

Note: this copy has been made from a PDF version of the 2005 Wiley Blackwell edition. The footnotes in that edition have been transposed here from end-of-book to end of chapter and the page-numbers have been omitted. Minor corrections have been made to the original where necessary.

Chapter 8: George Eliot

You can tell that George Eliot is a liberal by the shape of her sentences. Whereas Dickens's prose is declamatory and impressionistic, Eliot's sentences unroll like undulating hills, full of wry asides and scrupulously qualifying sub-clauses. There is an equipoise and authority about her prose style which is very far from the panache and hyperbole of a Dickens. Eliot's prose makes the kind of strenuous intellectual demands on the reader that Dickens's never does, yet it is also full of playful affection and good-humoured irony. Her writing is mellow yet incisive, marked by a well-tempered wisdom and a genially tolerant wit. If she suffers or rejoices along with her characters, she can also stand at a judicious distance from them and deliver dispassionate judgements on their behaviour. This is not an author who is likely to be impulsive or one-sided.

Given her supple, coolly rational prose style, we are not surprised to find that she rejects absolute moral judgements of the kind that Dickens goes in for. Nobody in Eliot's fiction is either transcendently good or wicked beyond redemption. The besetting sin of her characters is egoism, which is hardly the most heinous of offences. The worst that can happen to you in Eliot's world is not spontaneous combustion or being battered to death by your vicious burglar of a lover, but 'never to be liberated from a small shivering hungry self', as she remarks of Edward Casaubon in *Middlemarch*. Besides, egoism is a fault which can be repaired. What can repair it is the imagination, which allows us to rise above our own interests and feel our way sympathetically into the lives of others. And the supreme form of this imaginative sympathy is known as the novel.

The novelist, in other words, is now becoming a kind of moralist, in a tradition which will pass to Henry James and D. H. Lawrence. It is not just that Eliot shares her earnest moral sentiments with the reader. It is also that the very act of imagination involves projecting oneself beyond one's own ego into the lives of others. The artistic imagination is thus the paradigm of human compassion. The novel is a model of morality because it can feel its way sensitively into a whole galaxy of human lives, showing us how each of these men and women experiences the world from a different angle. If traditional morality works by universal principles, the novelist-as-moralist can go one further by bringing these principles to bear on uniquely particular situations, which for Eliot is the only true basis for moral judgement.

Besides, the novelist can penetrate to inward facts as well as recording outer ones, shifting from states of affairs to states of mind, and tracing the delicate interactions between them. The novels are both inside and outside the life they document, rather as Eliot herself as a writer was both inside and outside the rural community. If she writes affectionately of this provincial form of life, the fact that she *writes* about it already places her outside it. She knows the Poysers, Tullivers and Dodsons from the inside, but is now distant enough from their doings to pass some rather condescending judgements on them. We need to get at a distance from situations in order to judge them; but true judgement also involves delving behind the external appearances of other people, or the brute facts of the matter, to grasp something of their inner make-up. There must be some mid-point between ardent empathy and Olympian detachment – some vantage-point which is neither warped by prejudice nor tainted by indifference.

It is this double-focusing of 'inner' and 'outer' which the novel form is supremely well placed to accomplish. Casaubon in *Middlemarch* is a bloodless old pedant who speaks like a legal treatise and dies of a 'fatty degeneration of the heart', a phrase almost calculated to inspire the reader to place a large asterisk in the margin and write 'symbol' beside it. But just as we are about to write him off, the novelist steps in to remind us that Casaubon, too, has a palpitating inward life which should win our respect. This is a typically liberal gesture, and one very far from the world of a Dickens. Even egoists must be regarded non-egoistically, and tolerance shown even to the intolerant. Liberalism and the realist novel are spiritual twins. Arthur Donnithorne of *Adam Bede* may be a sexual predator, but he is no Alec D'Urberville; so to forestall the reader's too-easy response, the novel takes pains to insist that he has a loving nature.

In this sense, knowledge, imagination, feeling and morality go together, and the name of this unity is art. The more you understand the truth of another's situation, the more you can grasp how the world seems from their standpoint; and the more you do this, the less likely you are to pass external, dogmatic judgements on them. For Eliot, this fellow-feeling is the very essence of morality. Novels can put things in context, and thus temper our impulse to judge them too absolutely. They can reveal buried histories, or hidden patterns of force and causality,

which make the apparently vicious or selfish actions of men and women more intelligible. The role of art, Eliot writes in her essay 'The Natural History of German Life', is to deepen human sympathies, 'amplifying our experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot'. Writing and reading, then, are implicitly political acts, breeding social solidarity. Fiction stirs men and women into 'that attention to what is apart from themselves... which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment'. The novel, in other words, is an antidote to egoism – not just in what it says but in what it does, in its form as much as its content. Another Victorian antidote to egoism is work, which in Adam Bede's opinion gives you a grip on things outside your own petty lot. In the case of a professional writer like Eliot, these two remedies come to much the same thing.

The idea that lack of sympathy springs from lack of knowledge – that to understand all is to forgive all – is a typically liberal mistake. It is one which Eliot shares with her fellow-novelist Elizabeth Gaskell. It is not the fact that we do not understand anti-Semitism which impels us to condemn it. The sadist has a quick sense of what his victim is feeling, which is exactly what makes the infliction of pain so pleasurable to him. You can feel what a beggar is feeling without being in the least moved to toss her a coin. Immorality is not just lack of imagination. Eliot does not really see, as the later Dickens does, that sympathy is not enough because human relationships may be distorted by social institutions. It is a matter of structures, not just of sympathies; and this is no doubt easier to see in the anonymous city than it is in what Raymond Williams has called the 'knowable community' of the country village. [1] It takes more than personal sympathy or the compassionate imagination to break down the social barriers between men and women, bosses and workers, or masters and servants. In this sense, ironically, it is the less realist Dickens who takes the more soberly realistic view. Eliot's doctrine rests on a rather optimistic view of humanity, one which is typical of her liberal humanism. It is at odds with the Romantic view that knowledge and feeling are polar opposites, as well as with the Victorian suspicion that scientific knowledge (the theory of evolution, for example) was eroding moral values altogether.

This is not the view of Adam Bede, who believes that 'feeling is a kind of knowledge'. Nor is it the opinion of his author, who was one of the most distinguished intellectuals of her day, a woman who was already a celebrated public figure before she came to pen her first line of fiction. Eliot was formidably well-versed in art, music, history, languages, theology, psychology, sociology and the natural sciences; and one of the momentous achievements of her art was to convert this body of knowledge into the stuff of imaginative creation. By the alchemy of her prose, scientific learning is transmuted into image, feeling, narrative, imaginative scenario. She is able, in a fine phrase of Shelley's, to imagine what we know.

