



George Eliot's pulse

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The essays offered here started out as classroom notes; they were eventually written up as talks for various academic audiences, then revised for publication over a period of (too many) years. Collecting them now (“ . . . before term ends / Oblig’d by hunger, and request of friends”), I have again lightly revised them, hoping to eliminate redundancies and thus dissimulate my fondness for certain passages in George Eliot’s writings. I have also added an Afterword, to review and clarify some of the preoccupations of the essays.

I’m grateful for the encouragement and criticism I’ve received from students and colleagues at Cornell, Berkeley, and Johns Hopkins, as well as from people in the audiences of the lectures and colloquia where these readings were first tried out. And I’m grateful for permission to reprint material granted by the original publishers of these essays: to the Indiana University Press, for “George Eliot’s Pulse” (*differences* 6.1 [1994]); to the Johns Hopkins University Press, for “Recognizing Casaubon” (*Glyph* 6 [1979]) and “Mr. Tulliver’s Life-in-Debt” (*diacritics* 25.4 [1995]); to the University of Amsterdam, for “Behind ‘The Lifted Veil’: Rousseau” (*Amsterdam School for Critical Analysis Yearbook* (ASCA) [1996]); to Columbia University Press, for “Daniel Deronda’s Mother,” originally a section of the “Afterword” of *The End of the Line* (1985), and for “‘Nullify,’ ‘Neutral,’ ‘Numb,’ ‘Number,’” which first appeared in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (eds.) *Languages of the Unsayable* (1989); and to

Routledge for "Poor Hetty," forthcoming in Lauren Berlant (ed.), *Compassion*, a volume devoted to the proceedings of the fifty-ninth meeting of the English Institute (2000). Finally, I owe a particular debt to Werner Hamacher and to Helen Tartar, whose encouragement and quite astonishing patience kept this project afloat despite my best efforts to scuttle it.

Postscript, October 2002: I had long looked forward with pleasure to bringing out this volume with Stanford and under Helen Tartar's editorial aegis. That pleasure has now been marred by the Press's recent and regrettable decision to dispense with the services of someone I and many others regard as one of the ablest editors working in academic publishing.

Abbreviations

Page references to George Eliot's writings are given in the text. For the convenience of readers, I cite easily available editions.

- AB* *Adam Bede* (1859), ed. Stephen Gill (London: Penguin, 1985).
- BJ* "Brother Jacob" (1860), ed. Beryl Gray (London: Virago, 1989).
- DD* *Daniel Deronda* (1876), ed. Terence Cave (London: Penguin, 1995).
- E* *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).
- FH* *Felix Holt: the Radical* (1866), ed. Lynda Mugglestone (London: Penguin, 1995).
- L* *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols., ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954-1978).
- LV* "The Lifted Veil" (1859), ed. Beryl Gray (London: Virago, 1985).
- M* *Middlemarch* (1872), ed. Rosemary Ashton (London: Penguin, 1994).

- MF* *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), ed. A.S. Byatt (London: Penguin, 1985).
- P* *Collected Poems*, ed. Lucien Jenkins (London: Skoob Books, 1989).
- R* *Romola* (1863), ed. Dorothea Barrett (London: Penguin, 1996).
- SCL* *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), ed. Jennifer Gribble (London: Penguin, 1998).
- SM* *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe* (1861), ed. David Carroll (London: Penguin, 1966).
- TS* *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), ed. Nancy Henry (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994).

In addition to these works of Eliot's, occasional citations from the Bible are given in the text in standard chapter-and-verse form (e.g., Matt. 3:27); similarly, citations from *Paradise Lost* are given by book and line number in the text (e.g., *PL* 7.387).

GEORGE ELIOT'S PULSE

§ 1 Introduction: George Eliot's Pulse

The pages that follow grew out of my curiosity about passages in George Eliot's work that struck me as continuous—in their diction and in the ways they functioned within her novels—with so-called “sublime” passages in eighteenth-century or Romantic texts, in the theoretical writings of Burke or Kant, or in the poetry of Wordsworth or Shelley. What is meant by “sublime” here, and how might it be related to the concerns of a Victorian novelist? Kant's distinction, in the *Critique of Judgment*, between a dynamical and a mathematical sublime may be helpful in rapidly—and sketchily—engaging these questions.¹ You will recall that the distinction serves Kant's purposes for both phenomenological and systematic reasons. He would recognize two somewhat different experiences of the sublime—one the experience of overwhelming force, the other that of a sort of cognitive overload, a losing track of what one is taking in—and he would account for that empirical difference by embedding his analysis of it within the branching symmetries of the critical philosophy: the dynamical sublime he would refer to the faculty of desire (the concern of the *Critique of Practical Reason*), the mathematical to the faculty of cognition (the concern of the *Critique of Pure Reason*). His discussion of the sublime, then, takes its place within the larger account of aesthetic judgment and thus serves to link the two Critiques.

Still, what might any of this have to do with the writing of nov-

els, especially with the writing of works like Eliot's, works of high mimetic realism? Consider this analogy: in the dynamical sublime, "the mind"—that fictional agent ubiquitous in eighteenth-century writings—matches forces with the sensed impingement of the sublime object. In the mathematical sublime, the mind brings its powers of conceptual totalization to bear on a seemingly infinite series, or a scattering or dispersion of objects. Now, both these notions can be found reinscribed in Victorian discourse about novels (and within the novels themselves) in the form of questions about the force or efficacy of fiction—the impact the novelist may or should have on her readers—and in questions about the coherence of any particular fiction, the capacity of the novelist to give shape to the multiple elements making up her vision of the world. That, at least, is what I hope to show in the discussions of George Eliot that follow. More particularly, I shall be examining the articulation of the diction and figures of the sublime with portrayals of characters whose fate it is to be stigmatized within the moral economy of the novels and, in effect, to be cast out of their depicted societies. Mr. Casaubon, in *Middlemarch*, is one such character, as is Hetty in *Adam Bede*, or Daniel Deronda's mother, or, also in *Deronda*, the gambler Lapidoth. Such characters, I shall argue, function as skewed, heavily or lightly disguised surrogates of their author, and their fates thus ask to be read allegorically, as clues to Eliot's understanding of—or apprehensions about—that form of agency called authorship. In this first essay, I shall take up a more central figure in *Deronda*, Gwendolen Harleth.

