomy, Eliot believed that the artist was obliged to represent such hard truths.

Eliot's reviews suggest that it was partially by balancing the claims of veracity and artistic merit in fiction and travel writing that she came to formulate her theory of fiction. The themes of her reviews, whether of fiction or non-fiction, are consistent. In an 1855 review of Charles Kingsley's historical romance *Westward Ho!*, she showed her willingness to appreciate his story while judging its realism cautiously. "We dare not pronounce on the merit of his naval descriptions," she wrote, "but to us, landlubbers as we are, they seem wonderfully real" (Pinney, p. 128). The next year she reviewed Richard Burton's *First Footsteps in East Africa* (1856). For her, accuracy of description in the literature of exploration was not sufficient. The author must also hold the reader's attention. Here Burton failed, and Eliot complained that his book "labours under the sin (unpardonable in the production of so extremely clever a man) of being dull." She objects that "we are hungry, and are not fed, we are thirsty, and find no drink."[12]

In other reviews, she speculated about the veracity of travelers' accounts with an implied concern that any inaccuracies or distortions would be perpetuated by less cautious readers. In a review of C. J. Andersen's *Lake Ngami*, she applauds the author's contribution to British geographical knowledge of southern Africa. Correcting the reports of

missionaries (received "second hand from Arab travellers") about an enormous inland lake, Andersen shows that the lake "turns out to be a mirage – a mythus with the smallest conceivable nucleus of fact." "So perishes a phantom," she writes, "which has excited London geographers for a whole season."[13] Andersen, she remarks, is more hunter than scientist, but it is on these testimonies that scientists must depend. It took explorers like Andersen and Burton, she believed, to separate the facts from the myths. Eliot acknowledges that information about Africa was inconsistent and fragmented, and that unconfirmed reports could leave even men of science chasing phantoms.[14]

Eliot wrote in "The Natural History of German Life" that art is "the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot" (Pinney, p. 271). Her historical romance *Romola* (1863) illustrates her interest in reconstructing a non-English past based on her readings about it. *Daniel Deronda* shows her entering into the lives of European and English Jews, about whom her research made her expert. Yet her writing shows a decided avoidance of the realities of British colonialism. Considering her belief in emigration as a solution to domestic problems, she might have striven to extend the contact of her readers to the experiences of English colonists. Or, with her critical attitude toward missionaries, she might have shown the vices and answering vices of the oppressors and oppressed in any number of places about which she had read. But with the British empire, Eliot seems to have run up against the limits of her realism, or at least the limits of what she was willing to represent.

Mid-century fiction that does more than allude to parts of the empire is noteworthy in that action and violence in the colonies, whether in sport or in warfare, was consigned primarily to boys' literature until the late nineteenth-century emergence of a new generation, most notably Kipling and Conrad.[15] In the early part of the century, novels set in India would have been familiar to the British reading public. Scott's *The Surgeon's Daughter* (1827), for example, extended a Scottish romance plot to India. Novels were also written by Englishmen who had served in India, such as Colonel Meadows Taylor, author of *Confessions of a Thug* (1839) and four other Indian romances. W. D. Arnold's *Oakfield; or, Fellowship in the East* (1853) was based on his experiences in India, as Henry Kingsley's *Geoffrey Hamlyn* (1859) was based on his five years in Australia.

But authors such as Eliot, Trollope, Dickens, and Thackeray had a more oblique relationship to the empire. They resisted extending to

the colonies their representations of English life, yet the colonies are present in their fiction. Thackeray was born in India. Eliot, Trollope, and Dickens all sent sons to the colonies. Trollope represented the Australian colonies he had visited, but in the work of Dickens and Eliot colonial spaces constitute the margins of their fictional worlds, simultaneously lands of opportunity and dumping grounds: the "Indies" to which David Faux emigrates in "Brother Jacob"; the Botany Bay to which Hetty is transported in *Adam Bede*; the Australia to which Dickens's Magwitch is transported in *Great Expectations* and to which Martha the reformed prostitute and Micawber the reformed debtor emigrate in *David Copperfield*. Eliot did not represent the colonies, which could seem alternately ominous and prosperous, but the tension between their image as "new worlds" for starting life over and as desolate, perilous margins of an empire to which the unwanted could be conveniently removed is evident in her life and fiction.

Although she never set a novel in the colonies, Eliot described those aspects of British imperialism that were part of her daily life as a resident in the metropolis of London. We can see her own experiences breaking in on her aesthetic argument. Correcting false images of English peasants in "The Natural History of German Life," she applies a metaphor drawn from her own decontextualized observation. Speaking of the English ploughman, she writes that "the slow utterance, and the heavy slouching walk" remind one of "that melancholy animal the camel" (Pinney, p. 269). Such an exotic analogy is part of Eliot's stated aesthetic project of representing the common English folk to English readers. It is possible that a greater number of urban middle-class readers had seen live camels than had seen live peasants. Where, we might ask, did Eliot encounter a camel? In a painting? A novel? Most likely it was at the London Zoological Gardens.

Once she moved to the Priory in Regent's Park in 1863, the Royal Zoological Gardens were within walking distance. Through Lewes's scientific observations, she became aware of the differences between animals in captivity, which she was able to view, and animals in the wild, about which she read, and this distinction is registered in her fiction. The imperialist nature of nineteenth-century zoos has received much critical attention. Harriet Ritvo argues that "[t]he maintenance and study of captive wild animals, simultaneous emblems of human mastery over the natural world and of English dominion over remote territories, offered an especially vivid rhetorical means of reenacting and extending the work of empire."[16] Robert W. Jones argues that in zoos "it was possible to