Victorian England was awash with new ideas which had yet to be 'naturalized', absorbed into the bloodstream of the culture to become a kind of spontaneous wisdom. Knowledge was rapidly outstripping customary habits of feeling. Ideas were changing, but patterns of symbolization and emotional response were still caught in a previous age. Alarming new doctrines like those of Darwin were still to be fully assimilated into the sensibility of the age. You might acknowledge in an abstract sort of way that the universe was millions of years older than you had imagined, but you could not really be said to believe this until it had reorganized your body – your perceptions, habits of feeling and emotional reflexes – as well as your mind. A rationalist, increasingly secular society was in need of a new mythology, and it was Eliot's fiction above all which accomplished this task for her anxious contemporaries.

Modern society, in her view, should not simply leave myth behind (Eliot believes that very little should be left behind), but should raise this 'primitive philosophy', as she called it, to a 'higher' stage where it would be compatible with reason. Her name for this, taken from Continental thought, was the Religion of Humanity, a rationalist equivalent of religious belief. The scientific evidence which was shaking religious faith had to involve more than rejection and refutation; it had to give birth to its own affirmative brand of humanism, not least if science and atheism were not to prove socially subversive. New forms of knowledge had to transform feelings and values, not exist in perpetual conflict with them. Fact and feeling, the head and the heart, blend in the texture of Eliot's level-headed yet lively prose style, as well as in the subject-matter of her novels. She sees her own art as akin to scientific inquiry rather than the enemy of it. The more we investigate Nature, the more we come to revere its unfathomable mysteries, so that science lends support to a sense of religious awe rather than undermining it.

In general, the English novel is not remarkable for ideas. It has little to compare to a Robert Musil or Thomas Mann. Instead, a fair amount of English fiction from Jonathan Swift to Kingsley Amis is devoted to satirizing the intellect, showing how high-minded notions are likely to get bogged down in the messy contingencies of everyday life. By and large, the English novel is sceptical, earth-bound and empirical, preferring to be guided by good sense rather than by Goethe. Conrad, Joyce and Beckett take an interest in ideas, but they are not English. Henry James

was commended by his compatriot T. S. Eliot for having a mind so fine that no idea could violate it. Though the French or Germans might regard this as a peculiarly backhanded compliment, Anglo-Saxons would not. Both James and Eliot were American converts to English culture who demonstrated their kosher Englishness by their scepticism of the intellect. The supposedly cerebral T. S. Eliot can find almost no role for the intellect in art. England is the home not of ideas but of customs and traditions – which means, roughly speaking, ideas which were once controversial, but which now feel so natural that we no longer need to argue about them. They seem more like instincts than rationally contestable theories. Radical republicans ask whether the royalty is a reasonable institution, whereas conservatives just know in their hearts that Britain could never survive without a monarch. It was another foreign blow-in trying to outdo the English at their own game, the Irishman Edmund Burke, who played a major role in bequeathing this notion of tradition to the nineteenth century.

George Eliot, exceptionally, is both a theorist and a traditionalist. She has a passionate engagement with ideas, but she is just as dedicated to the value of custom, feeling and habitual affections. Another way of putting the point is to say that she is a woman intellectual, for whom thinking and feeling are not as damagingly divorced from each other as they are for some male varieties of the species. Moral truths and scientific doctrines can thus be translated into each another. If tradition means that the dead are somehow borne along with the living, then Eliot can find evidence for this in the latest evolutionary hypotheses. If tradition insists that men and women conform to their environments, Eliot will use the new scientific theories to show that such adaptation is the surest way for the species to flourish. *Silas Marner* may be a charming folk legend, but it is also full of complex reflections on chance, providence, causality and the nature of historical evidence. Silas himself moves from religious faith to the cloistered egoism of a miserly existence, and from there to what Eliot called the ‘truth of feeling’, as he discovers the love of little Eppie and through her a whole human fellowship. If this is the simplest of moral fables, it is also an allegory of the historical progression from religious superstition to modern-day materialism, and from there to the Religion of Humanity of the future.

John Goode has spoken of *Adam Bede* as ‘the first major exercise in programmatic literary realism in English literature’, and the key word here is ‘programmatic’. [2] It is with Eliot that realism in the English novel becomes theoretically self-conscious, not least in the famous chapter of *Adam Bede* ‘In Which the Story Pauses a Little’. (This is ironic, since holding up your narrative to insert a brief treatise on realism is not exactly realist.) Realism for Eliot is the doctrine that truth and beauty are to be attained only ‘by a humble and faithful study of nature’ – and the word ‘faithful’ here means both accurate and loyal. It is a moral term as well as a factual one: you can only depict the world truthfully if you also portray it lovingly. As for ‘humble’, only by sympathetic self-forgetfulness can you lay yourself open to the world as it is. In this sense, the sheer act of writing involves the author herself in the kind of compassionate surrender of selfhood which so many of her characters strive for as well. The process of attaining knowledge is itself a moral act. Sympathy lays bare things as they are. Without imagination, you cannot see the world aright.

But the act of knowledge is also a political one, in two different senses. First, because you cannot be sure in advance what is worth knowing, which means that the lowliest manifestations of life are as worthy of attention as the highest. Indeed, if reality is a complex web of interconnections, the humblest and the highest are intimately related. The theory of evolution has blurred the distinction between man and mollusc. So there is something inherently democratic and liberal-minded about literary realism. It involves a loving fidelity to the value of the ordinary – to what Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* calls the ‘sweet monotony’ of everyday life, and what one of her less appreciative Victorian reviewers called ‘the people... with all their coarseness, ignorance, and prejudice – poor, paltry, stupid, wretched, well-nigh despicable’. [3] Both the liberal and the scientist in Eliot trust to the power of the prosaic. Her writing is a powerful blow on behalf of those whose lives have been thought too humdrum and obscure for epic or tragedy. Whereas the truth is that this obscurity, not least when it comes to the lot of women, is exactly what makes them fit subjects for tragedy. The fact that Eliot has to break off her narrative to engage in some special pleading on this subject indicates the contentiousness of the case, as does the fact that she promotes the literary rights of people like the Poysers with more than a touch of patronage. But it is clear, despite the apologetic ironies, that the middle-class writer, with his or her ardent preoccupation with everyday life, is now in supreme command of the literary scene.