To begin with, consider these brief passages, chosen to illustrate the inflection George Eliot gives to the idiom of the mathematical sublime when it is brought into touch with one of her surrogates:

- a Middlemarcher's joke about Mr. Casaubon: "Somebody put a drop [of his blood] under a magnifying glass, and it was all semi-colons and parentheses" (*M* 71) (see Chapter 2, below);
- from the remarkable analysis of a great actress's mimetic powers (this is Daniel Deronda's mother): "It would not be true to say that she felt less because of this double consciousness: she felt—that is, her mind went through—all the more, but with a difference: each nucleus of

pain or pleasure had a deep atmosphere of the excitement or spiritual intoxication which at once exalts and deadens" (*DD* 629) (see Chapter 7, below);

- and, again from *Deronda*, a description of a depraved roulette player's sensibility: "[His son's] words had the heart eaten out of them by numbers and movements that seemed to make the very tissue of Lapidoth's consciousness" (*DD* 778) (again, see Chapter 7, below).

What these passages have in common is a focus on the reduction or contraction of lived experience, presumably available for a richer-blooded or fuller mimesis, into some more elementary, particle-like forms—punctuation marks, nuclei of pain or pleasure, the numbers that mark the spaces on a roulette wheel. The figures may serve different purposes in each particular context, but the drive—what I call a "drive to the end of the line," in these cases toward the naming of such small, minimally differentiated units, like Lucretian atoms—is at work in each as well, and indeed is a recognizable trait of George Eliot's prose. I want to add to this list two more terms, key-words in Eliot's lexicon: *seed* and *pulse*. First, *seed*.

There is a long, enthusiastic early letter of George Eliot's (*L* 1.105–9) in which she proposes two different but related exercises in writing. One is designed to "give a clearness and comprehensiveness to our knowledge of Scripture truths," and it consists of setting down paraphrases of New Testament passages. "For a hasty example," she writes, "the familiar but impressive parable of the Sower [Matt. 13:1–23] might yield the following heads for reflection and perhaps many more." She goes on to list seven such topics, each one numbered; but, as in all interpretive paraphrase, the list is not exhaustive—there could be, as she says, "perhaps many more." The letter writer then turns to other subjects, mentions "revelling" in a book of astronomy, quotes the poet Edward Young on "an infinite of floating worlds," pauses to remind herself that "learning is only so far valuable as it serves to enlarge and enlighten the bounds of conscience." But she is clearly caught up in an excitement, partly intellectual, partly verbal, that propels her past such chastening reminders:

When a sort of haziness comes over the mind making one feel weary of articulated or written signs of ideas does not the notion of a less laborious mode of communication, of a perception approaching more nearly to intuition seem attractive? Nathless I love words; they are the quoits, the bows, the staves that furnish the gymnasium of the mind. Without them in our present condition, our intellectual strength would have no implements. I have been rather humbled in thinking that if I were thrown on an uncivilised island and had to form a literature for its inhabitants from my own mental stock how very fragmentary would be the information with which I could furnish them. It would be a good mode of testing one's knowledge [and here she comes to the second writing exercise], to set one's self the task of writing sketches of all subjects that have entered into one's studies, entirely from the chronicles of memory.

The second proposal will be seen to be the secular version of the first, for both—paraphrasing Jesus's parable and sketching one's studies from memory—would enlist writing in the service of consolidating that learning which ought itself to be subservient to “the bounds of conscience.” Mary Ann Evans² was twenty-one when she wrote this letter, but it would not be misleading to say that it epitomizes the concerns of the collected works of George Eliot, the intellectual ambition, the pedagogical aims and particularly the tensions that will be played out in her fiction between an expansive volubility and a scrupulous, contractile restraint. A recurrent emblem of those concerns also appears in the letter: it is the parable of the sower, a source of figures—and of interpretations—George Eliot will continue to draw on in all her writings. One can read her works as instances of those “many more” topics of reflection to be developed out of that inexhaustible text: the Word—or perhaps only words—as seed; its dispersal, seen sometimes as active, sometimes as passive, now as ultimately controlled, now as subject to chance; the burial of the seemingly dead seed that nevertheless harbors life within it; seed as valuably unique, seed as plural, scattered fruitlessly or spilled onanistically; seed as slowly maturing, seed as potentially explosive. I shall eventually be discussing some specific language near the end of *Daniel Deronda*, in the section called

“Fruit and Seed,” but I want to approach that scene by way of some earlier sowings.