Realism of both the literary and the moral kind demands that you be selflessly open to things as they are, not as you would wish them to be; and this, too, also carries a political implication. It is a rebuke to abstract theory and idle utopianism. You must accept people as they are, in all their quirks and mediocrities. This is both generous-spirited and wryly pessimistic, since one reason why you should accept people as they are is that it is a fruitless task to try to change them. The point is to interpret the world rather than to change it – or at least change it substantially. Eliot speaks of ‘quiet perceptions... undiseased by hypothesis’, an obvious smack at radical thought.

Like many an Anglo-Saxon intellectual, she is deeply suspicious of intellectuals. The phrase 'liberal intellectual' borders on the oxymoronic, since liberals are wary of doctrinal systems. For Eliot, those who 'pant after the ideal' are in one sense admirable; but they also risk a withering of human sympathies, even if, ironically, the ideal in question is one of love and compassion. Theories and ideals are necessary to raise us above an unreflective, animal-like routine, but in doing so they threaten to restrict the rich inclusiveness of life. There is a problem, then, in being a realist and a reformer at the same time: you need to take the world as you find it, but an excess of such tolerance may mean abandoning your vision of progress.

The novelist, then, is a kind of social scientist, exploring through the lens of her fiction the microscopic processes by which character and circumstance interact. The realist novel is a kind of imaginative sociology – one which can forage beneath external facts to lay bare the inner recesses of human consciousness. It is thus a diagnostic kind of social knowledge, rather than a merely descriptive one. As such, it fulfilled a vital function. As industrial-capitalist society ran its course, there were now whole reaches of social experience which seemed dangerously opaque to middle-class politicians and intellectuals – the life of small rural communities, for example, or of the urban working classes. Eliot speaks in her essay on German life of how little the 'natural history' of the working classes has been studied, as though they were some rare species of racoon. Since knowledge is power, the Victorians needed an account of these largely unmapped territories from the inside; and the realist novel could provide it more effectively than a whole army of earnest-minded researchers.

Sociology might reveal the general laws by which human societies evolved; but the novel, uniquely, was able to do this *and* show how these laws were fleshed out in human passion, psychology, lived experience. The novel could shift its focus back and forth from part to whole, which meant that it could yield something more than the merely fragmentary, but also something more than a purely abstract or theoretical picture of the whole. Few people were more strategically placed to bring this off than a female intellectual novelist of modest rural origins. If the intellectual is typically in pursuit of the whole picture, the woman is perhaps more likely to be responsive to the claims of feeling and local experience. If the intellectual is typically ambitious and wide-ranging, one from a modest rural background is likely to recognize the need for such high-flying notions to stay rooted in the habits of feeling of ordinary people. And if a novelist needs to be reasonably well-educated, with a few mildly original ideas about the world, he or she also needs a quick sense of the concrete and particular.

The nineteenth-century novel, needless to say, was more than a convenient instrument of middleclass knowledge. It was not just a set of coded despatches from darkest England, informing the ruling class of what the natives were getting up to. It could also challenge the very basis of that social order.

There is much of this rebellious impulse in Eliot's own fiction, but it is tempered by a zealous belief in tradition and continuity. It is not hard to see in this conflict something of the running battle between George Eliot the enlightened middle-class metropolitan liberal, and the provincial farm bailiff's daughter Marian Evans (her real name), who preserved a lifelong commitment to the rural, conservative, lower-middle-class community from which she sprang. It is the dilemma of the intellectual who is not far removed in origin from the common people. Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence were both to grapple with it later.

In *Adam Bede*, for example, Eliot admires working-class Methodism as a cultural phenomenon, one which spiritualizes the common life and binds the self to a communal tradition. Yet the liberal intellectual in her regards most Methodist belief as crass superstition. Popular culture is commended more for its form than its content. The question, then, is how the life of the free spirit is to be reconciled with the duties and affections of everyday existence. Or, to put it another way, how the earlier phase of George Eliot's life is to be reconciled with her later career. Can the two somehow be combined, so that 'educated' consciousness can find a root in a more commonplace, collective existence without losing its largeness of mind? And can the traditional life of the countryside shed its bigotry and benightedness while preserving what is precious about itself?

The answer of *Adam Bede* to this question is largely affirmative. Impressively, the novel manages to combine complex realism with old-world rural charm. Though its countryside is a thoroughly capitalist set-up, it still has a festive, semi-feudal aura about it, not least in the village games, dance and birthday party. There is a carefully stratified class structure, but the various social classes are more harmonious than in, say, *Middlemarch*, where the gentry and aristocracy tend not to hobnob with middle-class bankers and manufacturers, nor they with small tenants and artisans. All this, however, also helps to conceal a rather more grim social reality: Donnithorne the squire is a social exploiter; his son Arthur is a sexual one, with alarmingly reformist ideas about efficiency and land enclosure; and the Poyzers belong to an economically precarious tenant class. In a magnificent scene late in the book, Mrs Poyser turns out to be a flaming class rebel, wrathfully driving the landlord off her property. This is scarcely the rural England of jocund ploughmen, spicy nut-brown ale, and idyllic shepherds making bashful

love under the hawthorn bushes, to quote Eliot's own sardonic words in the journal she edited, the *Westminster Review*.

Adam Bede is backdated to the end of the eighteenth century, with Britain at war with revolutionary France and mill-hands labouring not far from rural Hayslope in the factories of Stoniton. Yet its static, intensely visual, Dutch-painting style of presentation helps to dehistoricize it. This is the age of the Methodist challenge to the church establishment, as we see with Seth Bede and Dinah Morris; yet this, the French wars and industrial labour touch only lightly on the rural community. The rural order is resilient enough to withstand historical change, rather as the community of Middlemarch is narrow-minded enough to do so. Eliot is interested among other things in *Adam Bede* in demonstrating certain supposed laws of nature and society, and stripping away a fair degree of history helps with this investigation in the same way that stripping off someone's clothes helps in discovering whether their blood is circulating efficiently.

Adam himself is an idealized figure, which is not to say an uncriticized one. He embodies what his author regards as traditional lower-middle-class rural values: honesty, hard work, practicality, social deference, moral integrity, loyalty to his roots, a pragmatic approach to life, a scepticism of fancy theories and utopian ideas. Interwoven with these virtues are a number of equally traditional rural vices: intolerance, inflexibility, moral self-righteousness, a reluctance to adapt, develop or forgive. Adam is a workaholic who enjoys drinking whey more than beer, breaks out into hymn-singing at embarrassingly unpredictable moments, and speaks like a second-rate anthology of thoughts-for-the-day. He is full of moral tags and sententious sayings, and though the novel takes the measure of his defects, it does not always seem to appreciate quite what a prig he is. Eliot ensures that Adam is finally humanized by his suffering, forced to be less stiff-necked and unbending; but she also ensures that this ambitious artisan ends up with a timber yard and marries the right Poyser niece (Dinah) rather than the wrong one (Hetty Sorrel). As John Goode puts it, 'What Adam really has to learn is not to marry beneath him'. [4] He is a shining example of the Victorian gospel of self-help and robust individual enterprise. In this novel, however, such individualism is compatible with social integration, as it also is in *Silas Marner*. This will not be the case in *The Mill on the Floss*.

As a cross between simple craftsman and local sage, Adam is a kind of synthesis of Nature and culture. In him, the bonds and obligations of culture have become a kind of second nature. Culture raises natural instincts to a higher level, but it must remain rooted in them if it is to flourish. Adam is thus both idealized and ordinary, as the fact that he is a foreman – one of the people, but set in authority above them – indicates. Dinah Morris, similarly, is a working woman who is raised above the commonplace by her religious fervour. She says things like 'I trust you feel rested and strengthened again to bear the burthen and heat of the day', not quite the kind of language one might hear after several pints of cider in the local inn. Both Adam and Dinah maintain a balance between Nature and culture, unlike Arthur Donnithorne and Hetty Sorrel. Arthur is culturally divorced from Nature as a gentleman, but he is also a creature of his sexual instincts, so that he combines culture and Nature in all the wrong ways. Hetty is pure natural instinct – a kind of precultural, even prehuman creature who is seen by the novel as an animal, insect, flower or fruit. Her very surname suggests a horse or a plant.

Egoism for Eliot is our natural condition. 'We are all of us born in moral stupidity,' she comments in *Middlemarch*, 'taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves'. It is the rationalist's version of original sin. 'Decentring' the self, acknowledging that we are one among many and that the world is indifferent to us all, is the laborious achievement of culture, a wisdom to be painfully acquired. Hetty fails to make this transition from Nature to culture, egoism to altruism, the Imaginary to the Symbolic. She is stuck at a lowly point on the evolutionary scale, and is treated before her tragic catastrophe with a mixture of patronage and genial malice. If Dinah has too many morals, Hetty has too few. One would hesitate a long time before marrying either of them.

Hetty is Nature not as pastoral, but as destructive and Darwinian. She signifies pure natural appetite or desire, and her real crime is to disrupt the social bond between Adam and Arthur, or master and man. Desire is natural in the sense that it is no respecter of social rank. Adam and Arthur, too, are reduced by their quarrel over this young woman to pure animal instinct, as they fight over their courtship of her. Human culture was wrested out of Nature by a lengthy, strenuous struggle, but it can always slide back again. Appetite is the enemy of civility. Once this female force of Nature has been sent packing, however, the bonds between master and man can be gradually reknit. As a convicted criminal, Hetty is, so to speak, transported out of the novel, leaving Hayslope little the worse in the long run. Though the tragic events of the book revolve on her, it is their implications for others which concern the novel most, so that she is both centred and sidelined.

In one sense, Hetty is elevated above the ordinary by her downfall. It is a courageous move on the novel's part to turn this frivolous young narcissist into a tragic protagonist. This is Eliot's democratic realism in action. Yet Hetty is more an object of our sympathy than a fellow subject, and we are not allowed access to her inner life in

the way we are to Maggie Tulliver's. If this novel can restore social equilibrium rather more smoothly than *The Mill on the Floss*, it is partly because Hetty – the character who transgresses, refuses to adapt and resists being incorporated – is treated so superiorly and externally. What in Maggie Tulliver will take the form of a disruptive quest for personal self-fulfilment is here little more than the errings of sexual appetite.

Natural instinct acknowledges only the whims of the present, whereas moral culture is what binds you to tradition. It is culture which preserves the unity of the self by weaving your past, present and future into a coherent narrative, so that your present actions can be informed by a rich heritage of loyalties and affections. This is not some chuckleheaded conservatism: as a liberal, Eliot believes devoutly in what she calls in *Middlemarch* 'the growing good of the world', in the possibilities of progress and enlightenment. It is just that such progress must build on the past without breaking with it, which is how Eliot sees evolution in general as taking place. The process of human development, she writes in her essay on German life, must reach 'that perfect ripeness of the seed which carries with it a life independent of the root'. You must rise above your historical inheritance, if you are not to be the prisoner of it; but you must do so by drawing on the resources of that tradition, and thus in a way which keeps faith with it. 'I desire no future that will break with the ties of the past', cries Maggie Tulliver. Origins in Dickens are often obscure, while in Charlotte Brontë's fiction you are conveniently set free of kinship so as to make your own way in the world. For Eliot, by contrast, acknowledging where you come from, and remaining loyal to it, is the only sure way of moving beyond it.

The political upshot of this is reform rather than revolution. Indeed, Franco Moretti, as we have seen earlier, argues that the nineteenth-century realist novel, with its trust in tradition, continuity and gradual evolution, is an implicit riposte to the French Revolution. [5] If this sounds a touch fanciful, it is worth noting that Eliot herself writes in *Middlemarch* of the French Revolution as a warning to the English against unmitigated zeal. She began writing *Adam Bede* with the French revolution of 1848 still fresh in her memory, and there is a pointed contrast between the novel's gradualist, 'organic' view of human society and that disruptive political event. This may well be one reason why Eliot chose a rural setting, in which social relations seem more settled and natural than they did when viewed from the Parisian barricades.

Without an anchorage in tradition, the self is perilously wayward and anarchic. The same is true if you press the doctrine of sympathy too far, since then you simply melt into accord with every mind you encounter, with no stable centre of selfhood of your own. Will Ladislaw of *Middlemarch* is an instance of this emotional dilettantism to begin with, before he buckles down to higher things. It is a version of what John Keats calls 'negative capability'. Sympathy enriches the self, but it is also in danger of diffusing it. In any case, the impulse to give the self away is always a suspect one in Eliot's fiction. It is a familiar trap for women, who have been conned too often into believing that true freedom lies in servitude. But it is also suspect because there is a kind of altruism which is really just a devious form of egoism, as in Arthur Donnithorne's desire to be thought well of by his tenants, or the cult of martyrdom to which both Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke are dangerously attracted. Dramatically relinquishing the self may just be a perverse form of self-affirmation. There can be, as Ladislaw observes to Dorothea, a 'fanaticism of sympathy'.