Consider now this passage from David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus*,³ the work of theological criticism Mary Ann Evans, not yet “George Eliot,” translated between 1844 and 1846, when she was in her mid-twenties. In this section of his treatise, Strauss has set himself the task of deciding whether the sayings attributed to Jesus are authentically his. One puzzling aspect of the question is the variation of the order in which Jesus's sayings are reported by the four Evangelists: if we cannot be sure which lesson, which parable preceded which, how can we be sure any of them were said in the first place? why couldn't they have been inventions of the earliest Christian community, part of the oral tradition, or simply composed by the authors of the Gospels themselves? Strauss satisfies himself, through a painstaking philological analysis, that the discourses reported in the first three Gospels are indeed authentic, then comments: “The foregoing comparison shows us that the discourses of Jesus, like fragments of granite, could not be dissolved by the flood of oral tradition; but they were not seldom torn from their natural connexion, floated away from their original situation, and deposited in places to which they did not properly belong.”

The authentic Word is like granite, indissoluble. According to Strauss. Or rather, according to his translator, who has here tampered, as she later happily acknowledged, with her author's authentic word. When a reviewer praised her for rendering Strauss's text “word for word, thought for thought, and sentence for sentence,”⁴ then went on to cite this passage in a later discussion, Mary Ann Evans reported this gleefully in a letter: “Is it not droll that Wicksted should have chosen one of my interpolations or rather paraphrases to dilate on? The expression ‘granite,’ applied to the sayings of Jesus is nowhere used by Strauss, but is an impudent addition of mine to eke out his metaphor” (*L* 1.227).

Strauss had been describing the dissemination of the Word in language that drew on traditional topographical figures of the fate of Paradise at the time of the Flood—in Milton's verse, “by might of waves moved / Out of his place. . . . Down the great river to the

opening gulf" (PL 11.830 ff.)—as well as drawing on the figure of the scattering of seeds in the parable of the sower. The German describes the floating away of "die körnigen Reden Jesu," and the editor of the *Letters* translates that as the "pithy" discourses of Jesus. But the more common equivalent of *körnig* is "granular," and that word, turning up in a Victorian dictionary, may well have prompted the shift from a vegetable to a mineral figure, the *gra-* of "granular" suggesting both the *gra-* of "granite" and the *frag-* of "fragment." Dictionaries can do that to translators, we know. We shall want to bear that possibility in mind, even though Mary Ann Evans offers a more engagingly personal version of what happened: according to her, it was *her* "impudent addition" to "eke out" *his* metaphor. I stress the pronouns to bring out the latent sexual and generational politics of this early moment in George Eliot's career. Imagine the scene: an ambitious and astonishingly accomplished young provincial woman has just spent two years loyally keeping house for her elderly father while translating fifteen hundred pages of difficult German, laced with quotations in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. She is as high-minded in her understanding of what is "demanded in a translator" as she is in her understanding of what is expected of a daughter: the translator's virtues, she will write later, in the idiom of daughterly devotion, are "patience, . . . rigid fidelity, and [a] sense of responsibility in interpreting another man's mind" (E 211). Now the three volumes have been published—she has been paid her handmaiden's fee of twenty pounds—and to her surprise she finds her efforts praised in this ironically rewarding fashion. She may well have felt entitled to confide to a woman friend her delight in having gotten away with a bit of impudence.

If, then, we are curious to know what motivated the appearance of the phrase "fragments of granite" in the text of *The Life of Jesus*, two explanations thus suggest themselves. In one, the dictionary (not the butler) did it: a chance encounter with a suggestive phoneme prompted a diversion of the author's original meaning, a supplementary eking-out of his metaphor. In the other, the translator did it, in a moment of something less than rigid fidelity. The accounts are not mutually exclusive; we needn't choose between

them. But we should note their difference in emphasis: one stresses the chancy workings of dissemination, the other refigures the event as voluntary, an act of mild transgression, a daughter's impudence. The materials out of which to illustrate each of these vocabularies of motivation are present in abundance in George Eliot's writings; her novels are shaped and marked by her efforts to articulate them, and, more often than not, the stress of articulation is most evident in her representation of a transgressive woman, a woman who is herself made to bear the marks of that stress. Gwendolen Harleth is the most developed of such characters, and I shall be looking at a number of others as well, versions of the impudent translator of 1846, but before I do I should say a word about the lens with which I would bring these women into focus.

In chapter 10 of his treatise *On the Sublime*,⁵ Longinus juxtaposes some language from the *Iliad*—a simile comparing Hector's attack on the Greeks to the fury of an ocean wave—with Sappho's ode *phainetai moi*, a poem about the ways a powerful erotic passion is felt as shattering and scattering the elements of Sappho's body. In *The End of the Line*⁶ I drew attention to the transfer of power implicit in Longinus's account, from the force impinging on Sappho (when she is seen as a victimized body) to the force deployed by Sappho (when she is admired as a poet), and I called that transfer of power—it is actually the representation of such a transfer—the sublime turn. In Longinus's poetic economy, Sappho's physical fragmentation, her coming "near to dying" under the stress of overwhelming force, underwrites her activity as a shaper of language, and aligns her poem with the *Iliad*, where, Longinus tells us, Homer "forces his prepositions," "tortures and crushes his words," and "stamps his diction" with a particular character. Something very similar, I believe, can be detected in Eliot's dealings with a series of put-upon women: the evidence of their agency (or lack thereof)—of their passive suffering or active (or fantasied) aggression—is linked to signs of the impingement of force on a receptive surface, either to the marks left by that force or to the forced fragmentation of the surface itself, the breaking down of larger into smaller units.