On the other hand, too deep a root in a traditional way of life stunts your individuality, stifles your freedom, frustrates your legitimate ambitions and narrows your largeness of mind. All this is most obviously true of women, who must struggle for education and independence far more vigorously than men. But there is a fine line between being too deeply and too shallowly rooted – between having too much of a self and having too little of one. You can be too rigid like Adam, or too easy-going like the liberal-minded Mr Irwine. Adam can be softened up by the events of the novel with no detriment to his sturdy, oak-like nature, but the same cannot be said of Tom Tulliver, Maggie's stiff-necked brother in *The Mill on the Floss*. What could still be just about contained within the framework of comedy and pastoral in *Adam Bede* threatens in the Mill to erupt into full-blown tragedy.

The pharisaical Tom is unrelenting almost to the end, and Maggie herself is no simpering Hetty Sorrel but a formidably complex figure. If Tom and the lower-middle-class Dodsons are premodern characters, living by unreflective custom, Maggie is a prototypically modern protagonist, rebellious, self-questioning, restless with restriction, and in passionate pursuit of her own fulfilment. The fact that she is a woman in a patriarchal rural community makes this emancipation all the more fraught. Tom and the Dodsons are admired rather in the way that *Adam Bede* is: they practise the stout petty-bourgeois virtues of thrift, honesty, loyalty, industriousness and obligations to kinsfolk. But they could never have written the novel, as one suspects Maggie could have done.

The crisis of the narrative turns on Maggie's need to choose between her fidelity to the rural society of St Oggs and her love for Stephen Guest. This is not a choice between duty and affection, head and heart, but between two kinds of affection. To opt for Stephen would be to allow the impulse of the moment to triumph over the claims of history, kinship and community. The line between self-fulfilment and self-indulgence is perilously thin. It is a

question of communal loyalty versus selfish individualism. It is also a question of 'Nature' – a delicious yielding to desire, which dissolves the self to a kind of dreamy nothingness – versus the claims of culture, which in this context means the claims of others. (Though an excess of culture can also lead to selfishness, as with the pampered Rosamond Vincy of *Middlemarch*.) Culture, morality and altruism are aspects of a single reality.

Sympathy with others fulfils the self, but it may also mean abandoning one's own unique path to selfhood. This, in the view of emancipated liberals like Stephen Guest, is a profoundly unnatural act. From one viewpoint, Maggie is faced with a Hobson's choice between natural selfishness and unnatural self-sacrifice. For the liberal Guest, self-realization is an absolute imperative; and Eliot is close enough to this ethic herself to appreciate its force. For her, however, yielding to 'natural' desire means giving way not only to egoism but to a kind of determinism. As Maggie drifts down the river with Stephen, she disowns her own moral agency, luxuriantly helpless to shape her own destiny. Once again, self-surrender can be a subtle form of self-pleasure. Throughout the novel, Maggie has a hunger for the seductions of oblivion – which is to say with Freud that, like the rest of us but rather more so than some, she is in the grip of the death drive. Her austere cult of self-renunciation is one instance of the perversity by which the self rejoices in its own dissolution.

It would be ironic for Maggie to make a liberal-individualist option for Stephen, since by whisking her off down the river he is depriving her of what the liberal cherishes above all: the right to choose for oneself. Maggie finally exercises that supremely individual choice – but what she chooses, ironically, is communal responsibility rather than individual happiness. If this is one irony, another is that the rural community to which she turns back to is a prejudiced, parochial backwater which gives her no credit for giving up the man she loves. In fact, it is not difficult to read Maggie's decision and its aftermath as splendidly perverse. In the end, she opts for death with a man who does not love her (her brother Tom) rather than life with a man who does.

In doing so, she sacrifices herself for her mulish bully of a brother, as well as for a neighbourhood which is not worth her loyalty. It is not hard to see this as yet another example of what Philip Wakem scathingly calls 'a narrow self-delusive fanaticism'. To stay faithful to the age-old sentiments of rural life is to opt for a stifling sectarianism. There may well be value in remaining faithful to one's past; but if this means keeping faith with a man as carping and self-righteous as Tom, it scarcely seems much of a moral achievement. Is maintaining a continuity of selfhood really so precious in itself, regardless of what it involves you in? Is Maggie just the self-deluded victim of a joyless Protestant morality for which the key to life is a 'sad patient loving strength'? Does she suspect in good puritanical fashion that if you are not in agony then you must have gone astray? The novel allows for this harsh reading, at the same time as it counters it. For the fact is that if it kills off Maggie in a surge of guilt and expiation, it kills off Tom as well. The extraordinary ending of *The Mill on the Floss* allows Maggie to be reunited with her brother, and with the way of life he symbolizes, but to obliterate him at the same time. It is as though the full force of the novel's pent-up desire is unleashed, like the river Floss itself, threatening to sweep away the very world for which this dutiful young woman has laid down her personal happiness. And this is a sweet sort of vengeance, even if it means that Maggie herself will not be around to savour it. In the book's apocalyptic finale, Maggie is granted her Romantic self-fulfilment, along with her submission to the local pieties – but only in a way which rounds violently upon the whole stiff-necked social order which has done her down. If she is finally granted the pleasures of self-annihilation, it is in the form of a triumphant self-affirmation.

In a sense, then, Maggie achieves what Philip Wakem has accused her of seeking: 'a mode of renunciation that will be an escape from pain'. Like the water of the Floss itself, the event both generates and destroys. The judgement of society is both endorsed and rejected, just as Tom is both embraced and wiped out. Formally speaking, the conclusion of the novel reveals a similar blend of acceptance and refusal. If it strives to preserve realism, it also threatens to burst beyond it into a realm of fantasy and wish-fulfilment. Like Maggie, it is regressive and rebellious at the same time.

The novel is determined to grant its heroine her victory, even if it has to go to the death for it. This includes a triumph over Tom, who in his dying moments acknowledges his sister's moral superiority. Maggie thus crushes him and wins him over at the same time, establishing an equality with her brother which is also a kind of power. Most of Eliot's novels only just manage to fend off tragedy, and the ending of this one can be read as both tragic and anti-tragic. Or perhaps it is an example of the ambiguity of all authentic tragedy, in which the very act of submitting to your destiny reveals a courage which transcends it. There is a parallel, perhaps, with the conclusion of *Jane Eyre*, which allows Jane both deference and revenge, equality and dominion, expiation and redemption. It is as if she had died locked in an embrace with Rochester in his burning house. In this society, simple human recognition between a man and a woman seems to demand a flood, an inferno or, as with Catherine and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, death and destruction. Much the same, as we shall see, can be said of Jude Fawley and Sue

Bridehead in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. In all of these cases, equality between men and women touches on something which presses against the confines of literary realism, and cannot really be articulated within them.

It may be that Maggie dies racked with false consciousness, immolating herself for a red-necked rural world which is worth no such renunciation. Like its heroine, *The Mill on the Floss* is homesick for a rural ideal which it recognizes scarcely exists. The true idyll is childhood, not the English countryside. The actual rural community is one of struggling tenant farmers and a bull-headed resistance to change. This is not a fable of the death of the old organic society at the hands of sharp commercial practitioners like Guest and Wakem. It is true that small-scale rural capital like old Tulliver's mill is now thoroughly ensnared with urban banking and agricultural industry, a collusion which is helping to bring it low. But there is nothing particularly new about the Guests and the Wakems, and the rural community's own defects play a vital role in its collapse.

If there are criticisms to be aimed at St Oggs and Dorlcote Mill, however, there is not much to be said for the world of urban capitalism either. It is not just a question of Maggie being rescued from her troglodytic relatives by town-bred liberals who respect the autonomy of the individual. Stephen's liberalism is real and admirable; but it is also a spiritual version of the rather less admirable individualism of his capitalist father. Rootless freedom is no answer to Tulliver intransigence. Maggie's refusal to break with her community must be set against the backdrop of a self-seeking Victorian society for which human relationships should not stand in the way of your self-advancement. Her fear of 'natural appetite' is not just a shyness of sexuality; it is also a repudiation of the so-called enlightened individualism which was the ruling orthodoxy of George Eliot's England. It is just that it is hard to know where legitimate desire ends and self-seeking appetite begins. In this respect, Maggie may well have miscalculated.

In this sense, Eliot's revisiting of her rural past is not a retreat from her contemporary world, but a way of engaging with it more deeply. In places like Hayslope and the region around Dorlcote Mill, one can find a 'corporate' way of life which may well be claustrophobic, but which at least has some regard for what contemporary capitalism scorns: custom, kinship, locality, tradition, work as a value in itself rather than a means of self-promotion. Yet there is an historical irony here. Industrial-capitalist society in Eliot's time was itself in transit from an early unbridled individualism to a more corporate, regulated version of itself. We have seen something of this transition in the later Dickens. Affirmations of individual freedom were now yielding ground to so-called scientific sociology, which exhorted men and women to promote the good of the whole over their own petty appetites.

The curbing of self-interest had always been necessary for human loyalties and affections; but it was now increasingly in demand from the industrial-capitalist system itself. Only in this way could class conflict be effectively quelled, and the common people be persuaded to identify their own interests with those of their masters. Eliot's career as a novelist falls largely in the period between the strife-ridden 1840s and the return of social unrest in the 1870s. It is a time of relative economic prosperity, when the political emphasis falls on unity, class harmony, corporate existence, the need to assimilate individuals into the social whole. One can trace the effects of this not only in Eliot's novels, but in the way in which she conceives of the novel form itself.

Individualism is no longer enough; instead, in an increasingly interdependent social order, one must come to think in more collective terms. A late work by Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, speaks of the need for 'corporate existence' and 'the pride which identifies us with a great historic body'. It is, she writes, 'a humanising, elevating habit of mind, inspiring sacrifices of individual comfort, gain, or other selfish ambition, for the sake of that ideal whole'. Such corporate existence is endangered by mixing too much with foreigners: Eliot warns us of the dangers involved in undergoing 'a premature fusion with immigrants of alien blood'. The whole text is cast in the jingoist rhetoric of the age of imperialism, and this from the author of the Judaeocentric *Daniel Deronda*. The idea of sacrifice is now rapidly assuming Kiplingesque overtones.

To think in corporate terms means trying to conceptualize social life as a whole, as well as grasping the underlying dynamic by which it develops. Since these laws are intricate and invisible, what you need to dredge them to light is either a scientific sociology, or a kind of fiction which delves beneath the appearances of things to unravel their secret causes. And this is the realist novel. Only by understanding these laws, and submitting to their inevitable evolution, can the individual flourish. Or, as a German contemporary of Eliot's put it, freedom is the knowledge of necessity. We must lay bare the logic of Nature, acknowledging its sublime power over us, if we are to harness this logic to our own ends. In this sense, too, submission and affirmation come to much the same thing.

This is more or less the view expounded by Eliot's Felix Holt, who, so we are informed by his creator, is a political radical. In fact, the full title of the novel in which he appears – *Felix Holt, The Radical* – is about as accurate as Genghis Khan, Man of Peace, or George Bush: Intellectual and Moral Sage. Felix is an updated urban

version of Adam Bede, the sort of man whom one would not wish to sit opposite on any but the briefest of train journeys. He believes in prudence, sobriety, hard work and self-discipline, and the extent of his political radicalism is to become accidentally embroiled in a mass riot and strive to head it off. This is rather like being branded a criminal for trying to avert a bank robbery. Eliot's sympathies may embrace the rural lower middle class, but they do not stretch quite as far as the urban working class. The proletariat is brutish and unruly, given to demagoguery and blind disorder.

In fact, far from running wild, the nineteenth-century working-class movement called for more social order, pressing for a state which would repair the damage wreaked by unruly market forces. Felix rejects political activism and trusts instead to a gradual process of popular education, which will bring men and women to appreciate 'the nature of things' and thus cool their political ardour. He is less a socialist than a Stoic. There is a sense in which the novel itself protests against this rather sanguine view of history, in the bleakness and social nostalgia of the finely wrought scenes centring upon Mrs Transome.

Eliot's advocacy of kinship, tradition, custom and community is typically Romantic. But Romanticism also believes in individual fulfilment – and in Eliot's work these two kinds of loyalty are often enough at loggerheads. One response to this dilemma is the realist novel itself, which is supposed to do justice to the individual life, but also to the whole context within which it exists. What, however, if the novel is now the only way of imagining that broader context? What if it is the only kind of 'totality' left to us? An anxiety of this kind haunts Eliot's finest work, *Middlemarch*, which is all about failed or false totalities. Casaubon is in pursuit of a spiritual or intellectual totality, the so-called key to all mythologies; Lydgate is searching for a materialist equivalent of this, in his scientific inquiries into the primitive tissue of all life; Dorothea Brooke is allured by the vision of some mighty project which would transform human life as a whole, while at the same time allowing her to achieve self-fulfilment. Even Bulstrode, the unsavoury Evangelical banker, refers his less than creditable everyday actions to some divine plan which will justify them.