Recently, critics like Gillian Beer, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan

Gubar⁷ have drawn attention to a dramatic poem George Eliot published in 1870, while she was at work on *Middlemarch*. The poem, "Armgar," is of interest chiefly because its heroine prefigures the bravura portrait of Daniel Deronda's mother. Like Deronda's mother, Armgar is an opera singer whose attempt to be defiantly independent of men is thwarted when she loses her voice. But Armgar can also be seen to resemble the translator of Strauss, in that the drama and pathos of her story are presented in language that draws in other, complicating, strands of figuration. The opening scene displays her in triumph, returning from a performance in the title role of Gluck's *Orpheus* and exuberantly seeking the confirming praise of her voice teacher:

Tell them, Leo, tell them
How I outsang your hope and made you cry
Because Gluck could not hear me. That was folly!
He sang, not listened: every linkèd note
Was his immortal pulse that stirred in mine,
And all my gladness is but part of him. (P 118)

Leo agrees, but points out ("sardonically") that Gluck was not responsible for "that trill you made / In spite of me and reason!", a bit of vocal elaboration he calls "melodic impudence," and for which Armgar mockingly apologizes:

I will do penance: sing a hundred trills
Into a deep-dug grave, then burying them
As one did Midas' secret, rid myself
Of naughty exultation. (P 119)

Adding a trill to Gluck's score is like eking out Strauss's metaphor: whatever prompted it, it can be blamed on the "impudence" of a woman carried away by feelings of "naughty exultation," what George Eliot had earlier, in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), named as feelings of "triumph" (MF 66). Armgar's trills, themselves, had appeared in an earlier text, as the "multitude of wandering quavers" added to a hymn in *Felix Holt* (1866) and stigmatized there as "lawlessness," the product of "pure willfulness and defiance" on

the musicians' part (FH 149–50). But of more immediate interest than these anticipations are the figures brought into touch with trills in the text of "Armgar" itself: figures of the sowing or burial of seed and, in a remarkable passage, of the disintegration of the self into mere "letters fallen asunder." This is from Armgar's lament when she discovers that a medical treatment has saved her life at the expense of her voice. She has become, she says,

A self accursed with consciousness of change,
A mind that lives in nought but members lopped,
A power turned to pain—as meaningless
As letters fallen asunder that once made
A hymn of rapture. Oh, I had meaning once,
Like day and sweetest air. What am I now?
The millionth woman in superfluous herds.
Why should I be, do, think? 'Tis thistle seed,
That grows and grows to feed the rubbish-heap. (P 137)

Armgar has been made to suffer a punishment fitted to her crime: she had produced superfluous trills, she must now embody the fragmentary and the meaningless. There is a moment in *Romola* (1863) when the villainous Tito recognizes that things are getting out of hand and the narrator comments: "Life was so complicated a game that the devices of skill were liable to be defeated at every turn by air-blown chances, incalculable as the descent of thistle-down" (R 407). This is the equivalent point in "Armgar," and it allows for a similarly double reading. We can recognize figures of "letters fallen asunder" or of the chance "descent of thistle-down" as serving the moral economy of each story, as ways of adumbrating the consequences of Armgar's impudence or of setting off Tito's villainy; or we can see the plotting of those economies as ways of stigmatizing—that is, of containing or managing by rendering morally intelligible—the dissemination inherent in letters and the operations of chance.⁸ In Armgar's case the containment takes the form of a renunciation of her career as a singer, a renunciation she describes in figures of burial. Earlier, defending her ambition, she had exclaimed, "Am I a sage whose words must fall like seed / Silently

buried toward a far-off spring?" (P 123); now she speaks penitentially of burying "her dead joy" (P 151) and dwells on that metaphor with a pained (and painful) insistence: "Oh it is hard / To take the little corpse, and lay it low, / And say, 'None misses it but me'" (P 151). The poem ends on this subdued but not entirely hopeless note. This burial, of a fragment of herself, is a sacrifice intended to bear fruit: Armgart, it is implied, will eventually be the better for it.

Sometimes burials bear even stranger fruit. Hetty, in *Adam Bede*, is convicted of child-murder for burying her newborn baby, and nothing good comes of that, unless you take the production of *Adam Bede* itself as a consequence of that crime. Here is how George Eliot described what she calls the "germ" of that novel. Her aunt, who served in several ways as a model of Dinah, had told her stories of visiting "an unhappy girl in prison": "Of the girl she knew nothing, I believe—or told me nothing—but that she was a common coarse girl, convicted of child-murder. The incident lay in my mind for years on years as a dead germ, apparently—till time had made my mind a nidus in which it could fructify; it then turned out to be the germ of 'Adam Bede'" (L 3.175–76).

It is the echo of "child-murder" in "dead germ" that is telling here: an equivalence is suggested out of which an implicit narrative of compensation and displaced guilt can be constructed. Something like a crime, but maybe not exactly a crime—in the novel it isn't certain that Hetty intended to kill her baby—figures the origin of *Adam Bede*.

I have been reading Hetty's story and Armgart's as allegories of a woman writer's fantasy of transgression, hinting at some initiating "crime" that is both like writing and like what writing must redeem. In certain letters of Eliot's, when she is prompted by praise of her work to gestures of grateful humility, her writing is made to seem redemptive of something she passively suffered rather than of something she did. Commenting on early, favorable reviews, she writes "I value them as grounds for hoping that my writing may succeed and so give value to my life—as indications that I can touch the hearts of my fellow men, and so sprinkle some precious grain as the result of the long years in which I have been inert and suffering" (L 2.416).

Or she will take the praise as "reason for gladness that such an unpromising woman-child was born into the world" (L 3.170). But in her fictions, the relation of writing to criminal agency is taken up in more elaborate, and equivocal, ways. In a recurrent configuration, there is a dead man to be accounted for, a woman confesses to a murderous intent, but it is judged that no crime has been committed: this complex allows questions of activity or passivity, guilt or innocence to be brought into focus and held there for some time, suspended. You will recognize that as a description of Gwendolen's interviews with Daniel Deronda after the drowning of her husband, but similar scenes had been played out, before that, between the French actress Laure and Lydgate in *Middlemarch* (M 151–53) and, earlier still, between the Italian orphan Tina and Mr. Gilfil in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (SCL 183–87). I want to look closely at the plotting and at some of the language of Tina's story before finally turning to Gwendolen.