All of these attempts at totality, whether Romantic, mythological, scientific or providential, finally come to grief. In some cases, this is because they are damagingly abstruse and theoretical, unlike a good realist novel. Or if may be, as with Lydgate's medical researches, that they are admirable in themselves but are undone by the ensnarements of everyday life, which in Lydgate's case means pretty faces and provincial politics. Total views of the world may be too remote from ordinary experience, as with Casaubon and Dorothea, or too entangled in it. Common life, in a typically Eliotic ambiguity, is both nourishing and narrowing. The only totality which really flourishes is the novel itself, a grand narrative deeply suspicious of grand narratives. What cannot be achieved in content can be attained by form. The book itself is a great web of interconnections which weaves together part and whole, idea and image, knowledge and experience. Its mesh of mini-narratives, along with its constant shifting of narrative viewpoint, reveals how different human egos or social worlds grasp the world in their own distinctive way, but also how they share a reality in common.

The image of society as a web, and the idea of one's history as a complex continuity, are spatial and temporal versions of the same way of seeing. If society is a web, however, then this has political consequences. To begin with, it is an argument against radical change. There is no centre to a web, no focal point or fundamental principle which would allow us to alter it as a whole. Besides, if all the filaments of our lives are so delicately interlaced, pulling too impatiently on a single strand may unravel the whole fragile structure. This, then, is an argument for reform rather than revolution – but so is the fact that action taken at any one point in a web will spread along its strands to have an effect on the whole. The very interwovenness which means that evil spreads like typhoid also means that goodness can never just be local. Simply by doing good where we are, Dorothea holds, we are somehow widening the skirts of light against the powers of darkness. Will Ladislaw shares her opinion: there is no use in trying to take care of the world as a whole, since that will happen anyway if we delight in what is true or beautiful. 'Act locally, act globally' is the slogan of this doctrine.

Ladislaw, as a Bohemian dilettante averse to the idea of a profession, starts off with too little selfhood, and finally acquires some solid identity as an activist in the cause of political reform. But since he does this with no detriment to his liberated cosmopolitan spirit, he ends up by combining principled identity with a flexibility of selfhood, thus becoming an ideal candidate for a George Eliot heroine to marry. Mr Brooke describes him as a blend of Shelley and Burke, meaning perhaps that he unites Shelley's idealist ardour for liberty with a judicious appreciation of the complex, evolutionary nature of human affairs. He is both rebel and pragmatist, another reason why any self-respecting Eliot heroine should rush him to the altar. Dorothea Brooke moves in the opposite direction from her future husband, beginning with too-ardent, 'theoretic' demands which she will finally have to scale down.

Dorothea's genteel uncle, Mr Brooke, has too lax and shambolic a self; if his niece has too many ideas, he has too few. We are invited to see that his spirit of moderation, while valuable in itself, is also a form of moral and intellectual indolence, as well as suggesting one reason why he is an irresponsible landlord. Reform has to start at home. Brooke's woolly reformist ideals are grotesquely at odds with his discreditable practice, rather as Bulstrode's religious faith is at odds with his corrupt conduct. There is a notable gap between the latter's otherworldly zeal and his worldly self-interest. Theory and practice – another language for the whole and the part – are hard to combine in this novel. Medicine promises one way of doing so, since a physician like Lydgate is both a theorist and a practitioner, searching ambitiously for the basic tissue of all life while doing good in a more modest local way. The science of medicine is another example of how knowledge and human compassion, fact and value, can reinforce rather than obstruct one another. Physicians bring their knowledge to bear on human needs, while the fact of human need acts as a stimulus to further research. But Lydgate, too, betrays a gap between his noble intellectual ideals and his morally commonplace character.

Middlemarch ends by putting a brave face on failure. Dorothea has no beloved brother to rescue in a flood, and as a 'foundress of nothing' is denied her St Teresa-like fulfilment. It is a realistic enough destiny for a Victorian woman. The good she does will be obscure rather than historic, and the novel rationalizes this compromise as brightly as it can. Perhaps we are persuaded that this settling for half is mature wisdom, in contrast to youthful naivety. Officially, history is in a middle march between ignorance and enlightenment, and the good of the world is steadily growing; but this profoundly disillusioned novel puts its author's own beliefs into question, as novels often do. The ambitiousness of its form contrasts with the cheerlessness of its content. The town of Middlemarch proves largely resistant to reform; Casaubon dies tormented by his own failure; Bulstrode is disgraced; Lydgate expires early and unfulfilled; and the Adam Bede-like values of hard work and moral integrity are confined to the marginal presence of Caleb Garth. Looking back on the great expectations of the first Reform Bill from the vantage-point of the second, it does not seem that history is on the side of the enlightened. From this point on, as radical hopes are baffled and the British economy moves into steep decline, there will be little talk of progress in the English novel.

Remarkably, however, Eliot does not give up. It is hard to see how one could rekindle social hope after this grimly disenchanting novel; but though the age of liberal enlightenment is drawing to a close, she comes up towards the end of her career with her most boldly utopian work of all, *Daniel Deronda*. The utopia in question is Zionism – a choice which may ring a little oddly in many ears today. But early Zionism is seen by the novel as a radical, anti-colonial movement, and the book's hero, Daniel, becomes caught up in it after discovering that he is a Jew. This, in Eliot's eyes, provides him at a stroke with the best of both worlds: a fulfilling Romantic identity, and integration into a rich historical culture. In Dickens, discovering who you really are often comes as an unpleasant surprise; but *Deronda* is provided on a plate with an enviable sense of selfhood. Like Will Ladislav, he moves from an early, rather rootless liberalism to a mature self-realization – from 'a too reflective and diffuse sympathy' to 'the blending of a complete personal love in one current with a larger duty'. Or, as Matthew Arnold might have put it, he moves from Hellenism to Hebraism – literally so, as far as the latter creed goes.

No Eliot character could ask for more than a blending of personal love and larger duty. If this synthesis had been on offer to Maggie Tulliver, she would not have needed to die. The best *Middlemarch* can do is to furnish Dorothea with the personal love and Will Ladislav with the larger duty. The problem with larger duties in George Eliot is that they threaten to obliterate the self rather than fulfil it; but *Deronda* is able to realize his deepest sense of identity precisely by surrendering himself to such a cause. This, however, is because of the type of political destiny which the novel, with wondrous convenience, has selected for him. Zionism or nationalism are Romantic brands of politics, full of vision, poetry and rhetoric, and thus ideal vehicles for reconciling the public sphere with the personal one. What is conceivable in Jerusalem is out of the question in Westminster.