Like Armgart, Tina is a singer—she is heard performing the same airs from Gluck's *Orpheus*—and a singer whose passion and whose vocal powers are hard to distinguish from one another. She has been adopted and brought back to England by a baronet, a man of "inflexible will" (SCL 120), which displays itself in the plans he makes for the future of his estate and his dependents: a nephew, Captain Wybrow, is to marry well and inherit the Manor; Tina is destined for the baronet's ward, young Mr. Gilfil. These arrangements are satisfactory to everyone but Tina, who has allowed herself to fall in love with Wybrow. In a moment of jealous rage she heads for a tryst with him intending to kill him, only to find him collapsed, in fact already dead. She runs back to report what she has seen, then falls into a faint. Gilfil stays to attend to her while the baronet runs to his nephew. The chapter ends with a tableau—the baronet bending over Wybrow's body "seeking with tremulous inquiring touches for some symptom that life was not irrevocably gone" (SCL 167). This is how the next chapter opens:

It is a wonderful moment, the first time we stand by one who has fainted, and witness the fresh birth of consciousness spreading itself over the blank features, like the rising sunlight on the alpine summits

that lay ghastly and dead under the leaden twilight. A slight shudder, and the frost-bound eyes recover their liquid light; for an instant they show the inward semi-consciousness of an infant's; then, with a little start, they open wider and begin to *look*; the present is visible, but only as a strange writing, and the interpreter Memory is not yet there. (SCL 167)

It is a wonderful moment. The juxtaposition of chapter-ending and chapter-beginning is such that, for an instant, it isn't clear whose face is being watched, or who is anxiously watching. It is, we learn, Tina's face, but the text's slight hesitation in determining that has the effect of linking this "fresh birth of consciousness" more securely to the description of Wybrow's corpse and establishing them as paired elements in a compensatory economy, a death exchanged for a rebirth. The reference to alpine sunrise, the allusion to Milton's "liquid light" (PL 7.362), the stress on the absolute quality of that originary "*look*," all go beyond the representation of a routine recovery of consciousness and lend the moment an unusual dignity.⁹ Tina's coming around sounds less interesting as a fact about Tina than it does as an account of a condition that, while it lasts, is made to seem both unique and desirable, although not necessarily so to Tina. To whom then? The lines ask to be read as the description of a writer's dreamt-of mode of consciousness, one so pure that it no longer represents particular things but is rather indistinguishable from the "strange writing" that is present to it. This is a Genesis scene, as the figure from Milton suggests, but it is of the birth of a notation detached from meaning, unavailable for interpretation, the benign (and utopian) equivalent of Armgart's trills—here figured in that "slight shudder"—or of her "letters fallen asunder."

Such an allegorical reading may seem too heavy a burden for the frail character of Tina to support, but in fact she lends herself to it, in part through her very fragility. Tina is the first of a series of young women—it includes Hetty in *Adam Bede*, both Dorothea and Rosamond in *Middlemarch* and, as we shall see, Gwendolen in *Deronda*—who prompt the narrator to pause and, in a paragraph of often elaborate prose, to dwell on the disparity between the grand motions of Nature or History and the restricted circle of

concerns and fragile consciousness of individual characters.¹⁰ It is one of the ways Eliot engages a central problem of her fiction, justifying her interest in private lives at moments when, as she puts it in *Deronda*, "the soul of man was waking to pulses which had for centuries been beating in him unheard, until their full sum made a new life of terror or of joy" (DD 124). Of Gwendolen the narrator asks, "Could there be a slenderer, more insignificant thread in human history than this consciousness of a girl, busy with her small inferences of the way in which she could make her life pleasant?" (DD 159). And of Tina: "What were our little Tina and her trouble in this mighty torrent, rushing from one awful unknown to another? Lighter than the smallest centre of quivering life in the waterdrop, hidden and uncared for as the pulse of anguish in the breast of the tiniest bird" (SCL 132).

The effect of such perspectival contrasts is to bring the two registers—of world history and of individual consciousness—almost, but not quite, to the point of incommensurability. What keeps them from flying apart is, among other things, an ambivalently figured pulsation attributed both to the vulnerable individual recipient of force and to the forceful impulses themselves. Tina's "hidden . . . pulse of anguish" beats to the same neutral rhythms, indeterminately vital or mortal, as the "pulses" that produce terror or joy on the historical scene. Indeed we are told that the throbbing of Tina's heart accompanies her as she sets out to kill her lover (SCL 164).

Pulse—as well as its cognates, *pulsing*, *pulsation*, *impulse*, *compulsion*, *repulsion*—turns up at telling moments in Eliot's fiction, and does some of the same work as the word *seed*. Each refers to a small, replicable unit of vitality, and as such is a sign of life. But *seed* and *pulse* are both equivocal, because they open up on a wide range of traditional associations that are either comforting or threatening and are available for any number of further inflections. Indeed, at two moments in Eliot's writings, *pulse* and *seed* merge. In *Romola*, taking advantage of the fact that *pulse* can also mean—I quote from the *American Heritage Dictionary*¹¹—"the edible seeds of certain pod-bearing plants, such as peas and beans," Eliot sets down a rather heavy-handed pun: citizens of Renaissance Florence,

she notes, could be condemned to death by six votes of an eight-man governing body, and these votes were known as the *sei fave* or six beans, beans (she adds) "being in more senses than one the political pulse of Florence" (R 478). The sentence is labored enough, and the joke itself of so little bearing on her narrative, that we must assume she simply wanted very badly to bring these two sorts of pulse into touch with one another.