Daniel's ideal is that of 'a mind consciously, energetically moving with the larger march of human destinies, but not the less full of conscience and tender heart for the footsteps that tread near and need a leaning-place'. It is not clear how a mind can be full of a tender heart, how you can feel tender about footsteps, or how exactly footsteps can lean; the slackness of Eliot's writing here betrays the nebulousness of her thought. But it is gratifying to know that you can march hand-in-hand with history while being a liberal humanist as well, responsive to the personal and the local. The fine balance between the individual life and the corporate whole which *Middlemarch* aims for in its formal technique becomes for *Deronda* a real-life project. Or rather, a real-life project of a notably unreal kind.

It is not, however, a possible project for the Maggies or Dorotheas of this world. Not only because they are women, which means that they can neither become political activists nor discover that they are circumcised, but because Zionism is not an England-based enterprise, and so can figure as no more than an abstract solution to the

problems of those stuck in St Oggs, Middlemarch or Silas Marner's Raveloe. In the end, you can achieve a unity of personal identity and corporate existence only by abandoning England altogether. The totality must be a displaced one, exported to the Middle East, where Deronda travels to discover his destiny. And this is a stinging criticism of conventional English society, which is represented in the novel by Gwendolen's repulsive husband Grandcourt. There is no way in which the values represented by Deronda and his Jewish heritage can be brought to bear on a spiritually arid English society. The novel accordingly splits down the middle, in a formal reflection of this ideological divide. A politically barren England must be abandoned for the cultural or ethnic politics of Zionism, which can infuse spirit and passion into public life. Deronda breaks away – but he breaks away in order to sign up to a cultural tradition. Rebellion and integration can be reconciled here, as they cannot elsewhere in Eliot's fiction.

In leaving for the East, however, Deronda must leave the novel's downtrodden heroine, Gwendolen Harleth, marooned in a spiritually vacuous England. What is redemption for him is a kind of limbo for her. Like Mary Magdalen, Gwendolen glimpses her redeemer only to see him vanish again, though in this case to Palestine rather than Paradise. Gwendolen and Deronda are both at odds with orthodox society; but it is the man who can turn his back on it, not the woman. In doing so, he turns his back on her as well, leaving her with little more concrete to cling to than a vague ideal of goodness. One may contrast this with the situation of Romola, in Eliot's novel of that name, who is stirred by Savonarola to enter upon public life.

If Daniel's project is not English, neither is it exactly realist. One might stumble across a Bulstrode in real life, but hardly upon a Mordecai, Deronda's charismatic Jewish mentor. In this last novel, Eliot throws a good deal of the realist tradition to the winds, as Hardy will do in his own last work, *Jude the Obscure*. *Deronda* is an extraordinarily original, risk-taking work, a finale which is also an audacious new beginning, a sudden leap into what for most contemporary readers was a disturbingly unfamiliar world of ethnicity, arcane symbolism, cosmopolitan culture, mysticism, mythology and aesthetics. It is a book in which myth, romance, Gothic, theatre, allegory, fantasy and biblical allusion play as important a part as social realism, even though it is the only one of Eliot's novels to be set in her own time. As her fiction moves up to date, its forms move backwards to the prerealist past. It is as though her contemporary moment is so drained of value that only a return to these more traditional resources can renew it. The formal gulf between realism and romance is also a social chasm between Gwendolen, the injured woman trapped in a vapour social world, and Daniel, the enterprising man about to move off into a realm of exotic adventure which sounds as though it is straight out of a novel.

This, in fact, is a work of art which is very aware of art, just as *Jude the Obscure* is a text peculiarly self-conscious about writing. *Deronda* is a dense web of literary and cultural references, and reflects a good deal on art and music. Some of the 'real' events it records are also 'fictional', in the sense of being symbolic or allegorical of something else; so that this is a fiction which is highly conscious of fictionality. Zionism itself is a fiction – a vision, a hypothesis – which will finally take on historical flesh. *Daniel Deronda* is, very deliberately, a meticulously plotted organic whole; and as such it offers a model of a certain idea of history. What if human history itself were to have the inner unity and purpose of a work of art? Or at least might be lent such unity and purpose?

Actual history seems to have come unstuck, as *Middlemarch* might testify, and reform seems to have been rebuffed. Yet perhaps there is a hidden spiritual history, of which Judaism is one mighty expression, in which everything is subtly interconnected with everything else, as in a great realist novel or an accomplished piece of music. There is a good deal of coincidence in this work, but also strange flashes of precognition, as dreams, desires and shadowy impulses prove to be harbingers of events to come. In one sense, this is simply the idea of tradition pressed to a semi-mystical extreme. If tradition means that the present teems with the burden of the past, then why cannot these organic affiliations work the other way too, and the present become pregnant with a future which is yet to be born? Perhaps we can read history backwards and forwards at the same time, rather as we can with the complex symbol web of a novel like this one.

The idea of precognition also presses to a logical limit Eliot's belief in the world-shaping power of ideas. Perhaps our hopes and beliefs, if felt fervently enough, help to bring about the situations they envisage. Perhaps the very fact that I have an impulse to become prime minister foreshadows the fact that I will eventually do so. In England, history appears to be headed nowhere in particular, and ideas seem to have lost their socially transformative force. The age of Will Ladislav is over – indeed, was over quite some time before the appearance of the work in which he figures. Ladislav is a hero of the first Reform Bill seen in the disenchanted backward glance of the second. *Daniel Deronda*, however, can compensate for this chilling lack of vision by turning to the alternative histories of Judaism and Zionism, which unlike late Victorian England are both teleological – they have a goal – and form a spiritual whole. This makes these histories a kind of art, and indeed *Daniel Deronda* proposes some suggestive

parallels between art and a political cause like Zionism. Art, too, liberates the individual self, yet subjects it to the chastening discipline of an order larger than itself. Like the most creative kind of politics, it involves renunciation and hard labour, but also love and personal fulfilment. In the case of *Middlemarch*, the art of the novel itself represents a purposive whole which seemed to be in the act of disappearing from history itself. In *Daniel Deronda*, it is as though the tables have been turned, and history itself has become a work of art. But this is a very special history indeed, one far from both Hayslope and Grandcourt's upper-class world. In the end, Eliot's determination to keep the faith forces her writing beyond England, as well as beyond the limits of realism.

Notes

1. Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto and Windus 1970), pp.15-18.
2. Charles Swann, *Collected Essays of John Goode* (UK: Keele University Press 1995), p.45.
3. David Carroll, ed., *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p.179.
4. Swann, ed., *Collected Essays of John Goode*, p. 56.
5. See Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World* (London: Verso, 1987), Chapter 1.