A more serious and remarkable convergence of *pulse* and *seed* occurs in an epigraph to one of the chapters of *Deronda*, where it serves as an oblique commentary on Gwendolen's naive ambition to have a career, like Armgart or Daniel's mother, as a world-class singer:

The most obstinate beliefs that mortals entertain about themselves are such as they have no evidence for beyond a constant spontaneous pulsing of their self-satisfaction—as it were a hidden seed of madness, a confidence that they can move the world without precise notion of standing-place or lever. (DD 250)

There is an early letter of Eliot's in which she speaks of herself as "a poor sprite metamorphosed into a pomegranate seed" and writes "I feel a sort of madness growing upon me—just the opposite of the delirium which makes people fancy that their bodies are filling the room. It seems to me as if I were shrinking into that mathematical abstraction, a point . . ." (L 1.264). Gwendolen's mad ambition is of that grandiose, room-filling sort, but the movement of the epigraph is a narrowing back up the line to the source, to the pulsing hidden seed of a "self-satisfaction" we would now recognize as autoeroticism or, more abstractly, as auto-affection, a seed of which Gwendolen is both the owner and the slave. The epigraph thus at once judges Gwendolen severely and offers a figurative structure that has nothing whatever to do with moral judgment: in this end-of-the-line idiom, a mad pulsation may be at the origin of the self *tout court*, not just of the grandiose self.¹²

But the bearings of this pathos are most evident in the recurrent scene I alluded to earlier, in which a woman, either complacently (as in Laure's case) or in guilty dread (as in the case of Tina or

Gwendolen), acknowledges that she meant to murder her husband or lover, and by confessing obliges another man to express his horror (as Lydgate does to Laure) or to enter into a casuistical attempt to relieve her of her guilt (as Gilfil and Deronda do). In each of these scenes the possibility of the woman's innocence depends not on assigning the guilt to another person but on attributing the death to an accident—in one case to heart failure, in another to someone's foot slipping, in a third to the unexpected lurch of a sailboat. Innocence, in this particular scenario, entails a recognition of the power of chance, but in the case of Tina and Gwendolen, this recognition is combined with a sense of the justice of the deaths—both Wybrow and Grandcourt die accidentally but deserve to die. As a result, these women who harbor murderous thoughts paradoxically come to seem at once interesting and pitiable moral agents and frightening nemeses. The accidental quality of the death rubs off on them and each becomes, fleetingly, both technically innocent and the embodiment of a certain random violence; each becomes what George Eliot calls elsewhere in *Deronda* "a chancy personage" (DD 319).

This is particularly true of Gwendolen, the most fully and subtly portrayed of Eliot's heroines, and it is to her final appearance in *Deronda* that I want to turn now. In the next-to-last chapter of the novel, Gwendolen talks with Daniel for the last time and learns, in rapid succession, first that he is a Jew, then that he has committed himself to work to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine and will soon be gone from England, and finally that he intends to marry. The realization that he is thus removing himself from her life in several ways at once is all but devastating. Her sense, after an earlier conversation, of the distance between them had left her "crushed on the floor" (DD 702): this time when Daniel leaves she takes to her bed, and we are told that "through the day and half the night she fell continually into fits of shrieking" (DD 806–7). The scene takes eight pages to unfold, and to read through them is to recognize a number of familiar elements, reprises of bits of action or of language from Armgart's story, or Hetty's, or Tina's. There is a moment, for example, when Gwendolen is in a sort of trance,

caught up in some "horrible vision" (presumably the paralyzing image of her drowning husband), then comes to and looks at Daniel "with something like the return of consciousness after fainting" (DD 805), another when she is described as wearing "a withered look of grief, such as the sun often shines on when the blinds are drawn up after the burial of life's joy" (DD 806).

These echoes may be no more than a novelist's tics, the wheeling-in on cue of stock props, like Homeric epithets, at certain recurrent points in a serial drama. But at least one reprise repays closer attention. It is another lyrical digression on the theme of the disproportion between world-history and the history here being recounted, that of the slender thread of a girl's consciousness, but this time it is elaborated with all the stops pulled out and placed as the culmination of Gwendolen's story, at once her punishment and the possibility of her redemption. Daniel has just told her that he is leaving for "the East," to found a "national centre" for his people, who are now "scattered over the face of the globe":

There was a long silence between them. The world seemed to be getting larger round poor Gwendolen, and she more solitary and helpless in the midst. The thought that he might come back after going to the East, sank before the bewildering vision of these wide-stretching purposes in which she felt herself reduced to a mere speck. There comes a terrible moment to many souls when the great movements of the world, the larger destinies of mankind, which have lain aloof in newspapers and other neglected reading, enter like an earthquake into their own lives—when the slow urgency of growing generations turns into the tread of an invading army or the dire clash of civil war, and grey fathers know nothing to seek for but the corpses of their blooming sons, and girls forget all vanity to make lint and bandages which may serve for the shattered limbs of their betrothed husbands. Then it is as if the Invisible Power that has been the object of lip-worship and lip-resignation became visible, according to the imagery of the Hebrew poet, making the flames his chariot and riding on the wings of the wind, till the mountains smoke and the plains shudder under the rolling, fiery visitation. Often the good cause seems to lie prostrate under the thunder of unrelenting force, the martyrs live reviled, they die and no angel is seen holding forth the crown and the palm branch. Then it is that the sub-

mission of the soul to the Highest is tested, and even in the eyes of frivolity life looks out from the scene of human struggle with the awful face of duty, and a religion shows itself which is something else than a private consolation.

That was the sort of crisis which was at this moment beginning in Gwendolen's small life: she was for the first time feeling the pressure of a vast mysterious movement, for the first time being dislodged from her supremacy in her own world, and getting a sense that her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own was revolving. (DD 803-4)

This remarkable performance resembles less a Homeric epithet than it does a Homeric simile: Gwendolen's situation, held in focus in the first sentences by the figure of the sudden, vertiginous widening of her horizon, is lost for the rest of that long first paragraph, submerged by a flood of visionary comparisons, until it is brought back, in Homeric fashion, by an explicit reminder that comparison is in fact what is intended ("That was the sort of crisis which . . .") and by the return of the spatial metaphor. The all-inclusive and overwhelming aspect of those middle sentences is the point, of course: like Longinus's language in his discussion of Sappho's poem, this language seeks its force in conjuring up the effects of force. And, repeatedly, force is figured by signs of its impingement—"the tread of an invading army," "the shattered limbs" of the young husbands, "the plains shudder[ing] under the . . . fiery visitation," "the good cause" lying "prostrate under the thunder of unrelenting force." But we need to be reminded that what is literally impinging on Gwendolen here is only mediately "the pressure of [the] vast mysterious movement" of world-history; *immediately*, it is Daniel's words. Two pages earlier, when Gwendolen had asked why discovering that he was Jewish need have made such a difference to Daniel, he had been puzzled how to reply: "It has made a great difference to me that I have known it," said Deronda, emphatically; but he could not go on easily—the distance between her ideas and his acted like a difference of native language, making him uncertain what force his words would carry" (DD 801-2).

At this point Daniel was probably wondering whether any degree

of emphasis would be forceful enough to make Gwendolen understand his new sense of things; by the end of the scene he cannot be in doubt about "what force his words would carry." And although Gwendolen may not be readily comparable to "the good cause," she can easily be imagined, at the close of their conversation, "prostrate under the thunder of unrelenting force." When I first read the chapter in which this scene appears, I assumed that it was because the Jewish people were "scattered over the face of the globe" that Eliot had chosen as an epigraph some lines from *The Prelude* honoring "the widely scattered wreck sublime / Of vanished nations" (*DD* 793); that is certainly the case, but it also seems likely that this paragraph about Gwendolen is intended to echo other lines in the epigraph, Wordsworth's allusion to "monuments, erect, / Prostrate, or leaning towards their common rest in earth." Still more pronounced is a reference to a well-known paragraph in *Middlemarch*: "Who shall tell what may be the effect of writing? If it happens to have been cut in stone, though it lie face downmost for ages on a forsaken beach, or 'rest quietly under the drums and tramlings of many conquests,' it may end by letting us into the secret of usurpations and other scandals gossiped about long empires ago:—this world being apparently a huge whispering gallery" (*M* 412).

Alexander Welsh has observed that this is a pastiche of the baroque style of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urne-Burial*, which is the source of the quoted phrase about inscribed stones resting "quietly under the drums and tramlings of many conquests."¹³ If Browne's figures and cadences underwrite the *Middlemarch* passage, then the latter surely echoes in *Deronda*, and one of the effects of that echoing is to bring Gwendolen into touch with those fragmentary inscriptions: to "lie prostrate under the thunder of unrelenting force" is to resemble the stone on which writing is being impressed.

I suggested earlier that the figure of the transgressive woman is one of the places where George Eliot sought to articulate conflicting vocabularies of motivation, and that these women bear the marks of the stress of that effort. Like Armgart, who both produces trills and suffers a collapse into "letters fallen asunder," Gwendolen is brought to the point of collapse—but not of total destruction,

for some slight hope is held out for her recovery. She is, in Armgart's terms, "maimed"; in Longinus's, she was "near to dying" and is now brought "out from under death." We may sense that this is how George Eliot dealt with the problem of her gender, her talent, and her own ambition—homeopathically, by imagining stories in which some "impudent" woman, her surrogate, is stigmatized. But if we ask what exactly Gwendolen is being punished for—her husband's death? the narrowness of her views? that "constant spontaneous pulsing of [her] self-satisfaction"?—the answer is neither clear nor simple. The extravagance with which the idiom of the sublime is deployed in the passage I have been considering, its language of impingement, inscription and scattering, relocates the question of Gwendolen's fate in another register, one in which the adjustment of her "punishment" to her "crime" is replaced by her allegorization as at once the dangerously chancy producer of writing and the target of its unrelenting force. The resonance of that equivocal allegory is the pulse one catches in George Eliot's fiction.

§ 2 Recognizing Casaubon

About halfway through *Middlemarch*, after having described one more manifestation of Mr. Casaubon's preoccupying self-concern, the narrator goes on to add a more general reflection:

Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world, and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self. (*M* 419)

The remark is characteristic of George Eliot in a number of ways, most obviously in its ethical implications: egotism in her writings is almost always rendered as narcissism, the self doubled and figured as both the eye and the blot. But equally typical is the care with which a particular image is introduced and its figurative possibilities developed. The speck blots out the glory of the world: that in itself would have enforced the moral. But the trope is given a second turn: the glory of the world illuminates the margin—the effect is of a sort of halo of light—but only so as to allow us all the better to see the blot. The intelligence at work extending a line of figurative language brings it back, with a nice appropriateness, to the ethical point. This is an instance of the sort of metaphorical control that teacher-critics have always admired in *Middlemarch*, the sign of a humane moral consciousness elaborating patterns of action and imagery with great inventiveness and absolutely no horsing around. Many a telling demonstration—in print and in the classroom, es-

pecially in the classroom—of the extraliterary value of formal analysis has been built around passages like this.

But what about that blot and its margin? Is the figurative language here so firmly anchored in a stable understanding of the moral relations of the self that it can't drift off in the direction of other margins and other blots? I have in mind two specific citations, both associated with Mr. Casaubon early in the novel. At one point George Eliot's heroine, Dorothea, is seen in her library "seated and already deep in one of the pamphlets which had some marginal manuscript of Mr. Casaubon's" (*M* 38); at another, Mr. Casaubon's pedantically accurate memory is compared to "a volume where a *vide supra* could serve instead of repetitions, and not the ordinary long-used blotting-book which only tells of forgotten writing" (*M* 27). It might be objected that the blot we've been considering is clearly not an inkblot, the margin is clearly not the margin of a printed page; that indeed it is only by ruling out those meanings as extraneous to this particular context that we can visualize the image at all, this image of vision, of obstructed vision, of some small physical object coming between one's eyes and the world. Of course: the image, to remain an image, must restrict the range of figurative meaning we allow to the words that compose it. And, given that restraining function, it seems all the more appropriate that the image here is operating to clarify an ethical point about the self, just as it is appropriate that the tag "the moral imagination" has been so common a way of referring to George Eliot's particular powers as a writer.

And yet, between themselves, those words *blot* and *margin* work to encourage just such a misreading of the image they nevertheless define and are defined by: *blot* helps us hear a rustle of paper in *margin*, *margin* makes *blot* sound just a bit inkier. And both, as it happens, are easily drawn out of their immediate context by the cumulative force of a series of less equivocal allusions to handwriting, printing, writing in general, all clustered about the figure of Casaubon. One character refers to him as a "sort of parchment code" (*M* 69), another wisecracks "Somebody put a drop [of his blood] under a magnifying glass, and it was all semi-colons and

parentheses" (M 71), his own single lugubrious attempt at a joke turns on "a word that has dropped out of the text" (M 78), and there are more serious and consequential allusions of the same sort. Earlier in their acquaintance, when Dorothea is most taken with her husband-to-be, Eliot writes: "He was all she had at first imagined him to be: almost everything he had said seemed like a specimen from a mine, or the inscription on the door of a museum which might open on the treasure of past ages" (M 32-33). Later, in Rome, after the first quarrel of their marriage, Dorothea accompanies him to the Vatican, walking with him "through the stony avenue of inscriptions" and leaving him at the entrance to the library (M 202). Back in England, in their own library, after another quarrel, Mr. Casaubon tries to resume work, but "his hand trembled so much that the words seemed to be written in an unknown character" (M 282-83).

When critics have directed attention to such passages it has usually been either to comment on the general appropriateness of these images to Mr. Casaubon—who is, after all, a scholar—on or on the particular finesse with which one image or another is adjusted to the unfolding drama of the Casaubons' marriage. An exception is Hillis Miller, who, citing a pair of similar passages, both about Dorothea's wildly mistaken first impressions of her husband, has stressed the nondramatic value of these allusions: Casaubon, he notes, "is a text, a collection of signs which Dorothea misreads, according to that universal propensity for misinterpretation which infects all the characters in *Middlemarch*."¹ Miller is right about Casaubon, but the point he would make is still more inclusive: he is arguing for a reading of the novel that would see every character as simultaneously an interpreter (the word is a recurrent one in *Middlemarch*) and as a text available for the interpretations (plural, always partial, and often in conflict) of others. It is with reference to Lydgate, he could have pointed out, and not to Casaubon, that George Eliot writes that a man may "be known merely as a cluster of signs for his neighbors' false suppositions" (M 142).

I find Miller's argument persuasive, and the reading of the novel he sketches a bold and attractive one: he takes *Middlemarch* to be

simultaneously affirming the values of Victorian humanism that it has been traditionally held to affirm—for example, a belief in the consistence of the self as a moral agent—and systematically undercutting those values, offering in place of an ethically stable notion of the self the somewhat less reassuring figure of a focus of semiotic energy, receiving and interpreting signs, itself a "cluster of signs" more or less legible. Miller's movement toward this poised, deconstructive formulation, however, is condensed and rapid, and may still leave one wondering how those two notions of the self are held in suspension in the novel, and what the commerce is between them. In the pages that follow I propose to take up that question by dwelling on the figure of Casaubon, and by asking what it might mean, if all the characters in *Middlemarch* may be thought of as texts or as clusters of signs, for the signs of textuality to cluster so thickly around one particular proper name. Or, to put it another way, why is Mr. Casaubon made to seem not merely an especially sterile and egotistical person, but at moments like a quasi-allegorical figure, the personification of the dead letter, the written word? Personifications exist somewhere in the middle ground between realistically represented persons and configurations of signs: that would seem to be ground worth going over. But I want to approach it obliquely, by first considering some passages where it is not Casaubon, but George Eliot herself—not the blot but the eye—around whom are clustered the signs of egotism and of writing.

Reading through Eliot's early letters one comes across—not on every page, but often enough to catch one's attention—a particular kind of apology. In one, for example, written when she was nineteen, she concludes with these lines:

I have written at random and have not said all I wanted to say. I hope the frequent use of the personal pronoun will not lead you to think that I suppose it to confer any weight on what I have said. I used it to prevent circumlocution and waste of time. I am ashamed to send a letter like this as if I thought more highly of myself than I ought to think, which is alas! too true. (L 1.23-24).

And then, beneath her signature, as a second thought, a postscript: