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Recontextualising George Eliot: A Cosmopolitan, Progressive, and Modern Victorian Writer

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Dedication

To my dear parents.

To Ma Ftaima.

To Jaddi Brahim.

To the memory of Badidi and Maziza.

To all my family and friends.

To the memory of Edward Said.

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Abstract

The cosmopolitan nature of George Eliot's thought, the diversity of her career, the controversial political views she held on colonialism, the social progress she promoted, and the original use she made of her artistic culture in her fiction all prove she is a multifaceted figure whose writings need to be re-interpreted and recontextualised in the light of twenty-first century criticism. This research intends to explore Eliot's cosmopolitanism in terms of her Judaeo-Christian European intellectual heritage, link it with Medieval Islamic thought and culture, and further extend it to determining her attitude to Islam and Arabs within the colonial context of her time. The research also wishes to investigate the extent to which some medieval Islamic philosophical ideas that have migrated to Europe have contributed in shaping Eliot's progressive views about achieving both individual self-improvement and social progress through her lifelong adoption of realism, which depicts the flaws of Victorian society, promotes human sympathy and raises her readers' awareness. The dissertation finally aims at highlighting Eliot's sense of modernity apparent in both her way of thinking and writing, which undeniably connects her with some aspects of modernist literature, as well as with other artistic disciplines whose techniques she originally exploited in enhancing the quality of her fiction. Combining biographical analysis and reader-response criticism approaches, the methodological rationale adopted in the thesis is at the interdisciplinary interface between the history of ideas and literary criticism, which means that a special focus will be devoted to Eliot's biographical and intellectual backgrounds as necessary contexts to interpret her works and understand her postures. This dissertation is meant as a contribution to Victorian studies in extending the findings made so far by contemporary critics about Eliot's cosmopolitanism to include Islamic intellectual heritage, which she has chosen to ignore. This research equally demonstrates that Eliot's perception of both Arabs and Islamic culture is a biased and a prejudiced one.

Résumé

La pensée cosmopolite de George Eliot, la diversité de sa carrière, ses opinions politiques controversées, le progrès social qu'elle revendiquait et l'emploi original de sa culture artistique dans sa fiction font d'elle une écrivaine aux facettes multiples dont les écrits nécessitent aujourd'hui une réinterprétation et une recontextualisation à la lumière de la critique littéraire contemporaine. Cette recherche vise d'abord à explorer le cosmopolitisme d'Eliot en termes d'héritage intellectuel judéo-chrétien, pour ensuite le relier à la pensée islamique médiévale, et enfin s'en servir afin de déterminer l'attitude d'Eliot vis-à-vis de la culture islamique dans le contexte colonial victorien. Cette recherche vise également à mesurer l'impact de certaines idées philosophiques de l'Islam médiéval qui auraient contribué à modeler sa vision progressiste qu'elle a traduite à travers ses romans grâce à son adoption du réalisme pour dénoncer les fléaux de la société victorienne, promouvoir la compassion en tant qu'idéal humain, et provoquer chez ses lecteurs un changement de mentalité. Enfin, cette thèse met l'accent sur la modernité d'Eliot, visible à la fois à travers sa pensée et ses écrits, et qui la relie indéniablement à certains aspects de la littérature moderniste et aux arts dont elle a exploité les techniques afin de parfaire son œuvre. Associant l'analyse biographique et la critique « reader-response », le raisonnement adopté dans cette thèse est à l'interface entre l'histoire des idées et la critique littéraire, portant une attention particulière aux références intellectuelles et biographiques d'Eliot comme contextes de lectures indispensables à l'interprétation de ses écrits et à la compréhension de ses attitudes. L'apport le plus important que cette recherche aura contribué aux études victoriennes est d'avoir élargi le champ d'exploration du cosmopolitisme européen d'Eliot, déjà entrepris par les critiques contemporains, et d'inclure la dimension islamique qu'Eliot avait choisi d'ignorer. L'autre apport de cette recherche est d'avoir démontré que la perception des Arabes et de la culture islamique chez cet auteur victorien est porteuse de préjugés raciaux et religieux.

ملخص

الثقافة العالمية التي تحلت بها جورج إيليويت ، وتنوع مسيرتها المهنية ، و تضارب مواقفها السياسية ، والرقى الاجتماعي الذي كانت تنادي به ، بالإضافة إلى استعمالها النوعي لثقافتها الفنية في رواياتها ، كل هذا يجعل منها أديبة متعددة المزايا يجدر بأن يعاد النظر في كتاباتها قصد تحليلها في ضوء الدراسات النقدية المعاصرة . ترمي هذه الرسالة في بادئ الأمر إلى استكشاف ثقافة إيليويت العالمية من حيث إرثها الفكري الأوروبي ، لتنتقل في مرحلة ثانية إلى ربط هذه الثقافة العالمية بالفكر الإسلامي في عصره الذهبي كي يستعمل هذا الربط في النهاية لتحديد وجهة نظر إيليويت بالنسبة للثقافة الإسلامية وسط المناخ الاستعماري الذي كان يسود بريطانيا في القرن التاسع عشر . كما تستهدف هذه الرسالة قياس مدى تأثير بعض الأفكار الفلسفية الإسلامية السائدة في العصر الذهبي والتي ساهمت في بلورة رؤية إيليويت التقديمية المتجلية في رواياتها ، و هذا بفضل استعمالها الأسلوب الأدبي الواقعي للتديد بالآفات المنقشة في مجتمعها آنذاك ، و ترقية روح التعاطف مع الآخر ، و تغيير ذهنية قرائها . كما تسلط هذه الرسالة الضوء على عصرنة إيليويت الواضحة في فكرها و كتاباتها ، والتي تربطها ببعض جوانب الأدب العصري . كما تستكشف هذه الرسالة بعض الفنون التي لجأت إليها الكاتبة إلى استغلال تقنياتها كي ترتقي بكتاباتها الأدبية . يمزج المنهاج الميثودولوجي الذي تنتهجه هذه الرسالة بين طريقتي التحليل للسيرة الذاتية و النقد المبني على استجابة القارئ ، مما يعني أن خلفيات إيليويت الفكرية و مسيرتها الذاتية ستحظى بعناية خاصة في هذا البحث لتحليل أعمالها الأدبية و تحديد آرائها و مواقفها . أهم ما أضافته هذه الرسالة إلى الدراسات النقدية في الأدب البريطاني للقرن التاسع عشر هو إثراء النتائج التي توصل إليها النقد المعاصر فيما يخص الطابع العالمي لفكر و كتابات إيليويت بالكشف عن مساهمة الثقافة و الحضارة الإسلامية في هذا الجانب . كما أثبتت هذه الرسالة أيضا مواقف إيليويت المنحازة و أفكارها المسبقة تجاه الثقافة الإسلامية و العرب بشكل عام.

List of abbreviations

<i>AB</i>	<i>Adam Bede</i>
<i>CC</i>	<i>The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot</i>
<i>DD</i>	<i>Daniel Deronda</i>
<i>FH</i>	<i>Felix Holt, the Radical</i>
<i>GE EN</i>	<i>George Eliot, European Novelist</i>
<i>GE & TBE</i>	<i>George Eliot and the British Empire</i>
<i>Letters</i>	<i>The George Eliot Letters</i>
<i>L & L</i>	<i>The Works of George Eliot, Life and Letters</i>
<i>MD</i>	<i>Middlemarch</i>
<i>Mill</i>	<i>The Mill on the Floss</i>
“Natural History”	“The Natural History of German Life”
<i>ORC</i>	<i>Oxford Reader’s Companion to George Eliot</i>
<i>Scenes</i>	<i>Scenes of Clerical Life</i>
<i>SM</i>	<i>Silas Marner, the Weaver of Raveloe</i>
“SN”	“Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”
<i>The Life</i>	<i>The Life of George Eliot, a Critical Biography</i>
“TM Hep!”	“The Modern Hep Hep Hep!”

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INTRODUCTION

No story is the same to us after a lapse of time; or rather, we who read it are no longer the same interpreters.

— George Eliot¹

Background

The idea of a recontextualisation of the Victorian George Eliot has been inspired by the aforementioned quote used as an epigraph to this introduction. Indeed, re-reading Eliot's writings in the light of twenty-first century criticism has inevitably led to re-interpreting many aspects of her intellectual life and writings that have been so far either insufficiently investigated or else have remained hidden and unexplored. Much has been written about Eliot so far, but criticism has constantly been fluctuating over time because critics have not been the same interpreters. When compared to their predecessors, twenty-first century readers of Eliot have more things to say about her thanks to both the abundance of material they benefit from and the evolution of mindsets.

Moreover, the intellectual legacy of Eliot is so weighty that it continues to cause heated discussions among literary critics. This versatile “woman of many names”² and facets maintained her originality through her writings and attitudes. She stood out as a translator, a philosopher, an essayist, a magazine co-editor, a book reviewer, a poetess, and a novelist. Indeed, this unconventional Victorian woman dared to live, think, believe, and write differently. Eliot's rich biographical itinerary, the cosmopolitan nature of her thought, the diversity of her career, the controversial political views she held, the social progress she

1. George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Toronto: Morang, 1902) 534.

2. Mary Anne Evans/Mary Ann Evans/Marian Evans/Marian Lewes/George Eliot/Mary Ann Cross.

promoted, and the commitment of her pen all prove she was an intelligent and multifaceted figure whose writings need to be re-explored and reinterpreted in the light of twenty-first century criticism.

Centrality

It is important to note that this dissertation is in no way a feminist attempt to idealise an authoress who has already proven herself on the international literary scene. Its centrality lies rather in the interpretative efforts made to view this Victorian writer within a new perspective. Therefore, in order to draw the multifaceted portrait of the George Eliot of our time, the dissertation shall consider the cosmopolitan intellectual background to her ideas, and their evolution, the postures she adopted towards still very topical issues, the use she made of her artistic culture and knowledge in her novels, and the role she played as a social reformer through realism in her fiction.

Previous Studies

The long critical tradition of Eliot's works started with a favourable appreciation during her lifetime followed by a posthumous depreciation from which her reputation has suffered. In the early twentieth-century, Madox Ford blamed her for being more of a moraliser and a preacher than an artist, while Edmund Gosse accused her of pedantry. Critics went on issuing negative opinions on Eliot until Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust acknowledged her talent and the richness of her works. Be that as it may, the recovery of Eliot's reputation did not last long; the depreciation soon resumed in *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) by Percy Lubbock in which he criticised her "telling" mode of narration. E.M. Forster regarded her novels as ponderous, while Lord David Cecil claimed that she "could not let her imagination have its head. Her intellect was always at its side, tugging at the reins, diverting it from its course" (qtd. in *A Century of GE Criticism* 209). Eliot was therefore "guilty of intellectual overloading" (Levine, *CC* 210). It was not until 1948, when F. R. Leavis in his

famous *The Great Tradition* re-evaluated her novels as mature works, that Eliot started to receive serious critical attention. Critics like Gerald Bullett in *George Eliot: Her Life and Books* (1947), Joan Bennett in *George Eliot: Her Mind and Art* (1948), Jerome Thales in *The Novels of George Eliot* (1959), Barbara Hardy in *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (1959), and W. J. Harvey in *The Art of George Eliot* (1961) have reassessed Eliot's works with a particular consideration for her broad intellectual abilities and artistic commitment. Moreover, both the publication of the nine volumes of Eliot's letters by her American biographer Gordon Sherman Haight between 1954 and 1978, and the 1963 edition of her essays by Thomas Pinney opened new vistas for the authorial esteem of Eliot. As a result, most critics reconsidered the literary appreciation of her texts. As Quentin Anderson sums it up: "when one is reading [a book such as] *Middlemarch* there are many moments when one looks up and says, 'How intelligent, how penetrating this woman is!'" (90). Both the complexity and the subtlety of Eliot's literature have then surfaced, which triggered a new range of abundant and diverse post-1970s criticism that made the Victorian author a very controversial figure.

Marxist critics such as Arnold Kettle in his *Introduction to the English Novel* (1951), or Terry Eagleton in his *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) affirmed that Eliot did not believe in potential social change and was rather an idealist whose fiction tried to deal with the conflict between Romantic individualism and the humanism of both Feuerbach and Goethe. Influenced by the leading structuralist figure Roland Barthes, despite his negative opinion on realist fiction because he assumed it "treated language as if it could represent reality transparently and neutrally," (Rignall, *ORC* 62) "certain British" post-structuralist critics regarded Eliot as a classic realist writer (62). On the other hand, Eliot's narrative comment in *The Mill on the Floss* that asserts: "intelligence so rarely shows itself in speech without metaphor,—that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something

else” (150) connected her with deconstructive thinking. She was even considered by the leader of deconstructive criticism, J. Hillis Miller, as a proto-deconstructionist (Rignall, *ORC* 63). However, feminist critics were annoyed at the fact that Eliot’s heroines did not achieve any revolutionary accomplishment, and denounced the Victorian writer’s “social conservatism and resistance to feminist practice” (Levine, *CC* 216). In her *Sexual Politics*, the American feminist writer and activist Kate Millet declared that Eliot “lived the revolution . . . but did not write of it. She is stuck with . . . the pervasive Victorian fantasy of the good woman who goes down into Samaria and rescues the fallen man—nurse, guide, mother, adjunct of the race” (139). Lee Edwards even more radically decided that *Middlemarch* could “no longer be one of the books of [her] life” because Dorothea Brooke ended up marrying Will Ladislaw, which she interpreted as Eliot’s personal refusal to celebrate “that world she forced into existence when she stopped being Mary Ann Evans and became George Eliot instead” (qtd. in Atkinson 83). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar affirmed that Eliot incarnates “feminine anti-feminism” and that she “resorts . . . to pledges of deference and doctrines of feminine renunciation that are directly at odds with her own aggressively pursued career” (466). In her “Why feminists are Angry with George Eliot” (1976), Zelda Austen adopted a calming approach to temper the seething opinions and called the feminists’ attention to Eliot’s stylistic and structural achievements. As for Gender critics, they vary from “those who try to make [Eliot] into a figure who is ‘either irredeemably, charming ‘feminine’ or transcendently without sex or gender’ to those who try to enlist her in the service of either sexual radicalism or conservatism” (Rignall, *ORC* 66). Following the publication of Haight’s *George Eliot: A Biography* in 1968 which revealed Eliot’s diverse background, new historicist studies of her works started to spread and focus on her “interactions with contemporary cultural, intellectual, and political movements, such as evolutionary science, positivism, and the early stages of the women’s movement” (Rignall, *ORC* 68). As for the landmark in post-colonial

criticism of Eliot, it surely is Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) which treats the issues of colonialism, imperialism and race in the works of many nineteenth-century writers, including George Eliot. Said's work caused a new wave of critical interest in the Jewish element in Eliot's last novel as well as in her attitude towards colonialism.

Current Debate & Literature Review

The ongoing scholarly debate about Eliot and her works—in which the current thesis wishes to take part—brings to light the versatility of Eliot and the wide range of her interests. It is mainly conducted by John Rignall,³ Kenneth Newton,⁴ Avrom Fleishman,⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb,⁶ Nancy Henry,⁷ and Margaret Harris.⁸ In his *George Eliot, European Novelist* (2011)—both a thought-provoking and insightful analysis—Rignall claims that Eliot belongs to the European literary tradition. He highlights the crucial role played by European thought, culture, and literature in producing her fiction. Rignall also affirms that even those of Eliot's novels that deal with provincial life, such as *Middlemarch*, have been shaped by a European affinity with Balzac. He goes further and sets comparisons between Eliot's works of fiction and European ones, such as Balzac's and Flaubert's. For Rignall, the Jewish element in Eliot's last novel *Daniel Deronda* is a call to “widen the English vision a little,” (*Letters*

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7. Professor of English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Her research interests are in Victorian literature and colonialism, textual criticism, biography and the life and writings of GE.

8. Professor of English and the Director of Research Development at the University of Sydney. Interested in Victorian fiction, her research has established new interpretations of the career of GE.

6:304) as confessed by Eliot in a letter to her publisher John Blackwood. The common thread in the study of Rignall is: “that wider culture of Europe which . . . her novels respond to and in the context of which they ask to be read” (167).

As for Newton, he maintains that Eliot’s works represent a fusion between art and the intellect. In his *Modernizing George Eliot* (2011), he establishes the connections between Eliot and literary modernism demonstrating that she actually has a lot in common with twentieth-century modernist authors. From moral philosophy, Darwinism, the role of the narrator, realism and symbolism, post-colonial criticism and racism, to the anticipation of modernism, Newton reveals an unconventional and modern reading of the Victorian writer.⁹ Both challenging and vigorous, his study stimulates the reader’s critical thinking and makes Newton the first critic to argue that Eliot is affiliated to twentieth-century literary modernism. In 2002, Newton co-published with Saleel Nurbhai¹⁰ *George Eliot, Judaism and the Novels*: the first academic work to maintain that every novel by Eliot has been influenced by Jewish mysticism. As a matter of fact, the two scholars do not consider *Daniel Deronda* as the sole work to have a Judaic background as their predecessors have tended to assert. They rather hold it to be “only the culmination of her interest in and use of Jewish myth and mysticism and that throughout her fiction, at least from *Adam Bede*, one can discern a substructure shaped by kabbalistic ideas” (2). Eliot’s interest in the use of Jewish mysticism, as Nurbhai and Newton see it, is linked to her urge to go beyond the limitations of realism and elevate the artistic value of her works. Therefore, the underlying mystical structure in Eliot’s fiction is synonymous with sophistication and perfection. Nurbhai and Newton’s argumentation is undoubtedly perceptive when applied to *Daniel Deronda*, but it seems less convincing with

9. As he himself has put it, “in this book a more radical position is adopted, namely that Eliot was a much more ambitious and experimental writer than critics have generally realized and more than any of her Victorian contemporaries anticipates significant aspects of writing in the twentieth and indeed twenty-first century in regard to both art and ideas” (4).

10. Associate Lecturer in English Literature at County College, Lancaster University.

regards to Eliot's earlier novels given the author's early flirtation with what is now known as anti-Semitism and her very late affinity with Judaism.

Fleishman's *George Eliot's Intellectual Life* (2010) is a chronological intellectual biography of Eliot that traces and discusses the evolution of her ideas which have constantly been developing due to her extensive readings and interactions with other thinkers. Fleishman treats the development of Eliot's thought throughout her career, which may categorise his work as a study in the history of ideas rather than as literary criticism. Driven by the ambitious aim to carry out an extensive exploration of Eliot's intellect, Fleishman claims to have read, or at least skimmed through, most of the works Eliot had been in contact with during her lifetime; she literally devoured multitudes of volumes in different languages.¹¹ He views Eliot as a progressive writer who believed in both personal and social change. Fleishman's main concern is Eliot's intelligence—"a neglected matter" (xi) as he describes it.¹² Fleishman's study is impressive; it includes ten chapters that cover the different stages in Eliot's thought, namely "the Evangelical", "the Apostate", "the Journalist", "the Germanist", "the Novelist", "the Historian", "the Radical", "the Encyclopaedist", "the Visionary", and "the Intellectual".

In her *The Jewish Odyssey of George Eliot* (first published in 2009) Himmelfarb focuses on Eliot's most controversial novel *Daniel Deronda* in relation to the Jewish national identity. Himmelfarb discusses the motivations that led an agnostic Victorian gentile author to include Jewish characters and even a Jewish protagonist in her work. She explains that Eliot had in mind the hardships the Jewish community endured in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, especially the question of citizenship. She goes on affirming that what

11. For more details on Eliot's extensive readings, see Avrom Fleishman, "George Eliot's Reading: A Chronological List", *George Eliot—George Henry Lewes Studies* 54-55 (2008): 1-106.

12. "George Eliot was an extremely intelligent person," proclaims Fleishman, "who, largely self-educated in languages, literary and other arts, religion and philosophy of religion, the social sciences, etc., etc., developed herself not only into what many regard as England's greatest novelist but into a leading intellectual of her time" (xi).

appealed to Eliot is the conservative nature of Judaism arguing, unlike Fleishman, that Eliot was a conservative who believed in “a cultural and social as well as political conservatism” (117). As evidence, Himmelfarb reminds her reader how Eliot opposed the enfranchisement of women and how she refused to sign the petition that supported John Stuart Mill’s amendment. She also pinpoints the fact that the novel’s themes such as assimilation, anti-Semitism, and the return to Zion remain highly topical today. For Himmelfarb, Eliot has totally grasped the core of the Jewish question which combines both religious and national identities: “this Jewish question was predicated upon a robust Judaism, the creed of a nation that could find its fulfillment only in a polity and a state” (147). *The Jewish Odyssey* demonstrates Himmelfarb’s deep knowledge of nineteenth-century Judaism, and clearly highlights Eliot’s interest in it, not only as a mystical tool to elevate her literature, but also as an ideological framework within which she proposed the Zionist element as a solution to the Jewish question.¹³

In her *George Eliot and the British Empire* (2002), Nancy Henry tackles the issues of nineteenth-century British colonialism, imperialism, and emigration in Eliot’s literature. She digs into specific biographical details such as Eliot’s involvement in colonial investments,¹⁴ her reviews of colonial literature, and the emigration of her stepsons—the Lewes boys—in order to assess Eliot’s positions. Henry refutes post-colonial criticism—like Edward Said’s analysis—that focuses on *Daniel Deronda* as a novel reflecting Eliot’s views on imperialism, race, and the Jewish reconstruction. Unlike Himmelfarb, Henry thinks that connecting a

13. “If Eliot was prescient . . . in anticipating the rise of Zionism and the creation of the Jewish state,” the reader is told, “she was no less prescient in recognizing the kind of Judaism that was appropriate to that state—not a defensive, beleaguered Judaism but an affirmative, even an assertive one” (147).

14. Henry informs the reader that “the seventh volume of Gordon Haight’s *The George Eliot letters* (1955) includes two appendixes: ‘GE’s Literary Earnings, Extracts from Journal’ and ‘GHL’s Literary Receipts’. The latter was taken from Lewes’s book of ‘Personal Expenses,’ but Haight omits the first nine pages, in which appear ‘a list of stocks and bonds in GHL’s hand’ (*GEL*, 7:365)” (91). Henry wonders “what editorial principle” (91) led Haight to omit such important information, and then she goes on speculating about the reasons behind his attitude. Yet, Henry ends up hypothesising that “perhaps because the means of acquisition were not literary, such profits were irrelevant to literary biography” (91). Eventually, Henry judiciously remarks: “the result is that Eliot appears less interested in her investments than she actually was” (91).

nineteenth-century Eliot to still nascent ideologies such as Zionism is anachronistic.¹⁵ Henry's first work is thoroughly documented; however, her literary criticism of Eliot's writings on colonialism could have been developed still further. In 2012, Henry returns with her *The Life of George Eliot, a Critical Biography* revealing new interpretations of Eliot's novels based on recent biographical research and fresh literary criticism. She re-discusses some aspects of Eliot's life that have always been accepted by critics who drew their information from the 1968 authoritative biography by Haight. Henry points to the importance of the new interpretations of these biographical data as a significant background much needed when reading Eliot's novels.¹⁶ Henry's second book is very informative and up-to-date; it introduces the reader to a twenty-first century pragmatic and shrewd Eliot.

Harris's last edited volume *George Eliot in Context* (2013) is an impressive collection of thirty-six fresh essays that frame Eliot's life and works into the corresponding historical, artistic, political, religious, intellectual, scientific, economic, literary, and social contexts. Scholars such as Lovesey, Hughes, Henry, Shattock, Atkinson, Flanders, Rignall, and Harris herself—to name just a few—deal with a variety of themes in Eliot's works.¹⁷ The list includes some highly relevant topics for this dissertation such as “critical responses”, “afterlife”, “education”, “gender and the woman question”, “philosophy”, “religion”, and “visual arts”. As Harris explains, the book “discuss[es] both concepts and contexts contemporary with her [Eliot], and later ones, contemporary with us, to provide as full a range of lenses as possible through which to illuminate her achievement” (xviii).

15. “Deronda's ideas of helping the Jews who were already living in various Eastern countries,” the reader is told, “is vague, as much philanthropic as nationalistic” (*GE & BE* 117).

16. Henry discusses what she sees as the real reasons which prevented Lewes from divorcing his wife, Agnes, and marrying Eliot. She also highlights the fact that Agnes, having been the first woman in Lewes's life, plays an important role in Eliot's one. Henry connects this to the fact that Eliot was the daughter of Robert Evan's second wife, Christiana. Eliot was therefore the offspring of a second wife and herself the second woman in Lewes's life. On top of this, Eliot had stepchildren. It is within this context of complex relationships and marriages, stepmothers, stepchildren that Henry proposes to read Eliot's novels.

17. Harris points to the fact that Eliot is an inexhaustible source of research because the heritage she left “is a potent one, constantly visited, revisited and revisioned” (60).

Aims & Research Gap

Therefore, the present dissertation wishes to continue in the mode of study initiated by the above-mentioned scholars and will deal with the way the main philosophical, ideological, artistic, and social facets of George Eliot have been expressed in her writings. In the same vein, this dissertation carries on the latest line of inquiry, building on scholarly works by Rignall, Newton, Fleishman, Henry, and Harris that discuss Eliot in relation to European philosophy and culture, Judaism and Jewish mysticism, colonialism and race, social progress and gender-based stereotypes, and arts. However, the dissertation also wishes to counter Henry's claim which affirms that Eliot's interest in the return of the Jews into the Holy Land of Palestine is purely "philanthropic" and belongs to the fictional world, far from any proto-Zionist ideology.

Moreover, the thesis will also attempt to extend the areas already studied by these scholars, taking into consideration a further dimension which has been overlooked so far. The following three points may be regarded as the cornerstones of this research gap. First, it is true that Eliot's European intellectual background has already been highlighted by contemporary critics, but none of them has thoroughly extended this exploration to include a possible connection to the Islamic heritage that has pervaded European culture and thought since medieval times, and influenced the writings of many of Eliot's contemporaries. Second, many critical studies have extensively discussed Eliot's position towards Judaism. Nevertheless, very few have tried to determine her attitude towards Islam. In his essay "Religion", Lovesey develops a brief, yet pertinent discussion of the topic. His view will be developed in chapters three and five of this thesis. As for Kuli Khan Khattak, she wrote an insightful and well-documented book entitled *Islam and the Victorians: Nineteenth Century Perceptions of Muslim Practices and Beliefs*. It is not the only work that deals with the Victorians' perceptions of Islam, but it is the first that discusses how Victorian novelists portrayed the

Muslim world in their fiction. Kuli Khan Khattak discusses Dickens, Thackeray, Kipling, and Morier more than other authors. Eliot appears only twice: once in connection to Gladstone who was not what may be called a fan of hers because *Daniel Deronda* showed an opinion on Jews similar to Disraeli's (38-39). The second time, Eliot is mentioned in the "Literature" chapter in which *Adam Bede* is highlighted as referring twice to the *Arabian Nights* (59), first as an "Egyptian sorcerer" (AB 5), and then as "a rich sultan" with his "grand-vizier" (AB 63). The third and final point in this research gap is that no other work has subjected Eliot's attitude towards colonialism in the Arab world to close scrutiny, except Edward Said who pointed in Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* to a "total absence of any thought about the actual inhabitants of the East, Palestine in particular" ("Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims" 22). Although Henry refers to Eliot's reviews of British colonial literature dealing with Arab and Muslim countries, like North and East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, she chooses nonetheless to comment very little on the reviewer's attitude towards the native populations. Eliot's position on Islam has received little attention so far and, therefore, the present dissertation will try to address this research gap by adding a new facet to Eliot's repertoire, i.e. George Eliot and Islam.

Thesis Statement

When the title of this dissertation refers to Eliot as a cosmopolitan, progressive, modern Victorian writer, it first points to the fact that this research intends to explore this cosmopolitanism in terms of Eliot's Judaeo-Christian European intellectual heritage and link it with Medieval Islamic thought and culture, and further extend it to determining her attitude to Islam and Arabs within the colonial context of her time. Second, the term "progressive" articulates the project of investigating the extent to which some medieval Islamic philosophical ideas that have migrated to Europe have contributed in shaping Eliot's progressive views about achieving both individual self-improvement and social progress

through her writings. She viewed the achievement of social progress as a gradual process, not a precipitated revolutionary one and promoted it in her fiction by denouncing the social flaws and stereotypes. Consequently, the term “progressive” does not suggest any ambiguity, but clearly proposes to show Eliot as a progressive writer who conceives social progress as the result of progressive, evolutionary change rather than a radical one. Third, when referring to Eliot as modern, the dissertation wishes to pinpoint her sense of modernity, apparent in both her way of thinking and writing that undeniably connect her with some aspects of modernist literature as well as some modern effects sought by different artistic forms and techniques. This dissertation, therefore, aims at recontextualising the Victorian Eliot as a cosmopolitan, progressive, and modern writer.

This thesis argues that the intellectual Eliot was marked by European thought, culture, and literature whose most preeminent representatives are Goethe, Feuerbach, Kant, Lessing, Spinoza, Pascal, Comte, Rousseau, Sand, and Balzac. Most of these thinkers and writers, and their works bear influences from the Judaeo-Islamic heritage. Besides avoiding any acknowledgement of the impact of the Islamic component of this heritage, Eliot preferred to turn to its Judaic component at a later stage in her life and use it as a source for literary inspiration and a political framework for her vision of a model nation and world. This vision acknowledges the wrongs done to various oppressed peoples at the hands of British colonialism, yet it is also marked by a prejudiced attitude towards Arabs. Eliot’s sympathetic attitude towards Jews and Judaism clearly contrasts with an essentially prejudiced view of Arabs and an obvious indifference to Islam. In *Daniel Deronda*, the Jewish national project is at the centre of Eliot’s concerns. Despite some critics’ attempt to hold Eliot’s view of the restoration of the Jews as a mere manifestation of her humanism that engaged only her sense of justice and reparation for the wrongs committed, this dissertation not only argues that she was personally acquainted with some of the Englishmen who overtly supported the idea of

restoration both politically and financially, but it also demonstrates her firm belief that Mordecai's "guiding vision" (Henry, *GE & TBE* 118) of a Jewish state and nation, planted on the Holy ground of Palestine, would unquestionably come into existence once the required conditions were met. Alongside her constant devotion and commitment to the Jewish national project, Eliot clearly ignored the destiny of the Arabs who lived in Palestine at the time in spite of the well-documented statistical information as regards their population which she read in various sources about the time she was writing her last novel *Daniel Deronda*. Her global vision of nationhood equally encompasses a deep understanding of the flaws that undermined Victorian society. She uses her fiction to denounce gender-based discrimination, conventional social norms, and literary stereotypes which she avoided. To achieve social progress, Eliot's fiction promotes education as a tool for enhancing knowledge and intellectual aptitudes on the one hand, and human tolerance, understanding and sympathy on the other. Far from the feminist activism of her time, Eliot was a committed woman author who chose realism to depict the imperfect social status of women, rather than any delusion, romance, or idealism. Beyond raising her reader's awareness of the social issues at stake in the Victorian society, Eliot sought an effective evolution of mentalities towards modernity of which France, in her view, was a model representative. Eliot's modernity is manifest in the original, resourceful use of her intellectual aptitudes to draw on European philosophy, mainly French and German, that shares much with Islamic thought and to develop her own progressive, meliorist view regarding self-improvement and social progress. This modernity is also apparent in some of the literary aspects present in her fiction like psychology, mythology, and unconventional endings that obviously connect her to modernist literature. Eliot also draws on her European artistic culture and knowledge to integrate a number of original artistic techniques in her realist fiction, seeking to reproduce the same feelings and emotions induced by visual arts. It is within this diverse framework marked out by a European intellectual background, a Judaeo-

Islamic heritage, a political vision of the colonial and national projects, social reform, and an original exploitation of artistic techniques that this dissertation proposes a recontextualisation of this multifaceted Victorian woman writer.

Methodology

The thesis adopts a rationale that considers Eliot's intellectual evolution, her experiences, and her attitudes and positions as significant factors in interpreting her works. In other words, it follows a gradual pattern that will first attempt to clarify how Eliot constructed her European intellect, how the latter shows in her writings, the extent to which this European background is connected to a Judaeo-Islamic heritage, and the way Eliot reacted differently to the two components of this heritage by acknowledging the former and ignoring the latter. Then, the dissertation's reasoning will move on to discuss the extent to which the Judaic element is present in Eliot's fiction, the literary and ideological reasons behind this presence, and the political vision discerned from her writings in terms of colonialism, nationhood, and race. Finally, the thesis will shift to analysing how Eliot's social vision took shape in her writings, and the way she used fiction to denounce social conventions, gender-based norms, and literary stereotypes. In the same way, the dissertation will ultimately shift to exploring the extent to which she made use of her artistic knowledge in her fiction through the implementation of some original artistic techniques, showing that the effects created by her mastery of language are similar to the ones produced by some modern artistic devices. Therefore, this rationale is at the interdisciplinary interface between the history of ideas and literary criticism, which means a special focus will be devoted to Eliot's biographical and intellectual backgrounds as necessary contexts to interpret her works and understand her postures. In an 1879 letter to Mrs. Thomas Adolphus Trollope, Eliot confessed that "the best history of a writer is contained in his writings—these are his chief actions" (*Letters* 7:230).

The dissertation combines biographical analysis and reader-response criticism approaches, the latter being the one in which the reader's role as an interpreter of Eliot's literature is put forward. Discussing the reader-response theorists' beliefs, Lois Tyson explains in her *Critical Theory Today*, that "readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature . . . [which] suggests, of course, that different readers may read the same text quite differently" (162). Tyson pointedly adds that "reader-response theorists believe that even the same reader reading the same text on two different occasions will probably produce different meanings because so many variables contribute to our experience of the text" (162). It is striking how Eliot's quote from *Adam Bede* (1859), used as an opening epigraph to this dissertation's introduction, claiming that "no story is the same to us after a lapse of time; or rather, we who read it are no longer the same interpreters" (534) anticipates the above-quoted fundamental statement of the twenty-first century reader-response criticism approach. This approach, adopted in the thesis, focuses on one particular aspect of the theory which "draws on elements of both transactional reader-response theory and affective stylistics in the course of establishing a parallel between the theme of a given text and the reader's experience while reading it" (Tyson 180). As further simplified by Tyson, the typical question a reader-response theorist would ask in such case is: "how might we interpret a literary text to show that the reader's response is, or is analogous to, the topic of the story?" (181). The critic's task, therefore, may be considered as an attempt to interpret and decode Eliot's texts according to the intentions she herself formulates through the language she uses and the contexts in which she actually sets her narratives. His interpretation of the text should not become the "product of [his] own beliefs and desires," (Tyson 182) because the involvement of his personal experience in the interpretive process may lead him to a distorted vision of the reality depicted in the text and to mere speculation about its author's original intentions. The

goal of this dissertation is to use the reader-response approach “to help enrich our reading” of Eliot’s works in order “to help us see some important ideas they illustrate that we might not have seen so clearly or so deeply otherwise” (Tyson 181). It goes without saying that such analysis needs judicious insight into the complexities of Eliot’s intellectual architecture and thoroughly documented biographical data, together with a re-assessment of the latest literary criticism of her works. In order to achieve this, the dissertation borrows from the reader-response approach two lenses relevant to the investigation conducted in some chapters, mainly the post-colonial lens that draws on Edward Said’s theoretical framework in post-colonial studies, and the gender lens that refers to the findings of a number of twenty-first century critics who discuss this issue in Eliot’s writings.

Structure

The dissertation is divided into eight chapters. The first and second chapters are centred on the building of Eliot’s European intellect, and the way she benefited from extensive readings—mainly German and French—which nourished her intellectual productivity, broadened her cultural perspective, and made her a philosopher before turning a novelist. Her early intellectual affinity with brilliant German and French writers allowed her works to be compared to their European counterparts. “*Middlemarch* marks an epoch in the history of fiction,” acknowledges Edith Simcox, “the effect is as new as if we could suppose a *Wilhelm Meister* written by Balzac” (qtd. in *GE: The Critical Heritage* 323). Throughout her *George Eliot*, Mathilde Blind establishes a comparison between Eliot’s works and George Sand’s. Talking about Eliot’s way of writing essays, Blind affirms that “everyone must see that this is the essay writing of a novelist . . . the touches are put on with the vigor of . . . Balzac, or Flaubert” (87). Fleishman claims that *Daniel Deronda* “stands as a high example, in a class with those of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky” (217). Eliot’s frequent and regular travels

to Europe, her interest in the cultures of the countries she visited, and the European encounters she made have also contributed to the development of her thought.

Chapter three highlights the impact of the Judaeo-Islamic heritage on the European philosophies Eliot was imbued with. The chapter points to the East-West intellectual channel through which important philosophical notions and concepts journeyed from Medieval Islamic *Al-Andalus* to Europe. *Ibn Tufayl's* philosophical novel *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* conveyed new ideas about self-education, self-improvement, and self-knowledge on which the German *bildung* philosophy drew much and which Goethe later exploited to develop his literary *bildungsroman*. Eliot, in turn, would use these same ideas to lay the foundations of her meliorist doctrine, seeking to achieve social and human progress through individual self-improvement. The chapter also compares Eliot's perception of Islam with that of some European writers and scholars such as Carlyle, Goethe, and Deutsch with whom Eliot developed undeniable intellectual affinities. Finally, Eliot's enthusiasm for Judaism is contrasted with her lack of interest towards Islam.

Chapter four explores the way Eliot incorporates Jewish mysticism in *Daniel Deronda* as a tool for literary sophistication. It also discusses Eliot's view of the historical prejudices endured by the Jewish community as synonymous with spiritual elevation. The chapter goes a step further and examines the extent to which Jewish national construction has developed into a political vision whose foundation lies in Eliot's belief in the privileged status of Jewish culture, religion and nationalism as models of perfection or ideals that also have hegemonic power over the rest of the world's nations, including imperial Britain. A posteriori, this vision also required her support for the return of the Jews to the Promised Land and the establishment of a Jewish national state there—to the exclusion of Palestinian Arabs whom Eliot totally ignored.

Chapter five uses a post-colonial lens to investigate Eliot's attitudes towards Arabs, emigration, and British colonialism, particularly in some Muslim and Arab countries. This discussion is contextualised with reference to the present scholarly conversation about Eliot and the question of Palestine in *Daniel Deronda* as in the works of Edward Said, Saleel Nurbhai & K. M. Newton, Nancy Henry, and Avrom Fleishman.

Chapters six and seven use a gender lens to zoom in on the ways Eliot's literature discusses gender and portrays power relationships between men and women. Indeed, chapter six analyses Eliot's fiction as a tool for social progress and focuses on how Eliot's writings expose Victorian flaws through careful consideration of gender, education, human attributes and relations. Then, chapter seven examines the way Eliot deals with both social and literary stereotypes in her writings. It explores such themes as the ideal woman and wife, mothering and parenting, marriage, and pinpoints the unconventional endings of Eliot's novels.

Finally, chapter eight points to the diversity and the richness of Eliot's European artistic culture and shows how she integrated some of the techniques developed by various forms of arts like poetry, painting, and sculpture in her fiction. It equally points to Eliot's originality in using physical motion as a literary technique to reflect the atmosphere in the settings of her narratives, to express the characters' emotions and states of minds, and to contrast their social statuses and aspirations. The chapter finally draws attention to the parallels between the effects created by Eliot's original use of colours, light, motion, and decorative items, and similar ones created by modern artistic devices, such as film cameras, stage spotlights, or by modern interior designers.

Sources

The first category of primary sources on which the present thesis is based appears in the form of letters, journals, and notebooks. Biographical information about Eliot was gathered by her husband John Walter Cross (1884). However, he removed some relevant

passages about her attitude towards religion that were subsequently restored in their original version by her American biographer Gordon Sherman Haight (1954-78). Eliot's Notebooks were edited by Jane Irwin in 1996 while her journals were edited by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnson in 1998. The second category of primary sources consists of Eliot's essays, book reviews, and fiction. In addition to the scholars already mentioned in the "Literature Review" section, this study has also extensively drawn on the works of George Levine (ed): *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (2001), and John Rignall (ed): *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot* (2000).

Shortcomings

As for the shortcomings pertaining to any research work of this kind that has attempted to probe Eliot's attitude to Islamic culture—a research area that has remained so far unexplored, access to primary bibliographical sources remains the main hindrance to the successful completion of the proposed research project. For this dissertation, in particular, the main obstacle was to access Gordon S. Haight's voluminous collection of Eliot's letters as many of her private thoughts lie in the correspondence she was exchanging at the time with a variety of personalities, but most importantly with a few confidants and close friends. Eliot was known for her avoidance of getting her religious and political opinions publically known, and strongly held to her privacy in these matters. Owing to the unavailability for sale of the total bulk of this biographical material, and to the impossibility of an on-site academic consultation, this dissertation has unfortunately come short of exploring more evidence as regards Eliot's hidden thoughts and opinions on the main issues discussed in this research work, mainly Islamic culture, Arabs, race and colonialism. This dissertation may have not been able to complete its exploration of Eliot's perception of these issues, but at least it has made use of what is available and has ultimately reached interesting findings.

Further criticism of this dissertation may be addressed to the research limitations that are obvious in its discussion of Eliot's use of her artistic knowledge in her writings. Indeed, a lot has been written about the topic and many of its aspects have been most extensively examined. Yet, however exhausted these aspects in the last chapter may seem in respect with Eliot's use of painting, sculpture, expression of movement, and interior decoration in her fiction, this research insists more on showing undeniable parallels with the modern effects produced by the dexterous manipulation of a film camera or stage lighting in a theatre, and the arrangements of furniture items made by modern interior designers. Indeed, the thesis proposes to exploit them in a way which will bring Eliot's modernity to the forefront of critical attention. This modernity allowed her to distinguish herself from her Victorian peers and depart from their intellectual conservatism to set on an exploratory journey to Europe in quest of universal knowledge which she gathered not only from European artists and art critics, but from European philosophers, writers, and social reformers as well. Her stance on education, self-improvement, social progress, and her commitment to human universals such as tolerance, sympathy, compassion, and understanding that she most valued bear testimony to her sense of modernity for the time. Even if such ideas and values are as old as mankind, they nonetheless remain constant, modern universals valued, acknowledged, and respected everywhere by everyone.

CHAPTER 1

George Eliot & Germany

Introduction

“Germany yields more intellectual produce than it can use and pay for,” affirms Eliot who had been committed to an early Germanophile quest (“Natural History” 224). Her intellectual Germanness started to take shape in the early forties through her readings and translations. The eventually well-structured and mature shape of Eliot’s German intellect, so to speak, was finalised through her travels to Germany with her lifelong companion George Henry Lewes. Eliot became not only fully aware of the German huge and versatile intellectual potential, but most of all a conversant with its old-rooted philosophies.

The present chapter will discuss the formation and development of Eliot’s German-based thought, as it will also try to build up some original synthesis as regards her personal understanding and attitudes towards these philosophies. Consequently, it will attempt to answer such questions as: how did Eliot react to and interact with the German intellectual set-up? To what extent did she rely on it in her thinking and writings? And, what was her personal contribution?

1.1. Eliot’s German Readings

Before going into the crux of the current discussion, it is interesting to view the complete list of Eliot’s extensive German readings. This list is indeed a long and impressive one, but the aim is to show the deep extent to which Eliot was imbued with German culture and thought. The density of the materials cited in the lengthy list below conveys the depth of Eliot’s intellectual Germanness:

She read books about Germany: Mme de Staël’s *De l’Allemagne* (*On Germany*), Varnhagen von Ense’s *Denkwürdigkeiten* (*Memoirs*), Adolf Stahr’s

Weimar und Jena, Johannes Scherr's *Deutsche Kultur-und Sittengeschichte* (*History of German Culture and Customs*), R. G. Gottschall's *Die deutsche National-Literatur*, A. F. C. Vilmar's *Geschichte der deutschen National-Literatur*, G. G. Gervinus's *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen*. She read German works of art criticism: J. J. Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (*History of Ancient Art*), Stahr's *Torso* (reviewing portions of it on a number of occasions), Ludwig Ross's *Archäologische Aufsätze* (*Archaeological Essays*), Heinrich Brunn's *Geschichte der griechischen Künstler* (*History of Greek Artists*). She read German reactions to other countries: Stahr's *Ein Jahr in Italien* (*A Year in Italy*), K. E. Vehse's *Memoirs of the Court of Austria* (a translation, which she reviewed, of part of a much longer work), H. L. H. von Pückler-Muskau's *Tour in England, Ireland, and France* and Friedrich Gerstaecker's *Nach Amerika*. She read in or on Germanic mythology: August Schrader's *Germanische Mythologie*, Wolfgang Menzel's *Zur deutschen Mythologie*, Friedrich Panzer's *Bayerische Sagen und Brauche* (*Bavarian Sayings and Customs*), Ludwig Bechstein's *Romantische Märchen und Sagen*, Martin Meyer's *Sagen-Kränzlein aus Tirol* (*A Wreath of Sayings from Tirol*), and the *Nibelungenlied*. (Her reading of the Grimm brothers' *Märchen* collection came later.) She read German philosophy: works by Otto Gruppe besides the one she reviewed, F. H. Jacobi's *Briefe über Spinoza* (*Letters on Spinoza*), A. W. Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, Lessing's *Laocoon*, and *Aus Herders Nachlass* (*From Herder's Remains*). In *Stimmung* with Lewes's research on Goethe, she read almost everything by that overachieving polymath—on which, more later. She also read the poets Ludwig Uhland, Friedrich Halm, Ferdinand Freiligrath,

K. L. Börne and A. H. Hoffmann von Fallersleben, and reviewed an anthology of translations by Mary Anne Burt. . . . She read German fiction: J. J. C. von Grimmshausen's *Simplicius Simplicissimus*, Fanny Lewald's *Wandlungen* (*Transformations*) and Berthold Auerbach's *Schatzkästlein des Gevattersmanns* (*Grandfather's Treasure-chest*). She read and saw performances of German drama: Schiller's *Die Räuber* (*The Robbers*) (following earlier immersion in his works), Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*, *Minna von Barnhelm* and *Emilia Galotti*, August von Kotzebue's *Der arme Poet* . . . and potboilers by the likes of W. Friedrich (a pseudonym), Friedrich Halm and J. E. von Plötz. She socialized with and attended concerts by Liszt, read his articles on Wagner, and read the latter's *Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*Artwork of the Future*). And she attended German opera—Gluck, Beethoven, Wagner—as well as museums of German painting and sculpture. (Fleishman 75-76)

1.2. Eliot's Translations: Feuerbach, Strauss & Spinoza

Eliot's intimacy with German thought had started as early as 1841 when she moved to Coventry with her father. The new free-thinking acquaintances and close friends she met at the radical Rosehill Circle, among whom the Brays¹⁸ and the Hennels,¹⁹ were greatly interested in European ideas and especially German Higher Criticism of the Bible: a study of the Holy Scriptures as mythical stories and literary history. Eliot showed a continuous engagement with this rational thinking through her translations of Friedrich Strauss's *Das*

18. Charles and Cara Bray (born Hennel) were a free-thinking couple and close friends of George Eliot. Charles was a prosperous British ribbon manufacturer, social reformer, philanthropist, philosopher, and phrenologist. His wife Cara was a writer of children's stories and school textbooks. They made of their home, Rosehill, a meeting place for radicals such as Robert Owen, Herbert Spencer, or Harriet Martineau to debate and exchange liberal ideas.

19. Mary, Sara, and Charles Christian Hennel: members of the Rosehill Circle and Cara's sisters and brother. Sara was an author and a close friend of George Eliot. Charles was known as a Christian apologist because of his work *An Inquiry concerning the Origin of Christianity*: a systematic analysis of the gospels as historical documents. This book was among the triggering reasons that caused Eliot's crisis of faith.

Leben Jesu, Kritisch bearbeitet (1835-36) as *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1846), Baruch Spinoza's²⁰ *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*²¹ (1670) and his *Ethics* (1677)—unpublished in her lifetime—and Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (1841) as *The Essence of Christianity* (1854). This last work was specifically influential in encouraging “the sceptical and interrogative nature of [Eliot's] thinking in relation to absolute notions of truth” (Rignall, *GE EN* 12).

Feuerbach's main idea in *The Essence of Christianity* is: “the divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective—i.e., contemplated and revered as another, distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature” (14). The same line of thought can be detected in Strauss's *A New Life of Jesus* when the author compares Spinozian philosophy to the Kantian one:

Kant like Spinoza, distinguished between the historical person of Jesus and the ideal of humanity pleasing to God, involved in human reason, or in the moral sense in its perfect purity, so far as is possible in a system of the world dependent of the wants and inclinations. To rise to this ideal was, he said, the general duty of man; and though we cannot conceive of it as existing otherwise than under the form of a perfect man, and though it is not impossible that such a man may have lived, as we are all intended to resemble this ideal, still that it is not necessary that we should know of the existence of such a man or believe in it, but solely that we should keep that ideal before us, recognize it as obligatory upon us, and strive to make ourselves like it. (435-36)

20. A Dutch scholar, but whose philosophy had deeply integrated the German thought.

21. Eliot started translating Spinoza's *Tractatus* in 1843 but did not finish it.

Both Strauss and Feuerbach, whose ideas Eliot “everywhere agree[s]” (*Letters* 2:153) with, were major sources for her moral tendencies and humanist orientation. The following passage from *The Essence of Christianity* summarises Feuerbach’s version of Humanism and pinpoints the importance he grants to sympathy:

The other is my *thou*,—the relation being reciprocal. . . . In another I first have the consciousness of humanity; through him I first learn, I first feel, that I am a man: in my love for him it is first clear to me that he belongs to me and I to him, that we two cannot be without each other, that only community constitutes humanity. . . . My fellow-man is my objective conscience. (157)

As for Eliot, she declared in one of her letters: “My own experience and development deepen every day my conviction that our moral progress may be measured by the degree in which we sympathize with individual suffering and individual joy” (*Letters* 2:403). In other words, morality grows with the human capacity to understand one’s fellows relying on values such as sympathy, mercy, and love. This is typically Feuerbach, as the latter claimed these moral attributes which Christianity had associated with the Divine to be innate qualities natural to humans. Sympathy, this aptitude for feeling and being compassionate toward the others, is a sign of humaneness and the moral foundation for healthy relationships, as the narrator in *Middlemarch* puts it: “There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men” (3:353).

Eliot’s translations of the already mentioned influential German works had also an impact on her hermeneutics. She learned from Spinoza what he describes as “the true method of interpreting scripture” (qtd. in Ratner 44), which relies on a warning against extreme and biased interpretations. “We cannot,” affirms Spinoza, “wrest the meaning of texts to suit the

dictates of our reason, or our preconceived opinions” (qtd. in Ratner 47). In the *Ethics*, Spinoza differentiates between three categories of knowledge:

the first kind, *opinion* or *imagination*, includes random or indeterminate experience, and hearsay or knowledge from mere signs; the second kind, *reason*, depends on “common notions” . . . and on adequate knowledge of “properties” (rather than essences) of things; the third kind, *intuitive knowledge*, “proceeds from an adequate knowledge of the essence or attributes of God to knowledge of the essence of things”. (qtd. in Garrett 5)

The first category of knowledge that relies on “opinion” and “imagination” seems to be regarded as inadequate, for Spinoza qualifies it as “hearsay or knowledge from mere signs”. This Spinozian view is echoed in Eliot’s criticism of gossip in *Middlemarch* where the characters rely on hearsay to form false opinions and act upon them, an instance being when they condemned Lydgate and were convinced of his guilt in the death of Raffles, though there was no evidence. The narrator, who borrows Spinoza’s words, warns the reader that Lydgate was “known *merely* as a cluster of *signs* for his neighbours’ false suppositions” (emphasis added) (*MD* 1:251). As Chase put it, “*Middlemarch* broods everywhere on the distinction between knowledge and opinion” (50).

There is no clear evidence of Eliot’s adherence to Spinoza’s theory of “intuitive knowledge”, but she may have been favourable to it later in her life. Indeed, she acknowledged in one of her 1870s letters that “the most thorough experimentalists admit intuition—i.e. direct impressions/sensibility underlying all proof—as necessary starting points for thought” (*Letters* 6:167). The third chapter of the current thesis will further expand on this point and discuss the connections between Spinoza and the Sufi philosophers Al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi. Talking about Goethe, who will be discussed further on in this chapter, Eliot also acknowledged that he “had a strain of mysticism in his soul. . . . I mean the delighted bathing

of the soul in emotions which overpass the outlines of definite thought,” and even Lewes, who wrote a biography of Goethe, “thinks that he [Goethe] entered into the experience of the mystic” (*L & L* 625).

1.3. Eliot’s German Travels, Encounters & Reviews

In addition to her German translations, Eliot’s German travels and encounters have had a substantial shaping impact on her intellectual architecture. Germany was the European country Eliot had most often visited and spent most time in with her “husband” (as she liked to call him) George Henry Lewes. Weimar and Berlin were the couple’s first destination when they started living together in 1854. Eliot’s warm impressions and feelings about this German “honeymoon” are recorded in her diaries: “Recollections of Weimar” and “Recollections of Berlin”. In the former, Eliot writes that on 30 July 1854 she met Strauss with whom she and Lewes had the chance to discuss briefly: “we breakfasted in the public room at the hotel at Cologne, and were joined there by Dr. Brabant and Strauss. After a short interview with them, we went on board the steamboat which was to take us to Coblenz” (*L & L* 170). Eliot and Strauss met again at Munich where they “had a quarter of an hour’s chat” alone and she “was very agreeably impressed by him” (278), especially by his way of speaking for “he speaks with very choice words, like a man strictly truthful in the use of language” (278).

Eliot’s diaries on Germany are crammed with information on her encounters with other eminent German minds such as Adolf Stahr, a writer and literary historian with whom Eliot “talked of Goethe” (179). “Professor Stahr,” affirms Eliot, “is a very erudite man . . . a good writer, who knows how to select his materials, and has, above all, a charming talent for description. We saw at his house the other night the first portrait of Schiller, which *convince*s me of a likeness to him” (186). Stahr’s book *Torso: Kunst Kunstler, und Kunst Werke der Alten*, which Eliot had read in Berlin and qualified as “charming” (186), was later reviewed twice by her in two different essays: “The Art of the Ancients” for *The Leader* in March 1855,

and “The Art and Artists of Greece” for the *Saturday Review* in May 1856 (D. Carroll 317). The German recollections also mention the so-called *Neudeutsche Schule* (“the New German School”) composer Franz Liszt, whose “conversation” Eliot found “charming” and “whose manner of telling a story was so piquant” (175). And the philosopher Otto Friedrich Gruppe with whom she spent “very pleasant evenings . . . listening to readings of [his] poems. . . . [She] never saw a combination at all like that which makes up Gruppe’s character. Talent, fertility, and versatility” (180-81). Eliot would later in 1855 review in *The Leader* Gruppe’s book *The Past and Future of German Philosophy*. In her essay entitled “The Future of German Philosophy”, she qualifies the author as:

a man of very various accomplishments [who] throws his active intellect with equal fervour and facility into many channels—into poetry and politics as well as into classical literature and philosophy . . . he has vindicated his versatility by achieving more than an average success in more than one department; his *Ariadne* is one of the best books, if not the very best, we have on the Greek Drama. (723)

In the same review, Eliot criticised the German system-making process and praised Gruppe’s non acceptance of it quoting a passage from his book with which she totally agreed: “the age of systems is passed. . . . System is the childhood of philosophy; the manhood of philosophy is investigation” (723). Eliot believed the fundamental error of philosophy to be “the severing of *ideas* from *things*” (ORC 302), a view that she further explains in her review while pointing to Immanuel Kant’s extension of the flaw:

Kant’s classification of Infinity and Universality as ideas *à priori*, and of Space and Time as purely subjective forms of the intelligence, is a further elaboration of this fundamental error. These abstract terms on which speculation has built its huge fabrics are simply the *x* and *y* by which we mark the boundary of our

knowledge; they have no value except in connexion with the concrete. The abstract is derived from the concrete: what then, can we expect from a philosophy the essence of which is the derivation of the concrete from the abstract? (“The Future of German Philosophy” 724)

In other words, Eliot did not believe in general laws for there is always a context for everything. Ideas “only exist incarnate, worked by human intention into some material or other” (*ORC* 302). This is Eliot’s open interpretation and her high esteem for tolerance: a principle that overwhelms her fiction. The following passage from *The Mill on the Floss* illustrates Eliot’s criticism of general rules and human rigidity:

All people of broad, strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the men of maxims; because such people early discern that the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims and that to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy. And the man of maxims is the popular representative of the minds that are guided in their moral judgment solely by general rules, thinking that these will lead them to justice by readymade patent method, without the trouble of exerting patience, discrimination, impartiality, without any care to assure themselves whether they have the insight that comes from a hardly-earned estimate of temptation or from a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellow feeling with all that is human. (487-88)

1.3.1. Immanuel Kant & Moral Philosophy

The very fact that Eliot criticised Immanuel Kant in her essay “The Future of German Philosophy” obviously means she had read his works and was familiar with his philosophy and thought. In another short essay entitled “A word for the Germans” that was published on

7 March 1865, Eliot does not only confirm her reading of Kant, but most of all defends his *Critique of Pure Reason* against a criticism which labeled it “cloudy”: “the recipe for understanding Kant is first to get brains capable of following his argument, and next to master his terminology. Observing this recipe, the *Critique of Pure Reason* is not indeed easy reading, but it is not in the least cloudy. It is not fit for the club table” (387-88). In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the second of Kant’s three critiques,²² he claims that:

The essential point in every determination of the will by the moral law, is that being a free will it is determined simply by the moral law, not only without the co-operation of sensible impulses, but even to the rejection of all such, and to the checking of all inclinations so far as they might be opposed to that law ... consequently we can see *a priori* that the moral law, as a determining principle of the will, must by thwarting all our inclinations produce a feeling which may be called pain. (77)

Therefore, human free will, according to Kant, is not as free as its appellation may suggest. It is determined by a “moral law” whose role consists in “checking” the “sensible impulses” that a human being can have and “rejecting” every “inclination” that goes against it, even if it may cause a feeling of “pain”. Kant uses the verb to “thwart” our “inclinations”, which means to oppose and go against our desires, and that requires a considerable effort. So, the aim of moral law or morality is to push the human to become a better being through the reformation process he imposes upon himself and through the efforts he makes to oppose his own penchants, even if natural. In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant expresses the same idea that human nature may need to be resisted for the sake of accomplishing a duty when he writes:

22. *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), *Critique of Judgement* (1790).

there is a practical law which commands absolutely of itself and without any other incentive, and that the following of this law is duty . . . it is of extreme importance to remember that we must not allow ourselves to think of deducing the reality of this principle from the particular attributes of human nature. For duty is to be a practical, unconditioned necessity of action. (84)

In Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, the protagonist Maggie Tulliver painfully rejects Stephen Guest's love, a feeling she strongly shares, because both of them are already engaged to somebody else:

Oh, it is difficult,—life is very difficult! It seems right to me sometimes that we should follow our strongest feeling;—but then, such feelings continually come across the ties that all our former life has made for us—the ties that have made others dependent on us,—and would cut them in two . . . there are things we must renounce in life. . . . Many things are difficult and dark to me; but I see one thing quite clearly,—that I must not, cannot, seek my own happiness by sacrificing others. Love is natural; but surely pity and faithfulness and memory are natural too. And they would live in me still, and punish me if I did not obey them. (485)

Maggie is obviously going through a moral struggle and laboriously trying to “thwart” a “natural” inclination in order to “obey” a “moral law”: her sense of “duty”. This episode clearly echoes the Kantian moral philosophy stated a few lines above, and makes it “directly concerned with the moral dilemma that is at the centre of Eliot's novel” (Newton 37).

In an 1877 letter to the English psychologist James Sully, Eliot called herself a “meliorist” affirming: “I don't know that I ever heard anybody use the word ‘meliorist’ except myself” (*Letters* 6:333-34). In his *Life and Letters*, Eliot's husband, Cross, confirmed that Eliot “was neither optimist nor pessimist. She held to the middle term, which she invented for

herself, of ‘meliorist’ ” (726). “Meliorism,” according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, is a term “coined by George Eliot for . . . the view that the world can be made better by human effort” (229). Indeed, for an individual to improve the world around him he needs to start by reforming and elevating himself first, and extend such positive attitude through better behaviour towards his human fellows. Meliorism is the personal conclusion Eliot draws from the European philosophies she had been imbued with.

1.3.2. Ephraim Lessing & the *Ut Pictura Poesis*²³ Tradition

Eliot’s “Berlin Recollections 1854-55”, in which she praised the German intellectual Otto Friedrich Gruppe—as already stated a few pages earlier—did not omit to mention his “delightful library, with rare books, and books too good to be rare” (*L & L* 181). Eliot and Lewes “often applied to him for some of them. He lent [her] ‘Lessing,’ and that is an additional circumstance to remember with pleasure in connection with the *Laokoön*” (*L & L* 181). These memories point to the special and particularly beautiful affinity Eliot had cultivated with Lessing and his *Laokoön*.

The German philosopher, dramatist, and interpreter of art Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was another building figure for Eliot’s intellectual artistic architecture whose books, such as *Emilia Galotti*, *Nathan der Weise*, and *Minna von Barnhelm*, she extensively read during the winter of 1854-55 in Berlin. However, the *Laokoön* was *the* work by Lessing that impressed Eliot most for she enthusiastically described it as “the most un-German of all the German books that I have ever read. The style is strong, clear, and lively; the thoughts acute and pregnant. It is well adapted to rouse an interest both in the classics and in the study of art” (*L & L* 190). In his *Laokoön*, Lessing discusses painting and poetry as follows:

23. “In the first century C.E. the poet Horace recorded the famous statement ‘*ut pictura poesis*’ meaning ‘as is painting so is poetry,’ from the *Epistle to the Pisos*. These two epigrams were foundational to inter-arts relationships beginning in antiquity. The *ut pictura poesis* tradition, from which the *paragone* arose, continued to evolve into the nineteenth century. It was founded on the premise that the arts shared similar objectives and content, although they differed in their means and manner of expression” (Lippert 45-46).

The connection between painting and poetry may be compared to that of two equitable neighbouring powers, who permit not that the one should presume to take unbecoming freedom within the heart of the dominions of the other, yet on their frontiers practice a mutual forbearance, by which both sides render a peaceful compensation for those slight aggressions, which, in haste or from the force of circumstances, they have found themselves compelled to make on one another privileges. (121)

Lessing's book is considered as "one of the most important contributions to the *ut pictura poesis* debate since the Renaissance . . . the *Laokoön* was hugely influential, in part, because it was the first real attempt in the history of aesthetics to make numerous and specific distinctions between painting and poetry" (Lippert 47). Evelyne Ender confirms such an influence on Eliot:

Visual images are the building blocks of George Eliot's construction; put together, they create a picture that is immensely rich. . . . It is no minor accomplishment to master a topographical description to the point where it looks like a painting, and Eliot had often been admired for this achievement . . . since Eliot seems deeply committed here to a literary aesthetics of writing as painting (in the long tradition of *ut pictura poesis*), she is bound to emphasize vision. (80)

Eliot herself admits in her essay "Story-Telling", published posthumously in 1884, that:

the modes of telling a story founded on these processes of outward and inward life derive their effectiveness from the superior mastery of images and pictures in grasping the attention . . . our most intimate convictions, are simply images added to more or less of sensation. These are the primitive instruments of thought. Hence it is not surprising that early poetry took this way. (286)

In another essay entitled “Notes on Form in Art”, Eliot further confirms her connections with the tradition of *ut pictura poesis* and, therefore, Lessing’s influence on her: “form begins in the choice of rhythms and images as signs of a mental state. . . . *Poetry* begins when passion weds thought by finding expression in an image” (435).

It is in *Middlemarch* that direct allusions are made to Lessing and his *Laokoön*. Indeed, chapter nineteen of the novel opens with a scene inside the Vatican Museum where the characters are surrounded by sculptures such as “the Belvedere Torso”, “the Meleager”, and “the Cleopatra” (*MD* 1:340). The German painter Naumann, and Will Ladislaw are debating the best means of capturing Dorothea’s beauty: painting or poetry. Naumann believes in the absolute power of painting, whereas Will insists on the fact that “language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, the true seeing is within” (*MD* 1:345). A few pages later, Will addresses Dorothea saying: “you *are* a poem” (*MD* 1:406). Henry James acknowledged that Eliot’s fiction as a whole is “a picture . . . vast, swarming, deep-coloured, crowded with episodes, with vivid images, with lurking master-strokes, with brilliant passages of expression” (qtd. in *A Century of GE Criticism* 81).

In her essay “The Natural History of German Life” published by the *Westminster Review* in 1854, Eliot fuses all of Feuerbach’s Humanism and concept of sympathy, Lessing’s tradition of *ut pictura poesis*, and Spinoza’s issue of biased interpretation (as a result of knowledge based on opinion and imagination). Although a bit too lengthy, the passage deserves to be entirely quoted and requires particular attention to grasp the subtlety of this Eliotian marriage:

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the

trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. . . . Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. Falsification here is far more pernicious than in the more artificial aspects of life. It is not so very serious that we should have false ideas about evanescent fashions—about the manners and conversation of beaux and duchesses; but it *is* serious that our sympathy with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humor in the life of our more heavily laden fellow-man, should be perverted, and turned towards a false object instead of the true one. (184)

In a nutshell, for Eliot—a pure German mind so far—an artist should depict clear, real (not biased), and vivid images of the complexities of life to his audience in order to stimulate their intellect and extend their emotional spheres from a self-centred egoism to sympathy and tolerance towards the others. Picturing becomes then more effective than argumentation to present human life in literature. In 1857, Eliot reviewed in volume 11 of the *Westminster Review* Holme Lee's (pen name of the Victorian authoress Harriet Parr) novel *Kathie Brande, a Fireside History of a Quiet Life*. Even though she found it “nicely written” (320), Eliot severely criticised the writer's way of storytelling for “instead of vividly realizing to herself the terrible scenes, and vividly representing them . . . the author *writes about* them, does not *paint* them” (321).

In *Middlemarch*, Eliot's most accomplished work of art, the tapestry in Dorothea's boudoir looks like “a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world; the volumes of polite literature in the bookcase looked more like immovable imitations of books” (*MD* 2:88). The reader is

propelled into a parallel dimension, i.e. the “ghostly” and bleak world Dorothea was compelled to live in after her marriage to Casaubon. Indeed, “ghostly blue-green” is nothing but a dim reflection of the real blue-green aged by monotony and the lack of care. Even “the volumes of polite literature” have been affected by this suffocating lifeless atmosphere and were reduced to indistinct “imitations of books”. This passage is a visual representation that allows Eliot to introduce the reader to Dorothea’s environment so that he may have access to her feelings. The indifference shown by Casaubon, the coldness of the house, and the heavy boredom all around had rubbed off on Dorothea’s mental state. Her innate motivation and *joie de vivre* had been dulled by sorrow and disappointment.

Eliot has equally painted several scenes where the heroines remain lost in their thoughts in front of windows. The female protagonists sink into deep reflections on their imperfect social conditions, their sufferings, and their inner struggles. Maggie Tulliver, for instance, used to sit at the window and “her eyes *would* fix themselves blankly on the outdoor sunshine; then they would fill with tears, and sometimes, if her mother was not in the room, the studies would all end in sobbing” (*Mill* 308). Dinah Morris has a chair below her room’s window where she would sit and think of “the struggles and the weariness that might lie before them in the rest of their life’s journey . . . and the pressure of this thought soon became too strong for her to enjoy the unresponding stillness of the moonlit fields” (*AB* 160). In *Daniel Deronda* Gwendolen Harleth, too, would sit in front of an open window “gazing fixedly on the sea, resting her cheek on her hand . . . with a deep melancholy in her expression . . . she looked towards the window silently, and again turned with the same expression . . . there was some fear hindering her” (3:212). As for Dorothea Brooke, she looked out and “felt nothing but the dreary oppression; then came a keen remembrance, and turning away from the window she walked round the room . . . all existence seemed to beat with a lower pulse . . .

the struggle out of a nightmare in which every object was withering and shrinking away from her” (*MD* 2:90-91).

Eliot’s rationale behind the use of the window symbolism is an accurate reflection of the complexity of life. A window is the umbilical connection between the inside and the outside. It is through windows that a person from the inside can have access to the outside world—figuratively speaking—to reality. The combination of these ideas, i.e. women being enclosed in the inside and the presence of a window that leads to the outside is reminiscent of Lord Tennyson’s poem “The Lady of Shalott”. The latter was cloistered in an island castle and did not have the right to look directly at the real world through her window. A mirror was her only source to get a reflected picture of the outside. It is noteworthy to mention that Eliot had read Lord Tennyson and knew him personally. She had also sent him her *Scenes* for a critical opinion and she did admire him as an author who occupied a “high place among the immortals” (*L & L* 665). Therefore, Eliot had most probably been dropping hints about Tennyson’s poem when she made her heroines sit in a room with a window. However, unlike the lady of Shalott, Eliot’s women did dare to stare straight at the real world. But more significantly, these scenes painted by Eliot in accordance with the *ut pictura poesis* principle could be counted among the first visual representations of “The Lady of Shalott”. In fact, the first portrait of the latter was made by the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Waterhouse in 1888, after Eliot’s death . Regarding Eliot’s essays in which the *ut pictura poesis* principle is most present, they are mainly the ones she wrote between 1854 and 1857—a period that coincides with her travels to Germany with Lewes.

“Whenever we have been in Germany,” says Eliot, “we have been treated with warm friendliness, and for this reason among many others we cherish a great love for Germany and the Germans” (*Letters* 5:159). She admired them for their liberated spirit, non-concern about appearances, simplicity, and “heartiness and intelligence” (*Letters* 2:189). Eliot sorrowfully

makes the comparison with her own country and draws the following conclusion: “one sees everywhere in Germany what is the rarest of all things in England—thorough *bien-être*, freedom from gnawing cares and ambitions, contentment in inexpensive pleasures with no suspicion that happiness is a vice which we must not only not indulge in ourselves but as far as possible restrain others from giving way to” (*Letters* 2:185). Being a free-thinking couple who shared an extramarital relationship as Lewes was already married, Eliot and her companion could not but enjoy the liberty and simplicity that characterised Germany, as opposed to the conservatism and complexity of the Victorian social code.

1.3.3. Heinrich Heine: Judaism & Israel

Among the many other reasons for which Eliot loved Germany stand out the richness of its intellectual background and the considerable achievements of German scholars. The genuine admiration of the Victorian Germanophile intellectual was openly expressed in an essay she wrote for the *Westminster Review* in January 1856 entitled “German Wit: Heinrich Heine”:

All honor to her [Germany] for the still greater things she has done for us! She has fought the hardest fight for freedom of thought, has produced the grandest inventions, has made magnificent contributions to science, has given us some of the divinest poetry, and quite the divinest music in the world. No one reveres and treasures the products of the German mind more than we do. (72)

Heinrich Heine was a Jewish-German (who had later converted to Christianity and regretted it) journalist, essayist, literary critic, and one of the most influential lyric poets of his epoch. He was a controversial intellectual figure on whom Eliot had a lot to say. She repeatedly cited him in her writings, including the epigraphs to the opening chapters of her novels, and interestingly made him the subject of four of her articles between 1855 and 1856, the essay quoted above being one of them. In the first of these articles, a review of an

American translation of Heine's *Reisebilder* (*Pictures of Travel*) which she published in *The Leader* in September 1855, Eliot described Heine as "a master of a German prose as light and subtle and needle-pointed as Voltaire's French, and as musical as that of Goethe's best lyrics', although he lacks Voltaire's moral conviction and Goethe's profound wisdom" (qtd. in *ORC* 151). In "German Wit: Heinrich Heine", Eliot asserts that:

Heine [is] one of the most remarkable men of this age; no echo, but a real voice, and therefore, like all genuine things in this world, worth studying; a surpassing lyric poet . . . a humorist, who touches leaden folly with the magic wand of his fancy . . . a wit, who holds in his mighty hand the most scorching lightnings of satire; an artist in prose literature, who has shown even more completely than Goethe the possibilities of German prose; and—in spite of all charges against him, true as well as false—a lover of freedom, who has spoken wise and brave words on behalf of his fellow-men. (73-74)

However, while celebrating the German intellectual, Eliot expresses some reservation when reading his *Geständnisse* (*Confessions*) in 1855, for she felt "immensely amused with the wit of it in the first fifty pages, but afterwards [she thought] it burns low, and the want of principle and purpose makes it wearisome" (*L & L* 191). The pinnacle of her interest in Heine showed in the 1870s, late in her life, when she started her Judeophile quest. *Daniel Deronda* remains the best illustration of Eliot's affinity with Heine since she purposefully cites him four times in the novel, three of which are directly linked to Judaism and Israel. The first reference is to Heine's poem "Ich hab im Traum geweinet" ("I had a dream in which I cried") used by the German-Jewish—just like Heine—musician character Klesmer to play a melody on the piano (*DD* 1:350). The second is an opening epigraph to chapter VII (*DD* 2:171), which is an extract dealing with the theme of Israel from Heine's poem "Prinzessin Sabbaz" ("The Sabbath Princess"). The latter belongs to Heine's poetical collection "Hebrew

Melodies” from his *Romanzero*. The third mention of Heine in *Daniel Deronda* is also a passage from *Romanzero* about good fortune and misfortune; it is the opening epigraph to chapter LXII (3:264). The epigraph to the next chapter, i.e. LXIII (3:276), is the fourth and last instance where Heine appears in *Daniel Deronda*. It is an excerpt from *Gestandnisse* (*Confessions*) that relates Moses’s success in liberating the Jewish people from the Egyptians and forming Israel.

1.3.4. From Schiller to Goethe: From Idealism to the *Bildung*

Eliot’s interest in Friedrich Schiller dates further back than her affinity with Heine. She started reading and appreciating the German poet, playwright, and philosopher in the 1840s when she was only twenty. Eliot was then learning German, and six short months later, she was already reading Schiller’s *Maria Stuart* (Guth 23). “Oh,” exclaims Eliot while referring to her collection of Schiller’s works, “if I had given these to the world, how happy I should be!” (*L & L* 740). Her enthusiasm was mainly expressed in her early letters, especially when she once called him “our divine Schiller” (*Letters* 8:13). The aspects that appealed most to Eliot are the idealism in Schiller’s works, as well as “the intensity of his moral vision, his belief in man’s capacity to transcend life’s distancing chaos and triumph over the call of narrow self-interest and egoism . . . the moral dilemmas arising from his characters’ high ideals in conflict with social and historical reality” (Guth 6). Deborah Guth also argues that the notions of heroism and truth present in Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* owe a lot to her love for Schiller (22). This attraction started to weaken in the 1850s when Eliot was to live and work with Lewes, a philosopher and literary critic, who was about to write a biography of Goethe. Biographers and literary critics of Eliot all agree that the latter showed a shift of interest from Schiller to Goethe during her German years. John Rignall sees in this episode a turning point in Eliot’s intellectuality that “marked a move from an idealism that lends itself

to moral maxims towards a more differentiated and relativized understanding of moral questions” (*GE EN 22*).

The German intellectual, novelist, poet, dramatist, and man of letters Johann Wolfgang Goethe was a considerable source of inspiration for Eliot all along her writing career. As related in the diaries of her friend Cara Bray, Eliot started reading Goethe’s works as early as the 1840s in Coventry, including *Wilhelm Meister Lehrjahre*, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*), and *Egmont* (qtd. in *ORC* 139). However, Eliot’s serious intellectual affinity with Goethe started in 1854 when she left London with Lewes for an eight-month stay in Germany to help the latter with the preparation of his *Life and Works of Goethe* (1855). Eliot actively participated in Lewes’s project translating the passages from Goethe that her companion had selected to cite in his book. When they were in Weimar, the couple went to visit Goethe’s house where they obtained permission to see his studio and study that normally were not open to the public. “And here our feelings were deeply moved,” confesses Eliot who, after a meticulous description of the scene, admits that “among such memorials one breathes deeply, and the tears rush to one’s eyes” (*L & L* 174).

Eliot cherished a profound interest in Goethe because she largely shared with him a deep similarity of vision regarding both the complexity of human experience and the avoidance of general moral judgments. On her return from Germany in 1855, she reviewed for *The Leader* Goethe’s novel *Wilhelm Meister*—accused of immorality by then. In her essay entitled “The Morality of *Wilhelm Meister*”, Eliot praises Goethe’s “large tolerance” (147):

Everywhere he brings us into the presence of living, generous humanity—mixed and erring, and self-deluding, but saved from utter corruption by the salt of some noble impulse, some disinterested effort, some beam of good nature, even though grotesque or homely. And his mode of treatment seems to us precisely that which is really moral in its influence. (146)

It is undoubtedly this openness and tolerance in Goethe that appealed to Eliot who considered the German figure to be “the man who helps us to rise to a lofty point of observation, so that we may see things in their relative proportions” (“The Morality of *Wilhelm Meister*” 297). “Relative” is a revealing word here as it hints at there being no “absolute understanding but a sense of how things may be understood in relation to one another. It is this kind of relativism that [Eliot] shares with Goethe in her vision as a novelist” (Rignall, *GE EN 22*).

Rignall interestingly adds: “it is significant that her one article on Goethe’s work is devoted to his archetypal *Bildungsroman* . . . for many of her own novels could be described as *Bildungsromane* . . . The debt to Goethe is made explicit in *Daniel Deronda* . . . Goethe shows how true learning can only come through lived experience” (*GE EN 23*). The literary genre known as the *Bildungsroman*²⁴ derives from the German word and theme *Bildung* which, according to the *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of British Literature*, is “a process of self-formation over the course of which the self, spurred by external circumstance, develops its own internal resources and forms itself harmoniously” (192). This literary and philosophical tradition is thought to have been initiated by Goethe (Fleishman 76), and could be defined “as ‘novel of education’ or, a bit more literally, ‘novel of formation’ . . . in Anglo-American criticism it has become a popular, relatively unscrutinized generic term for a novel that focuses on the psychological and social development of its main character” (Redfield 191). According to these definitions, and as stated by Rignall a few lines above, most of Eliot’s novels, i.e. *Adam Bede*, *the Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda* are *Bildungsromane*, as all of them are psychological novels in which the protagonists go through complex human experiences. Yet, they do struggle and evolve to eventually emerge more mature.

24. “*Wilhelm Meister* (1795–96) is usually considered the foundation of this genre, despite the earlier appearance of Christoph M. Wieland’s *Agathon* (1767)” (Fleishman 262).

Eliot's originality lies in the fact that before becoming an actor in literature, she started by acting on herself first. From the 1840s on, she had been experiencing a *Bildung* process of personal development. Eliot had been collecting nectar of knowledge from Europe to produce Meliorism that became the very foundation of her way of thinking and writing. In a letter dated 21 January 1852, Eliot shared with her friend Sara Hennel an anecdote that occurred between her and the French intellectual Pierre Leroux who asked her with "unction" that Eliot found "amusing": "Est ce que nous sommes faits pour chercher le bonheur? Est ce là votre idée—dites moi," to which she replied "Mais non—nous sommes faits, je pense pour nous développer le plus possible" (*L & L* 136-37).

Conclusion

In essence, Eliot's intellectual Germanness started to form in the early forties through both her extensive readings of German history, philosophy, mythology, art, poetry, fiction, and drama, and her translations of influential works such as Feuerbach's, Strauss's, and Spinoza's. Eliot's intimacy with Germany eventually matured in the fifties thanks to her frequent travels to the country, her encounters, and her reviews. From Feuerbach and Strauss's Humanism, Spinoza's hermeneutics, Kant's moral philosophy and sense of duty, Lessing's *ut pictura poesis*, to Goethe's tolerance, relativism, and *Bildung*, Eliot was very receptive to German philosophies that acted like firm foundations for what she coined as "Meliorism"—a principle based on constant improvement that became the core of her way of thinking and writing. Eliot's relationship with Germany was based on two concepts which *à priori* may seem paradoxical: agnosticism and wisdom. "The Sage of Unbelief" (K. Hughes 280), as she was called, rejected dogmatic Christianity after a deep crisis of faith largely fuelled by her readings and translations of German High critics of the Bible, and turned towards what can be summarised as German wisdom. The latter encompasses old Humanism,

sympathy, simplicity, openness, tolerance, the *Bildung*, and morality, all of which produced Eliot's Meliorism.

The extent of both Eliot's tolerance and sympathy, however, will be discussed further on in this dissertation. But for the time being, the following chapter shall carry on with Eliot's European journeys—this time to France.

CHAPTER 2

George Eliot & France

Introduction

Eliot and France shared a mutual intellectual relationship based on receptivity. Not only did the British authoress speak fluent French, read a multitude of French works in the original, review French books in her essays, and enjoy frequent stays in the European neighbour country, her writings too were at the time translated into French by François D'Albert-Durade and appreciated by the French audience, including eminent intellectuals. “I find to my surprise that I have admirers in France,” exclaims Eliot, “and in some cases, where I least expected them. Montalembert, for example, and—Alexandre Dumas (the elder)! Count Arrivabene, on his return from Naples, told us that Dumas went off into rhapsodies about ‘Adam Bede,’ and pronounced it the first novel of the age” (*L & L* 420).

As the main interest of this dissertation has so far been to investigate Eliot’s attitudes towards European intellect, and not the opposite, the present chapter will focus on the way Eliot responded to the most outstanding French philosophies, such as Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées* or Auguste Comte’s altruism and Positivism. Likewise, it will discuss Eliot’s affinity with fiery minds, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and George Sand. The chapter will eventually deal with Honoré de Balzac’s delineation of provinciality that Eliot highly praised and yet so differently interpreted as a person and expressed as a writer.

2.1. Pascal’s *Pensées* & Faith

Eliot started learning French at the Misses Franklin’s school²⁵ in Coventry when she was thirteen years old. She was a brilliant student who made huge progress during a one-year

25. A boarding school run by two Baptist sisters: Mary and Rebecca Franklin. At the Franklins school, Mary Anne won prizes in French and in English composition, and was known for her fine piano playing.

training period , and had therefore received a copy of Pascal's *Pensées* as a school prize. Eliot's first visit to France was with the Brays in 1849 when they went for a continental tour including all of northern Italy and Switzerland, where she made the decision to stay alone for a period of eight months in Geneva. In 1865, Eliot returned to France with Lewes for "an expedition into Brittany" (*L & L* 465). The detailed itinerary of their trip had carefully been noted in Eliot's diaries as follows: "from Boulogne to St. Valéry, Dieppe, Rouen, Caen, Bayeux, St. Lô, Vire, Avranches, Dol, St Malo, Rennes, Avray, and Carnac, back by Nantes, Tours, Le Mans, Chartres, Paris, Rouen, Dieppe, Abbeville, and so again to Boulogne" (*L & L* 465). The couple had regularly kept travelling to France until Lewes died in 1878. Eliot's last European visit was in 1880 when she spent her honeymoon with John Walter Cross in both France and Italy.

The *Pensées* of the French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher Blaise Pascal was a volume that the young Mary Anne had greatly appreciated. In a letter dated 18 August 1838, she cheerfully declared to her former teacher Maria Lewis: "I do not wonder you are pleased with Pascal; his thoughts may be returned to the palate again and again with increasing rather than diminished relish" (*L & L* 20). This affinity had remained relatively strong until the last years of Eliot's life. Indeed, on 26 January 1878, she explained to her publisher and friend John Blackwood that "[her] first acquaintance with Pascal came from his 'Pensées' being given to [her], as a school prize, when [she] was fourteen; and [she is] continually turning to them now to revive [her] sense of their deep though broken wisdom" (*L & L* 670). What Eliot meant by "broken" is probably the fact that the *Pensées* was a collection of fragmented thoughts and ideas that Pascal had noted down in an unaccomplished order. He then died before completing his work, leaving an unfinished project that was posthumously reassessed and published.

The *Pensées* is an apologetic work of literature in favour of Christianity. It focuses on the human existential dimension claiming that for a man to reach true happiness and balance, he surely needs faith. The *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* presents Blaise Pascal as “a leading example of religious conviction based on existential commitment and faith rather than reason” (269). In the *Pensées*, one can read: “if man is not made for God, why is he happy only in God? . . . We want truth and find only uncertainty in ourselves. . . . Happiness is neither outside of us nor within us. It is in God, both outside and within us” (4-5). This idea of happiness, truth, and quest for the true self being intimately related to one’s faith is to be found in Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, a novel which starts with the affirmation that “men can do nothing without the *make-believe* of a beginning ” (emphasis added) (1:1) and ends with “an ocean of peace” (3:371) eventually reached because Daniel had been reunited with his true Judaic self, not to say his God. The success of Daniel’s quest brought happiness and comfort to the prophet-like figure Ezra (Mordecai) who peacefully passed away pronouncing “in Hebrew the confession of the *divine Unity*” (emphasis added) (3:371). Here again, serenity of the soul was found “in God, both outside and within”, i.e. Ezra’s soul found peace when Daniel had recovered the Jewishness that would help him to guide the Children of Israel back home. Ezra/Mordecai had been waiting for this happy moment for a long time, fuelled by his proper faith in “the divine Unity”.

The opening paragraph to *Daniel Deronda* carries on as follows: “even science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars’ unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought” (1:1). So, not only do men need to believe in something to start their journeys, but even science/reason is bound “to start with a make-believe unit,” affirms in 1876 a mature Eliot who would in 1878 confess her continuous reading of the *Pensées* for their “wisdom”. In 1873, while she was preparing *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot famously declared: “every community

met to worship the highest Good (which is understood to be expressed by God) carries me along in its main current” (*Letters* 5:448). Therefore, it may be concluded that the idea of faith never left Eliot who had undoubtedly rejected dogmatic Christianity in the 1840s, but had ever since striven after a substitute for the idea of God because she instinctively needed to have faith in something constructive, be it Humanism, morality, the *Bildung*, Meliorism, Judaism, altruism—as it will be argued below—or simply the “Good”. Eliot shared with Pascal the belief that faith was the key for a balanced and happy human existence. George Levine puts forward the idea that Eliot “stopped believing in God but could not stop believing in divine ideals” (*Dying to know* 238).

Eliot paid homage to Pascal Blaise in *Middlemarch* where he is quoted twice in the epigraphs to chapters XXX (2:112) and LXXV (4:215). Pascal is also considered by the novel’s protagonist Dorothea Brook as an “old companion” (3:84). Dorothea knew “many passages of Pascal’s *Pensées* . . . by heart” (1:3)—the same way Eliot did. While she was thinking about her future new life with the erudite Casaubon, Dorothea enthusiastically said to herself: “it would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by” (1:41). Another striking similarity is that Casaubon, just like Pascal, eventually died leaving his work, *The Key to all Mythologies*, unfinished in the form of mere notes.

2.2. Comte’s Altruism & Positivism

In addition to Pascal’s influence, Eliot’s idea of finding a substitute for God and believing in it has also a lot to do with August Comte. The French philosopher and social theorist is considered as the founder of both Positivism and the Religion of Humanity, whose controversial influence on Eliot has been thoroughly debated by literary critics. In truth, Eliot

developed an affinity with some of Comte's ideas, but had also very clearly rejected others. She encouraged her companion Lewes, who was a fervent admirer of Comte, to regard the Comtian "polity as a utopia, presenting hypotheses rather than doctrines" (qtd. in *ORC* 57). Eliot, however, owed deep respect to the French thinker's intellect, as she declared to Miss Sara Hennell in a letter dated 12 July 1861: "I quite agree with you—so far as I am able to form a judgment—in regarding Positivism as one sided; but Comte was a great thinker, nevertheless, and ought to be treated with reverence by all smaller fry" (*L & L* 411).

Certainly, Eliot was "able to form a judgment" about Comte for she had been in contact with his ideas as early as the 1840s when his major work *Cours de Philosophie Positive* was published (*CC* 78). In the 1850s, Eliot's companion George Henry Lewes was to write his *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences* (1853) after having already had his *A Biographical History of Philosophy* published in 1846, and updated in 1867 as *History of Philosophy: From Thales to Comte*. As related in her *Life and Letters* by her future husband John Walter Cross, Eliot had equally read most of Comte's works: *Catechism* (319), *Discours Préliminaire* that had "greatly moved" her (442), *Social Science* (446), *Synthèse* (487), *Correspondence with Valat* (552), and *Politique Positive* in which she found "delight" (503) and whose "first chapter of the fourth volume [she described as being] among the finest of all, and the most finely written" (488-89). In an 1867 letter to her positivist friend Mrs. Congreve, Eliot eagerly declared that her "gratitude increases continually for the illumination Comte has contributed to [her] life" (*L & L* 489). This "illumination" accompanied Eliot until the last year in her life, as confirmed by Cross who relates that he used to read aloud Comte's *Discours Préliminaire* to her during her illness, as it was "one of her especial favorites" (*L & L* 721). Cross further explains that:

For all Comte's writing she had a feeling of high admiration, intense interest, and very deep sympathy. I do not think I ever heard her speak of any writer

with a more grateful sense of obligation for enlightenment. Her great debt to him was always thankfully acknowledged. But the appreciation was thoroughly selective, so far as I was able to judge. Parts of his teachings were accepted and other parts rejected. Her attitude towards him, as the founder of a new religion, may be gathered from the references and allusions in the foregoing correspondence, and from the fact that for many years, and up to the time of her death, she subscribed to the Comtist Fund,²⁶ but never, so far as I am aware, more directly associated herself with the members of the Positivist Church. It was a limited adherence. (721)

Considering the selective and critical attitude Eliot had shown regarding Positivism, and keeping in mind the major aspects she had chosen to retain from the philosophies of Strauss, Feuerbach, Goethe, Kant, Spinoza, and Pascal (namely Humanism, sympathy, tolerance, morality, objectivity, intuitive knowledge, and faith), it seems that what appealed most to Eliot in Comte is his altruism. Indeed, he regarded history as a progression in time from Metaphysics towards Positive science and “each period was associated with corresponding developments in the moral and political spheres. As Reason replaced Feeling in thought, so Altruism replaced Egoism in action” (*ORC* 310). Eliot, herself, was an intellectual who went through these metaphysical and scientific phases to eventually reject rigid Christian dogmas and become a free-thinker. Altruism, with its human dimension, is undoubtedly the social and moral basis for Comte’s Positivism that Eliot was most interested in. She distanced herself from Comte’s Religion of Humanity as a Church, for it was a whole system of rituals, liturgy, sacraments, and priesthood that Eliot had formerly and firmly rejected, and adhered to

26. As clarified by Pickering in her *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*, “members of the ‘rich class of society’, should give part of ‘their capital’ to ‘poor, but honest scholars’ who, motivated by their ‘love of Humanity,’ did not want to ‘dirty their pen’ by having to work for people opposed to progress. In the *Cours*, Comte had also referred to this idea; he explained that ‘public munificence’ would have to protect thinkers as their work became more general, abstract, and abstruse. This principle seemed to be endorsed by Mill, who wrote on March 22, 1842, that if Comte were unjustly persecuted by his scientific colleagues, ‘all impartial persons’ would sympathize with him, and they could compensate him for his material loss” (24-25).

the Humanist version of it as a secular belief that valued human altruism. Therefore, her lack of a God was filled, once more, with a faith in the sacred character of the human and his philanthropy.

“Man’s true unity,” says Comte in *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, “consists in living for others” (271). Eliot’s *Middlemarch* is an arena where a fight takes place between acquired moral altruism and instinctive dark egoism because “we are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves” (*MD* 1:383). This innate “stupidity” is nothing else than “the cloudy, damp despondency of uneasy egoism” (*MD* 1:382). “Dorothea,” the reader is told, “had early begun to emerge from that stupidity,” (*MD* 1:383) while Rosamond Vincy was “entirely occupied not exactly with Tertius Lydgate . . . but with his relation to her” (*MD* 1:299). Rosamond was, thus, overwhelmed by “self-interested desires” (*MD* 1:319). However, Eliot’s fictional characters are struggling human beings who all deserve the reader’s sympathy—be they egoists or altruists, right or wrong—because the social element also has its share of the blame as it will be further discussed in both chapters 6 and 7. Eliot famously asserted: “the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures” (*Letters* 3:111).

Towards the end of his life Auguste Comte, too, became more tolerant towards the emotional than he had been earlier. In his *System*, “he allows a larger place for feeling . . . and concedes that it is possible to attain some knowledge through this more emotional, less rational means . . . he argues that we can accept a ‘subjective’ theory for which we have no objective evidence if it is consistent with the facts we do know” (*CC* 106). It is interesting how Comte’s late view echoes Pascal’s belief in faith as a necessary element for a balanced

human existence regardless of any “objective evidence”, and Spinoza’s idea about intuitive knowledge that can be attained through “this more emotional, less rational means”.

The striking conclusion here is that most of these European philosophies dealt with so far, be they German or French, always tend to share a similar essence: the human being needs faith in something constructive that would help him to improve and elevate himself in order to have a balanced and productive existence, and assure a peaceful and happy interaction with his fellows. It seems as though all these attitudes to life have partly been influenced by Islamic culture as it will be further developed in the next chapter. Even the Positivist *par excellence* Auguste Comte had obviously found balance in his Religion of Humanity. Eliot clearly chose to be selective with regards to Positivism and to focus rather on its altruistic side, which makes her “a positivist with a small *p*” (Fleishman 6). She, nevertheless, acknowledged and celebrated the humanist side of Comte’s Positivism in both her life and literature.

2.3. Rousseau, Sand & French Women Intellectuals: an “Electric Thrill”

French literature was the first foreign literature Eliot had read in the original, which allowed her to develop a wide knowledge of French culture, and fluent mastery of the language. All along her life, she had relied on a significant use of French words, expressions, and quotes in all of her letters, essays, and fiction. French literature was for Eliot “one of the three greatest literatures of the world, together with English and German” (ORC 127).

After having completed her translation of Strauss’s *The Life of Jesus* in 1846, Eliot turned to reading *Emile, ou De l’éducation*, and *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, as well as the *Confessions* by the French-Swiss philosopher, novelist, and man of letters Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In the appendix to his *Life and Letters*, Cross reveals a conversation Eliot had in the Brays’ house in Coventry with the American Transcendentalist philosopher, essayist, and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. The latter asked Eliot about “what had first awakened her to deep

reflection, and when she answered: Rousseau's 'Confessions,' he remarked that this was very interesting, inasmuch as Carlyle had told him that very book had had the same effect upon his mind. As I heard Emerson's remark after his interviews with Miss Evans, it was, 'That young lady has a calm, clear spirit' " (742-43).

As she herself acknowledged in an 1849 letter to Miss Hennell, the spark that ignited Eliot's "deep reflection" was Rousseau's "genius" which:

has sent that electric thrill through my intellectual and moral frame which has awakened me to new perceptions,—which has made man and nature a fresh world of thought and feeling to me; and this not by teaching me any new belief. It is simply that the rushing mighty wind of his inspiration has so quickened my faculties that I have been able to shape more definitely for myself ideas which had previously dwelt as dim *Ahnungen* ["intuitions"] in my soul; the fire of his genius has so fused together old thoughts and prejudices, that I have been ready to make new combinations. (*L & L* 101)

So, Rousseau had strongly electrified Eliot's intellect, arousing "new perceptions" and intense sensibility. He was a sparkling source of "new" and "fresh" inspiration, fervour, ardour, and enthusiasm for her. "The fire" of Rousseau's genius acted like one of the classical four elements whose energy and impulse stimulated a revival and a resurrection of Eliot's brain, so to speak, and boosted her innate faculties. These "new perceptions" that "made man and nature a fresh world of thought and feeling" to Eliot have been celebrated in her article "Poetry and Prose from the Notebooks of an Eccentric" published in the *Coventry Herald and Observer* in February 1847. Indeed, Eliot had beautifully and symbolically presented a scene where Rousseau was "looking at a plant as an example of a mind restored through intellectual cultivation 'to that state of wonder and interest with which it looks on everything in childhood' " (qtd. in *ORC* 351).

Eliot inherited from Rousseau a fresh electric mind and a sensitive receptivity to the new that allowed her to respond with positive excitement and enthusiasm to the Paris Revolution of 1848, as clearly shown by the following passage from a letter she addressed to her Coventry friend and correspondent John Sibree:

I absolve you, for the sole merit of thinking rightly (that is, of course, just as I do) about *la grande nation* and its doings. You and Carlyle . . . are the only two people who feel just as I would have them—who can glory in what is actually great and beautiful without putting forth any cold reservations and incredulities to save their credit for wisdom. I am all the more delighted with your enthusiasm . . . I feared that you lacked revolutionary ardor. But no—you are just as *sans-culottish*²⁷ and rash as I would have you. (*L & L* 91)

Eliot was impressed by the fact that French people enjoyed a high revolutionary spirit, which they ardently exploited as an intellectual force aiming at social reform: “in France, the *mind* of the people is highly electrified—they are full of ideas on social subjects—they really desire social reform” (*L & L* 92). French women in particular were a piquant and sparkling source of an electric inspiration and stimulation for the sharp and quick-witted Eliot. In her essay “Woman in France: Madame de Sablé”²⁸ published in 1854 in the *Westminster Review*, Eliot praised the exclusivity of the French women’s maturing effect on literature: “in France alone woman has had a vital influence on the development of literature; in France alone the mind of woman has passed like an electric current through the language, making crisp and definite what is elsewhere heavy and blurred; in France alone, if the writings of women were swept away, a serious gap would be made in the national history” (33). Eliot presented French

27. An adjective related to the French word *Sans-culotte*, which during the French Revolution referred to a revolutionary of the poor class who used to wear trousers instead of knee breeches.

28. An essay that marked the beginning of Eliot’s reviewing career at the *Westminster Review* in 1854. It is a review of three French books on illustrious women: Victor Cousin’s *Madame de Sablé. Etudes sur les Femmes illustres et la Société du XVII siècle*, C.A. Saint-Beuve’s *Portraits de Femmes*, and J. Michelet’s *Les Femmes de la Révolution*.

women intellectuals as an inspiring example of success in nearly all domains: “we must turn to France for the highest examples of womanly achievement in almost every department” (33). These women, claims Eliot, “are known rather by what they stimulated men to write, than by what they wrote themselves—the women whose tact, wit, and personal radiance created the atmosphere of the *Salon*, where literature, philosophy, and science, emancipated from the trammels of pedantry and technicality, entered on a brighter stage of existence” (34). French intellectuals of both sexes used to meet in the “*Salons*”²⁹ and have “*réunions*” during which “conversation ran along the whole gamut of subjects, from the frothiest *vers de société* to the philosophy of Descartes” (34). A few pages further, Eliot provides the reader with a description of the *Salons*’ atmosphere in which she subtly implied a critical comparison between these stimulating intellectual French meetings and the much less inspiring British ones. The quote is somewhat lengthy but it deserves to be entirely cited for an overall comprehension of Eliot’s caustic criticism:

When these womanly characteristics [affection, imagination, passion, lightness of treatment, and airiness of expression (37)] were brought into conversational contact with the materials furnished by such minds as those of Richelieu, Corneille, the Great Condé, Balzac,³⁰ and Bossuet, it is no wonder that the result was something piquant and charming. Those famous *habitués* of the Hôtel de Rambouillet³¹ did not, apparently, first lay themselves out to entertain the ladies with grimacing “small-talk,” and then take each other by the sword-

29. Eliot was very enthusiastic about the French *Salons* in which she believed “enviable evenings, no doubt” were held, and “if we could be carried back to any of them at will, we should hardly know whether to choose the Wednesday dinner at Madame Geoffrin’s, with d’Alembert, Mademoiselle de l’Espinasse, Grimm, and the rest, or the graver society which, thirty years later, gathered round Condorcet and his lovely young wife” (“Woman in France” 40).

30. Not to be mistaken with Honoré de Balzac. This is Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac (1597-1654): French author and one of the founding members of the *Académie Française*.

31. One of the main renowned French *Salons* of the seventeenth century run by its owner Catherine de Vivonne, Marquise de Rambouillet, better known as Madame de Rambouillet.

knot to discuss matters of real interest in a corner; they rather sought to present their best ideas in the guise most acceptable to intelligent and accomplished women. And the conversation was not of literature only: war, politics, religion, the lightest details of daily news—everything was admissible, if only it were treated with refinement and intelligence. The Hôtel de Rambouillet was no mere literary *réunion*; it included *hommes d'affaires* and soldiers as well as authors, and in such a circle women would not become *bas bleus* or dreamy moralizers, ignorant of the world and of human nature, but intelligent observers of character and events. (37-38)

It is undoubtedly this precocious freedom of thought *à la française*, respect between genders, and acknowledgement of the woman's intellect that granted women a top-rank intellectual position. This had electrically inspired Eliot who overtly declared her admiration at the end of her essay:

women become superior in France by being admitted to a common fund of ideas, to common objects of interest with men; and this must ever be the essential condition at once of true womanly culture and of true social well-being. . . . Let the whole field of reality be laid open to woman as well as to man . . . then we shall have that marriage of minds which alone can blend all the hues of thought and feeling in one lovely rainbow of promise for the harvest of human happiness. (62-63)

One of the most prominent French female intellectuals whom Eliot read and particularly admired was Aurore Dudevant, alias George Sand. She started reading Sand's novels in the 1840s after her crisis of faith: *Indiana* (1832), *Lélia* (1833), *Jacques* (1834), *Spiridion* (1838-39), *Consuelo* (1842-43), *Le Meunier d'Angibault* (1845), and *Lettres d'un Voyageur* (1834-35) (ORC 355). In an 1848 letter to Miss Hennell, Eliot informed her friend

that she was “reading George Sand’s ‘Lettres d’un Voyageur’ with great delight” and hoped that “they will some time do you as much good as they do me” (*L & L* 86). In another 1848 letter, but to John Sibree this time, Eliot qualified a stanza³² from Sand’s *Lettres d’un Voyageur* as “almost the ultimatum of human wisdom on the question of human sorrow” (*L & L* 89).

Eliot took great pleasure in reading Sand and valued the passion and psychology in her writings. Eliot’s fiction, too, relies on the psychological element and contains passionate characters, which is a European legacy that she inherited and developed in her writings. This psychological depth that Eliot admired in Sand’s writings is further exploited in her own works. Indeed, Eliot’s fiction depicts human psychology and portrays human inner struggles, moral conflicts, and social dilemmas that are all part of human experience. She also relied on her own experiences to sustain the psychological dimension of her fiction, as she herself acknowledged: “my writing is simply a set of experiments in life . . . I refuse to adopt any formula which does not get itself clothed for me in some human figure and individual experience” (*Letters* 6:216-17). Eliot’s interest in the human psychological dimension echoes the modernists’ interest in analysing human nature by means of human experience. As Virginia Woolf herself put it, modernist novelists tried to come closer to life by showing that “everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss” (qtd. in Goldman 106). By introducing this psychological concept into fiction, modernists “have opened up for it a new area of life. They have added mental functioning and psychic existence to the already established domain

32. Le bonheur et le malheur,
 Nous viennent du même auteur,
 Voilà la ressemblance.
 Le bonheur nous rend heureux,
 Et le malheur malheureux,
 Voilà la différence. (*L & L* 89)

of motive and action. They have created a fiction centred on the core of human experience” (Humphrey 22). Humphrey goes on to explain that “in short, the stream of consciousness novelists were, like the naturalists, trying to depict life accurately; but unlike the naturalists, the life they were concerned with was the individual’s psychic life” (9). Furthermore, Tim Dolin admits that “the modernistic self-awareness of *Daniel Deronda* and [Eliot’s] emphasis on psychological analysis set the pattern for modern stream of consciousness fiction” (218). As a matter of fact, both Daniel Deronda and Gwendolen Harleth, the two central characters of the novel, came to self-awareness through psychological struggling. This very concept of self-awareness is also linked to another issue: unconsciousness. While the unconscious mind would wait until “the end of the 1880s,” when Eliot had died, to “become the most celebrated of all psychological concepts” (Tallis 34), she was already using this modern vocabulary in her fiction: “the silent consciousness” (*AB* 495), “deep fold of his consciousness” (*DD* 1:123), “dark seed- growths of consciousness” (*DD* 2:22), “an under-consciousness” (*DD* 2:111), “a suppressed consciousness” (*DD* 2:151), “unconsciousness” (*DD* 2:248), and “beyond his consciousness” (*DD* 3:107). Eliot’s works show an advanced interest in consciousness and psychological life. Her interest in human nature and psyche is clearly reflected by her novels’ description of human inner struggles and social conflicts relying on human experiences. Together with the modernists, she shares the same attempt to come closer to life by showing, as Woolf had put it, that “every feeling, every thought” is “the proper stuff of fiction” (qtd. in Goldman 106). Both Eliot and modernist writers made efforts to “depict life accurately” using the psychic dimension (Humphrey 9). As acknowledged by D.H. Lawrence, “it was she [George Eliot] who started putting all the action inside; she made visible the invisible world inside the heads of her characters” (qtd. in Flanders 160).

Sand's genius, like Rousseau's, had on Eliot's mind the same electric and thrilling impact. In the same letter to Miss Hennel where she describes the effect Rousseau had on her intellect, Eliot also acknowledges a similar affinity with Sand:

It is thus with George Sand . . . I don't care whether I agree with her about marriage or not—whether I think the design of her plot correct, or that she had no precise design at all, but began to write as the spirit moved her . . . It is sufficient for me, as a reason for bowing before her in eternal gratitude to that “great power of God manifested in her,” that I cannot read six pages of hers without feeling that it is given to her to delineate human passion and its results . . . with such truthfulness, such nicety of discrimination, such tragic power, and withal, such loving, gentle humor, that one might live a century with nothing but one's own dull faculties, and not know so much as those six pages will suggest. (*L & L* 101)

George Sand is described in Eliot's “Woman in France” as “the unapproached artist who, to Jean Jacques' [Rousseau] eloquence and deep sense of external nature, unites the clear delineation of character and the tragic depth of passion” (33). It is possible that Sand's view of human passion may have influenced Eliot's personal experience of it: her daring decision, at the time, to openly live in an extramarital relationship with the already married George Henry Lewes. There is no evidence for it, but it may equally be conceivable that “George”, the pen-name Eliot had chosen to adopt, is in fact a tribute to both Lewes and Sand.

While writing about Rousseau and Sand, Eliot made it clear that they “are not in the least oracles to me. It is just possible that I may not embrace one of their opinions,—that I may wish my life to be shaped quite differently from theirs” (*L & L* 100-01); however, she, on the other hand, also asserted that both writers “have most profoundly influenced me—[they] have rolled away the waters from their bed, raised new mountains and spread delicious

valleys for me” (*L & L* 100). Eliot cherished a profound and lifelong intellectual affinity with both Rousseau and Sand. In 1880, the last year in her life, Eliot decided to return with her husband John Cross to Les Charmettes where Rousseau had lived from 1736 to 1742, and she picked some roses in the French writer’s garden as homage to his love of nature (*L & L* 710). On their way back home during the same year, Eliot and Cross had been reading Sand’s books all of which, says Cross, “she had read years before, and I was astonished to find what clear-cut, accurate impressions had been retained” (*L & L* 723).

Rousseau and Sand have been for Eliot sustainable sources of energy, so to speak, for they have both provided her with the necessary cerebral flame, verve, and vitality that she internalized forever without compromising her aptitude for future receptivity of other fresh *élans* palpably evident in the cosmopolitan nature of her lifelong productivity.

2.4. Balzac & the Empathy with the Provincial

Another imposing French literary figure, novelist, playwright, critic, essayist, and journalist with whom Eliot developed a certain affinity—and also significant differences—is Honoré de Balzac. Eliot noted in her journals that on 18 August 1856, she finished reading Balzac’s “‘César Birotteau’ aloud” (*L & L* 210). She, then, pointed to September 1856—only a month later—as the date which “made a new era in [her] life, for it was then [she] began to write fiction” (*L & L* 210). Eliot’s first work of fiction is a collection of three short stories entitled *Scenes of Clerical Life*, the first of which is “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton”. According to Rignall, Eliot very possibly had Balzac in mind when she started writing her fiction, for *César Birotteau* belongs to *Scènes de la Vie Parisienne*: one of the numerous subdivisions, as is *Scènes de la Vie de Province*, of Balzac’s *Etudes des Mœurs* (*GE EN* 67). No need to mention here the striking similarity between Balzac’s titles and both Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Middlemarch: a Study of Provincial Life*.

In the “Belles Lettres and Art” section of the July 1856 *Westminster Review* (volume 66), Eliot praised “the delineation of quiet provincial life; it belongs to that genius of novels in which Miss Austen and Balzac have given us too high a standard to allow of our being easily satisfied” (144). In the *Comédie Humaine* collection, Balzac’s provincial novels were Eliot’s favourites (Rignall, *GE EN 70*). Therefore, it is no surprise that the novel she had chosen to re-read in the last year of her life, during her honeymoon in Paris, was *Eugénie Grandet* from *Scènes de la Vie de Province* (*L & L 708*).

However, Eliot’s dealing with provincial life in her fiction is different from Balzac’s. In “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton” in the *Scenes*—Eliot’s first work of fiction—Amos Barton is a provincial clergyman described by the narrator as “a man whose virtues were not heroic . . . who had not the slightest mystery hanging about him, but was palpably and unmistakably commonplace” (44). In Balzac’s *Eugénie Grandet*, the reader is told that Eugénie’s father, namely Monsieur Grandet, “received a new distinction which none of our manias for equality can efface—he paid more taxes than any one else in the country round . . . no one could see the man pass without feeling a certain kind of admiration” (8-9). In other words, Eliot’s provincial character is an ordinary person whereas Balzac’s is rather an important rich man. As a matter of fact, the same ordinariness of the characters is often present in Eliot’s novels as opposed to the bourgeoisie the reader could meet in the characters of Balzac. This particular point is revelatory of the major difference between the Eliotian and the Balzacian visions of the provincial. In the three major works that belong to his *Scènes de la Vie de Province*, i.e. *Ursule Mirouët*, *Eugénie Grandet*, *Illusions Perdues*, Balzac deals with social classes and, therefore, considers the provincial—or even the Parisian in his other works, and more particularly the French bourgeoisie—from a social perspective. Eliot, on the other hand, focuses on human features and psychology regardless of class divisions, which enlarges her perception of the provincial to a perspective of the being and his human flaws,

whether ordinary or from the upper classes. In his *George Eliot, European Novelist*, Rignall puts forward the following statement:

George Eliot's vision of provincial life may be acutely attentive to fine distinctions of rank and fortune, and it can be sharply satirical, but it is not articulated in the class terms that Balzac employs with his reference to "Bourgeois life". . . . Her understanding of social life is thus at odds with Balzac's insight into the conflicts and contradictions of a specifically bourgeois society. (69)

While describing the provincial surroundings and atmosphere in *Eugénie Grandet*, Balzac associates them with "dumb silence", "depressing", "melancholy" (1), "dark", "dull" (2), and "gloomy" (5). In his *The Vicar of Tours* (that belongs to *The Comedy of Human Life*), Balzac points out the influence of such a narrow and dreary life on people's behaviours:

Birotteau, unhappily, had developed in Sophie Gamard the only sentiments which it was possible for that poor creature to feel,—those of hatred; a passion hitherto latent under the calmness and monotony of provincial life, but which was now to become the more intense because it was spent on petty things and in the midst of a narrow sphere. (277)

For Eliot, however, provincial landscape and pastoral atmosphere evoke warm recollections of the happy and energetic childhood of the young Mary Anne Evans with her parents and beloved brother Isaac in Arbury Farm. The quietness that one usually tends to associate with life in the province is for Eliot synonymous with deep reflection upon those neglected human voices that may have a thought-provoking story to tell despite their ordinariness. Rural existence becomes, thus, worthy of study as:

these commonplace people—many of them—bear a conscience, and have felt the sublime prompting to do the painful right; they have their unspoken sorrows, and their sacred joys; their hearts have perhaps gone out towards their firstborn, and they have mourned over the irreclaimable dead . . . you would gain unspeakably if you would learn with me to see some of the poetry and the pathos, the tragedy and the comedy, lying in the experience of a human soul that looks out through dull grey eyes, and that speaks in a voice of quite ordinary tones. (*Scenes* 45)

Eliot's concern for provincial life "illustrates her realist's determination to bear truthful witness to life as it is," affirms Rignall, "and at the same time serves the ethical aim of extending our sympathy for our fellow men" (*GE EN* 79). Rignall's remark finely matches Eliot's personal version of realism, i.e. a combination of both a realist description of complex psychological life *and* the humanistic perspective of an advocate of empathy.

Faithful to these personal principles of realism, Eliot relies on the use of provincial language in some parts of *Adam Bede*, a practice that raised controversy at the time and even later. The Victorian novelist, poet, and playwright Edward Bulwer Lytton had on 24 April 1859 addressed to Eliot's publisher John Blackwood a letter concerning *Adam Bede* in which he wrote "the book indeed is worthy of great admiration. There are touches of beauty in the conception of human character that are exquisite, and much wit and much poetry embedded in the 'dialect,' which nevertheless the author over-uses. The style is remarkably good whenever it is English and not provincial—racy, original, and nervous" (*L & L* 298). François D'Albert-Durade was a Swiss artist, author, and friend of Eliot who translated into French *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, and *Scenes of Clerical Life* (*L & L* 118). He once told Eliot about the difficulties he had faced in rendering the provincial passages during

his translation implying a certain criticism of her use of colloquial language, to which she answered:

Would it be inadmissible to represent in French, at least in some degree, those “intermédiaires entre le style commun et le style élégant” to which you refer? It seems to me that I have discerned such shades very strikingly rendered in Balzac, and occasionally in George Sand. Balzac, I think, dares to be thoroughly colloquial, in spite of French strait-lacing. Even in English this daring is far from being general. The writers who dare to be thoroughly familiar are Shakespeare, Fielding, Scott. . . . Even in his loftiest tragedies—in Hamlet, for example—Shakespeare is intensely colloquial. One hears the very accent of living men. (*L & L* 397-98)

Eliot’s above quote reveals that her use of colloquial language in some passages of her fiction shows her affinity with some renowned French and English literary figures—including Balzac—and serves her commitment to the real. Eliot’s interest in provincial life may be regarded as an outcome of the German and French philosophies she was imbued with, namely the sense of sympathy, tolerance, empathy, altruism, and receptivity that have contributed to her openness. This wide perspective allowed her to seriously consider human conscience and feelings, whether the person belongs to a small provincial community who speaks with a rural accent such as in *Silas Marner*, *The Mill on the Floss*, or *Adam Bede*, or a gentleman from an urban metropolis as in *Daniel Deronda*. Eliot was an active, productive, and organised Londoner the same way Balzac was a Parisian. On 6 April 1854, she wrote to Mrs. Houghton—Frances Lucy Evans (nicknamed Fanny)—her half sister:

But do you imagine me sitting with my hands crossed, ready to start for any quarter of the world at the shortest notice? It is not on those terms that people, not rich, live in London. I shall be deep in proof-sheets till the end of May, and

shall only dismiss them to make material for new ones. I dare say you will pity me. But as one of Balzac's characters says, after maturity, "La vie n'est que l'exercice d'une habitude dans un milieu préféré;" and I could no more live out of my *milieu*, than the haddocks I dare say you are often having for dinner. (*L & L* 163)

It is true that the settings, landscapes, and many ordinary characters in many of Eliot's novels and short stories are provincial, but definitely not the works themselves, let alone the author. Eliot aimed at being different from the other British intellectuals and writers of her epoch, the way Balzac or Shakespeare did. She sought difference in her writings, notably through the language she employed. Eliot could be very Shakespearian or Balzacian and use a highly refined and sophisticated language, which cost her criticism for being "ponderous" (*ORC* 333), or again be very Shakespearian or Balzacian and rely on a dialectal, ordinary, and rural language, which was equally poorly viewed. Eliot was aware, the same way Balzac was, that difference is attractive by nature and that it would always call for criticism. However, this should be positively perceived because the aim of an intellectual would be fulfilled despite the criticism. In other words, by being different, a writer would attract a huge audience, among whom the critics and his work would largely be read. When her *Spanish Gypsy* received a number of critical reviews in 1868, Eliot reminded her publisher, John Blackwood, that "as you have a certain *solidarité* with my poetical doings, I would not have your soul vexed by the detective wisdom of critics. Do you happen to remember that saying of Balzac's—'When I want the world to praise my novels, I write a drama; when I want them to praise my drama, I write a novel'?" (*L & L* 517).

Conclusion

In short, Eliot had been in touch with French culture since her early years, and continued to nurture a relationship of receptivity with France until the end of life. She

developed intimate affinities with brilliant French minds such as Pascal, Comte, Rousseau, Sand, and Balzac. Pascal helped to strengthen her belief in faith as the secret for a balanced and happy human existence. Eliot's rejection of dogmatic Christianity in the 1840s seems to have provoked her constant quest for a faith in something constructive to replace the idea of God. Comte's ideas were another source of faith for Eliot. Indeed, she embraced some of these, like faith in the divine character of the human and his philanthropy, to compensate for her loss of a Christian God. She adhered to the Humanist version of Comte's ideas as a secular belief that valued human altruism. Both Pascal and Comte accompanied Eliot until the final year in her life. As for Rousseau and Sand, they have impressed her by their fiery genius. Eliot cherished a profound and lifelong intellectual affinity with both of them. Rousseau energised her intellect and aroused new perceptions in her. He was a source of new inspiration, receptive sensibility, and fresh enthusiasm for Eliot. Sand was the French woman writer whom Eliot read and appreciated most. She had, just like Rousseau, the same thrilling impact on Eliot who valued the passion and psychology in Sand's writings. Eliot also admired the intellectual status and achievements of the French women whom she regarded as a piquant and sparkling source of inspiration and stimulation. She appreciated French freedom of thought, respect between genders, and fair acknowledgement of the woman's intellect that her British fellow citizens unfortunately lacked. Interestingly enough, Balzac was the last French giant Eliot read a month before she started writing fiction, which had undoubtedly left a mark on her artistic practice. Indeed, Balzac's most obvious impact on Eliot is visible in the titles of some of her fictional works. She shared with Balzac "the delineation of quiet provincial life" ("Belles Lettres and Art" 144), as she called it, but she definitely differed in her interpretation of it. Eliot focused on the ordinariness of the provincial as opposed to the bourgeoisie the reader would meet in Balzac's novels. She highlights human flaws and psychology regardless

of class divisions. For Eliot, provincial quietness and simplicity may hide thought-provoking stories to tell despite the ordinariness of provincial people.

This particular interest Eliot had for the most ordinary is a sign of her openness and tolerance, which together with her intellectual cosmopolitanism and her humanistic empathy, are enough of a motivation to further investigate her attitude towards other races and religions, and more particularly towards Arabs and Islam. While her attitude towards the Arabs will be examined in chapter 5 of this thesis, Eliot's intellectual position regarding Islam and Judaeo-Islamic heritage will be discussed in the forthcoming chapter.

CHAPTER 3

George Eliot & Judæo-Islamic Heritage

Introduction

It is commonly known and widely recognised that the Islamic Golden Age (c. 750-1258 C.E.) had a significant influence on the development of European philosophy, mathematics, astrology, chemistry, and medicine. From Al-Kindi, Al-Khawarizmi, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, to Ibn Arabi and many more, Islamic civilisation had undoubtedly a marked influence on Renaissance Europe that traces back to thirteenth-century Florence and Dante Alighieri. In Baghdad, the Abbasid Caliph Harun Al-Rachid instituted the renowned library, research centre, and translation institution of *Bayt Al-Hikma* (the House of Wisdom), which was a highly valuable source of knowledge for both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars whose interaction had formed a cross-cultural exchange network. European minds such as Goethe, Feuerbach, Strauss, Kant, Spinoza, Pascal, and Comte who inspired Eliot intellectually—as discussed earlier—had all developed certain affinities with Islamic philosophy. Some of them, as well as other English and European intellectuals, had even taken a public stand on Islam in their writings or lectures, as will be discussed further on.

Therefore, this chapter intends, first, to investigate whether Eliot's European intellectual heritage and readings of both English and European writers and intellectuals who showed affinities with Islam had any influence on her religious thought and scholarly opinion about this religion. Second, the chapter will also attempt to understand the reasons behind the affinity she developed with Judaism instead.

3.1. From Judaism to Islam

In her youth, during her evangelical period, Eliot did not consider Islam any differently than the people of her creed. In fact, even the term “Islam” was completely ignored at the time, particularly among the hostile Christian sects and even among the intolerant intellectual circles that believed the Prophet Mohammed to be an imposter, and therefore focused on his person and his followers as a fanatic sect rather than as a true religion. Retrospectively, Luther was among the first Protestants to spread such views. Eliot’s attitude towards Islam was then very much the same as that of the other evangelical believers. Like all the rest, she saw this Oriental religion only through the prejudiced picture of the Arab prophet she had been presented with by biased Victorians. In a letter to her Calvinist teacher Miss Lewis on 21 May 1840, she put forth her project to draw a chart of ecclesiastical history, but which she intended not to continue beyond the year 606 because “mahommedanism became a besom of destruction in the hand of the Lord, and completely altered the aspect of ecclesiastical history” (*L & L* 32). The Prophet Mohammed and his religion “Mahommedanism” were negatively perceived by most Victorians, including the then Calvinist young Mary Anne Evans.

Most of what is known today of Eliot’s interest in Islam is derived from the few notes she left in her own notebooks, or in the margins of the books she read at the time—and only a few significant ones in her essays or novels. One of these sources is Emanuel Deutsch’s³³ essay “Islam” which, in part, originated from his review of the famous Austrian Orientalist and physician Aloys (or Alois) Sprenger’s *The Life of Mohammad, from Original Sources*. Eliot’s copy of Sprenger’s three biographical volumes about the life of Mohammad seems to

33. Emanuel Deutsch (1829-73) was a German-Jewish “Orientalist, Hebrew, and Semitic scholar, populariser into English of the Talmud and Midrash, known personally to George Eliot and G. H. Lewes. . . . He wrote for *Chambers Encyclopedia*, *Smith’s Dictionary of the Bible*, and other Victorian reference works Eliot’s friendship with Deutsch seems to have been particularly close in the years between 1867 and his death” (*ORC* 91), a period during which Eliot was learning Hebrew and studying Judaism in preparation for the writing of *Daniel Deronda*.

have been offered to her by Deutsch as it bears “his signature . . . on the title page of the first volume” (Irwin 388). One of the objectives for the writing of “Islam” by Deutsch, as he himself acknowledged, seems to prove that “Mohammedanism owes more to Judaism than either to Heathenism or to Christianity . . . we think Islam neither more nor less than Judaism as adapted to Arabia plus the apostleship of Jesus and Mohammed. Nay, we verily believe that a great deal of such Christianity as has found its way into the Koran, has found it through Jewish channels” (“Islam” 64). It may be relevant at this point to highlight the fact that both the Muslim prophet and the Quran not only acknowledge, but also claim the Abrahamic origins of Islam which they call the religion of Abraham, the latter being considered the first *Hanyf* as this will be pointed to in a forthcoming quotation from Sprenger. Most of the notes that Eliot made of her reading of Deutsch, Sprenger, or the German-born Jewish-French erudite in Judaic studies and Orientalist Salomon Munk about Islam equally and clearly pointed to the above direction stated by Deutsch, i.e. Islam is nothing more than “Judaism as adapted to Arabia”.

Eliot’s first note concerning the etymology of the word *Allah*, as entered in her notebooks, writes: “The Çufis who developed Mohammed’s idea, fell on the same sort of expression as the Jehovahists. ‘wenn du uns fragst, wer Gott ist, so antworten wir: Howa, howa, i.e. er ist er.’ (howayya = Ipseität)” (qtd. in Irwin 39). When the quoted expression is translated from German into English, it gives the following: If you ask us who is God, we answer: *Howa, howa* i.e. he is he. Munk’s commentary on the etymology of the name *YAHWE* refers to Exodus iii, 13-14: “And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, the God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, what is his name? What shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM” (qtd. in Irwin 39). Although considering it as “insufficiently

recognized yet” Deutsch, nonetheless, admits the existence of a “testimony” that fully proves the Egyptian origin of monotheism as he wrote in his essay “Egypt, Ancient and Modern”:

and the initiated [ancient Egyptians] took their sublime Confession of Faith, inscribed upon a scroll, with them even into the grave. The name of the One God, however, is not mentioned on it, but is expressed only in the circumlocution, *Nuk pu Nuk*—“*I am he who I am*”. Who does not instantly remember the awful “*I am that I am*” sounding from amid the flames of the bush? (178)

This information, which was also noted down by Eliot in her notebooks (Irwin 288), was likely to have dethroned Deutsch’s claim to the monopoly of monotheism by Judaism, but it was not taken into consideration or developed any further either by himself or by Eliot.

Eliot had also read Moses Ben Maimon (a.k.a Maimonides), the famous medieval Andalusian Jewish philosopher—through Salomon Munk’s French translation of his philosophical treatise *Le Guide des Egarés (The Guide for the Perplexed)*—from which she drew the etymology of *YAHWE*, the Hebrew name for God (279). She also took more notes from Munk’s other works, like *Mélanges De Philosophie Juive et Arabe* (1859) which she read in 1868 and *Palestine, Description Géographique, Historique et Archéologique* (1845). Munk’s scholarly expertise showed most in his study of Judæo-Arabic literature and philosophy of the Middle Ages. As one might expect, Maimonides was also mentioned at length by Deutsch in his essay “Islam”. Maimonides is credited for his adaptation of Aristotelian thought to Biblical faith and the teachings of the Torah. Much more interesting in this context, however, is Maimonides’s discussion of the renowned Muslim *Sufi* philosopher, theologian, jurist, and mystic Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) (*Guide des Egarés* 383, 392) who also tried to “adapt” philosophy to religion, and who shall be dealt with later on in this discussion.

Maimonides's interest in Greek philosophy sprang from Arabic translations which he read at the time in Andalusia, Morocco and Egypt where he died.

From Aloys Sprenger's *The Life of Mohammad*, Eliot made use of a number of interesting notes, almost all of them translating connections between Judaism and Islam. Two of them—that are of great relevance to the current discussion—concern the *Hanyfs* and the *Çufis* or *Sufis*. According to Sprenger, the dogmatic core of Mohammad's monotheism was greatly influenced by the Abrahamic beliefs of *Hanyfs*, a sect of Essene Jews (Irwin 388). According to Islam, there seems to be an inherent contradiction in Sprenger's consideration of the Meccan *hanyfs* as Jews for when Zayd—one of the earliest members of *Hanyfs* in Mecca—asked a Jew about the true religion so that he would embrace it, the latter said that Judaism was not the true religion and directed him to the *Hanyfs*:

I know nothing better than that thou shouldst be a Hanyf. "What is the Hanyf?" asked Zayd. It is the religion of Abraham; he was neither a Jew nor a Christian; he worshipped nothing but God. . . . Like Zayd, Mohammad professes to be a Hanyf, and to follow the religion of Abraham, of whom he says, "Abraham was not a Jew nor a Christian; but he was a Hanyf, a Musalman, and not one of those who associate false gods with God". (Sprenger 168)

Eliot's note about the *Hanyfs* as a sect of Essene Jews is related to her other note about the *Çufis* or *Sufis* as "followers of the Essenes" (Irwin 388). The following quote by Sprenger explains who the *Sufis* are:

All Çufies aspire to prophecy, in the sense in which Ghazzaly takes the word; that is to say, to intuitive knowledge of truth; but in a lower degree than Mohammad possessed it. Their discipline is calculated to induce a wild exaltation of the mind, which they consider as the symptom of inspiration. The

sincere Çufies live in solitude, fast, pray and incessantly meditate on the nature of God and eternity. (116)

Regardless of the anachronistic confusion there seems to exist in Sprenger's mind between both *Hanyfs* and *Sufis* being either a sect or followers of Essene Jews, both terms, i.e. "Hanyfs" and "Sufis", were relevantly picked out and noted down by Eliot as they carry over two distinctive concepts that—if correctly interpreted and understood—are meaningful enough to present a clear image of Islam. The term "Hanyf" translates the Abrahamic origin of Islam and "Sufi" points to the way to attain prophecy or revelation for a prophet or, for mere followers: "intuitive knowledge of truth," as Al-Ghazali put it (Sprenger 116). Eliot, however, seems to have noted down these terms only for their connection with the Essene Jews, not for their own meanings as such. This interest Eliot developed in Judaism will be later discussed in this chapter, and then examined further in the next.

It is also worth noting the puzzling use of the Islamic *shahada* or declaration of faith by Eliot to sign off one of her letters to her publisher John Blackwood on 29 October 1871. What made her recall and use this Islamic formula, though in a somewhat jumbled order and in an entirely irrelevant context?: "as for me, I get more and more unable to be anything more than a feeble sceptic about all publishing plans, and am thankful to have so many good heads at work for me. *Allah illah allah!*" (*L & L* 567). Did Eliot mean to sound smart with her publisher or did she just intend to introduce a pleasant foreign, exotic or oriental note or touch to her discourse? Of course, owing to the lack of sufficient information, one can only resort to mere speculation in this case.

Perhaps much more intriguing than the above *shahada* anecdote is the assertion that Mary Kay Temple seems to make in her essay "Emanuel Deutsch's *Literary Remains: A New Source for George Eliot's Daniel Deronda*" when she laboriously tries to demonstrate that Eliot used Emanuel Deutsch's description of the Prophet Mohammed's physical as well as

moral traits in his essay “Islam” to draw the portrait of Daniel Deronda. From the Prophet Mohammed’s “dark good looks” and “full beard” down to his virgin’s “modesty”, his “great taciturnity” and “heroism” (Temple 65-66) Deronda has inherited almost everything. According to Temple’s assertion, Eliot seems to have literally cloned the Arab prophet. Temple, however, admits that “perhaps the whole trouble with Deronda as a character is that it was difficult for even George Eliot to imagine Mohammed, the product of a distant age and culture, dropped into Victorian society” (67). Eliot never wrote a word about the Prophet Mohammed as Deutsch and others among her friends and peers courageously did despite the hostile mood in England at the time. However, three entries in her notebooks (qtd. in Irwin 289), all of them derived from Deutsch’s essay “Islam”, are worth mentioning here: Mohammed means “the Praised”, Islam: “peace”, and Muslim: “righteous man” (“Islam” 68, 129). Though still inscribed in her—and Deutsch’s—obsessed search for justifiable connections between Judaism and Islam, Eliot had for the first time taken note of the simple, clear and unquestionably positive etymological meaning of three basic but fundamental terms: “Islam”, “Muslim”, and “Mohammed”.

It was not until the publication of her last work *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879) that Eliot expressed her deference to the Muslims’ sacred Book though the matter is to be dismissed rather as anecdotal, almost trivial. It is this spontaneity with which she expressed her apologies that seems important although it might also prove revelatory. Talking of a strange man called Lentulus in “A Man surprised at His Originality”, Eliot inappropriately used the word “Koran”, but swiftly apologised afterwards, clarifying her point: “he [Lentulus] might have clad his addled originalities, disjointed commonplaces, blind denials, and balloon-like conclusions in that mighty sort of language which would have made a new Koran for a knot of followers. I mean no disrespect to the ancient Koran” (60). When examined in depth, however, the above example makes one wonder, first, whether the phrase “a new Koran” was

a common, semantically unmarked idiomatic expression in Victorian times; second, why Eliot did not, for instance, make the comparison with “a new Bible” or “a new Torah” instead; finally, why Eliot associated “that mighty sort of language” with “addled originalities, disjointed commonplaces, blind denials, and balloon-like conclusions”, which is reminiscent of Carlyle’s commentary on the Quran³⁴ when he described it as “a wearisome confused jumble, crude, incondite; endless iterations . . .” (“The Hero as Prophet. Mahomet” 31).

3.2. Eliot, European Intellectuals & Islamic Culture

3.2.1. Carlyle, Goethe & Deutsch

In 1840 Thomas Carlyle³⁵ gave his famous lecture on “The Hero as Prophet. Mahomet”; it was the first time that a European intellectual admitted his belief in the sincerity of the Muslim prophet and declared him a “true” one: “Our current hypothesis about Mahomet, that he was a scheming Impostor, a Falsehood incarnate, that his religion is a mere mass of quackery and fatuity, begins really to be now untenable to anyone. The lies, which well-meaning zeal has heaped round this man, are disgraceful to ourselves only” (11). And he seemed to have done this with great delight as the content of his lecture shocked many Christians—according to what he wrote to his mother on 9 May 1840: “I gave my second lecture yesterday . . . on Mahomet . . . I gave them to know that . . . the Arab had points about him which were good for all of them to imitate; that probably they were more of quacks than he,—that, in short, it was altogether a new kind of thing they were hearing today! The people seemed greatly astonished” (*The Collected Letters* 138-39). Carlyle, who had translated Goethe, also quoted him in his “The Hero as Prophet. Mahomet”: “ ‘If this be Islam,’ ” says Goethe, “ ‘do we not all live in Islam?’ ” and fully approved his point of view: “yes, all of us

34. Goethe, too, could not have been more sincere when he boldly admitted that “the body of this sacred volume [Quran], which to us, as often as we approach it, is repellent anew, next attracts us ever anew, and fills us with admiration, and finally forces us into veneration” (qtd. in “Islam” 128).

35. “His early work provided intellectual stimulus for George Eliot. . . . By December 1841, she dubbed him ‘a grand favourite of [hers]’ ” (*ORC* 45).

that have any moral life; we all live so” (24-25). Wouldn't Eliot have equally approved Goethe—particularly because of her unshakable faith in man's “moral life”, sympathy, and tolerance? Even Emanuel Deutsch, Eliot's Hebrew mentor, acknowledged in “Islam” Carlyle, Goethe and Sprenger's (to cite just a few) fair treatment of the Islamic religion and its prophet amid general hostility and rancor in Christian Europe:

How the silly curses of the Prideaux, and Spanheims, and D'Herbelots; how their “wicked impostors,” and “dastardly liars” and “devils incarnate,” and Behemoths and beasts and Korahs and six hundred and sixty-sixes, gave room, step by step almost, to more temperate protests, more civil names, less outrageous misrepresentations of both the faith and the man : until Goethe and Carlyle, on the one hand, and that modern phalanx of investigators, the Sprenger, and Amari, and Nöldeke, and Muir, and Dozy, on the other, have taught the world at large that Mohammedanism is a thing of vitality, fraught with a thousand fruitful germs; and that Mohammed, whatever view of his character (to use that vague word for once) be held, has earned a place in the golden book of Humanity. (63-64)

Even if Eliot seems to generally favour a neutral attitude, neither crediting nor criticising what many English thinkers and historians wrote about Islam and the Muslim prophet, she nonetheless—in this instance at least—did defend what was morally right. In a letter addressed to Reginald Bosworth-Smith after his publication of *Mohammed and Mohammedanism*, she praised the historian for his “brave truthfulness, especially in relation to our actual dealings with nations whose culture and genius differ from our own” (qtd. in Grogan 147).

3.2.2. The Influence of Al-Ghazali on Europe

In her notebooks, Eliot mentioned Al-Ghazali (Irwin 425) who was first cited by Sprenger in relation to his *Sufi* view about how truth can be apprehended through intuitive knowledge rather than through reason.³⁶ Al-Ghazali's intuitive knowledge is akin to Spinoza's *scientia intuitiva* and the *Sufi* *'ilm al asrar* ("the science/knowledge of secrets"). In his *The Meccan Revelations (Al-Futuh al-Makkiyya)*, the Arab Andalusian Sufi mystic and philosopher Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), also called Al-Sheikh Al-Akbar, who had himself been influenced by the teachings of Al-Ghazali, divided knowledge or science into three different categories:

The intellectual science [*'ilm al-'aql*] is all that you get necessarily (by common sense) or after considering an evidence provided that you find out the (rational) aspect of that evidence. . . . The second (category of) science is the science of states [*'ilm al-ahwal*] to which there is no way other than taste (experience). . . . And the third (category of) science is the science of secrets [*'ilm al asrar*], which is the science that is above reason, a science of the inbreathing (*naft*) of the Holy Spirit into the heart. (122-23)

Isn't this very similar, not to say identical, to the three categories of knowledge—already dealt with in the first chapter³⁷—Spinoza had described in his *Ethics*? In his *Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy*, the English jurist Sir Frederick Pollock mentioned "the alleged affinities of Spinozism with other ancient and modern systems, including Sufism and Chinese Buddhism" (386).

36. In an accompanying explanatory footnote, Sprenger cited Jonayd, another renowned *Sufi* master, to clarify his point about Al-Ghazali's view: "gnosis is of two kinds: the gnosis of instinct, and the gnosis of demonstration. That is to say, we may arrive at the knowledge of the existence and nature of God either by intuition; or by the contemplation of his works, and by reasoning. The Çufies consider the latter as most unsatisfactory, and condemn reasoning" (115).

37. See block quote on page 26.

Al-Ghazali found in Sufism a way to reconcile philosophy and religion—the value of which both Lewes and Eliot had failed to notice and appreciate in terms of spiritual and epistemological perspective. In addition to Jewish mysticism, which Eliot employed in her last novel—as it will be discussed in the next chapter—Sufism may surely have been another excellent mystical tool for the humanist author to reach her artistic and functional goal, i.e. to elevate and upgrade her literature. Moreover, Sufism offers even unorthodox minds the opportunity to behold the mysteries of creation. The following extract from Sprenger quoting Al-Ghazali is indeed pedagogically relevant:

There is a phase in man's life, which is even higher than that of reason: an eye opens in his mind, by which he sees mysteries, the future, and other things, which are not within the reach of our reasoning powers, in the same manner as the notions acquired by reason are not within the grasp of the senses. This higher faculty is called *nabuwat*, prophecy.... We are also told, that some men drop to the ground in a swoon, and they are like dead—the seeing, hearing and other senses are sealed, and in this condition they behold the mysteries According to this theory, Mohammad was endowed by Providence, for a special object, with a more elevated genius than any other man; and the revelations were sparks of his genius. All Çufies aspire to prophecy, in the sense in which Ghazzaly takes the word; that is to say, to intuitive knowledge of truth; but in a lower degree than Mohammad possessed it. (115-16)

Al-Ghazali was not unknown or unfamiliar to Eliot, and Sprenger was not her only source for the distinguished Muslim *Sufi* philosopher. Eliot's companion, Georges Henry Lewes, was deeply involved in an encyclopedic research, gathering the works of famous philosophers in order to publish a universal history of philosophy. In his *History of Philosophy from Thales to Comte*, vol. 2, Lewes devoted a whole chapter to what he called

“Arabian Philosophy” through the works and views of eminent Muslim philosophers, including Al-Ghazali. Lewes was so excited by the originality of Al-Ghazali’s *Revivification of the Sciences of Religion* that he exclaimed: “it bears so remarkable a resemblance to the *Discours sur la Méthode* of Descartes, that had any translation of it existed in the days of Descartes, everyone would have cried out against the plagiarism” (49). While not confirming that there existed a Latin translation of Al-Ghazali’s book at the time (117), Rafiabadi does not exclude this possibility since, as he writes, the Muslim philosopher’s influence on another French scientist and philosopher contemporary of Descartes—Blaise Pascal (1623-62)—has been amply proven, and that many of Al-Ghazali’s works had been translated into Latin and even Hebrew as early as the twelfth century (175). Much more important than this polemical point, Rafiabadi points to the impact of Al-Ghazali’s thought on philosophers whom Eliot drew much from, like the French Positivist Auguste Comte (327), the German Emmanuel Kant (340) and even Yehuda Halevi or Maimonides (176-77). In his *Islam and the English Enlightenment*, Garcia asserts that “ ‘our Judeo-Christian heritage’ and ‘our *secular present*’ is not the exclusive property of Western Europe but a shared yet too-often forgotten heritage in which cross-cultural exchange between the early modern Christian West and the Muslim world was not unfathomable or even predominantly hostile” (xiv).

3.2.3. The East-West Interconnection & Eliot’s Position

Talking of Eliot’s shared intellectual concerns with her companion George Henry Lewes through translations and readings common to both, it is very interesting to remember that the European network of literary and philosophical interests (like Kant, Comte, Pascal, Spinoza, Strauss, Feuerbach, Goethe) they had formed also interconnects with great names of medieval Islamic thinkers. Lewes wrote a biography of Goethe and a history of philosophy including, as mentioned earlier, a whole chapter on Muslim philosophers. Eliot also translated major works by Strauss, Feuerbach and Spinoza and, like Lewes, was very much interested in

German culture and the oriental influence it went through in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This interconnection between Western European and Muslim intellectuals is historically traced back by the scholar of religions and the specialist in the study of Islam and interfaith dialogue Clinton Bennett to “a philosophical school, represented by Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), G.W. Leibnitz (1646-1716), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and J.W. Goethe (1749-1832), behind whom stood the poetic and literary influence of the Saracens via Spain and Sicily where much creative cultural and intellectual interaction occurred between the Christian and Muslim worlds” (10).

Among those “Saracens” stands out the prominent figure of the twelfth-century Andalusian philosopher Ibn Tufayl (1105-85) who wrote *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, a philosophical novel in which Hayy, the hero of the story, was abandoned by his mother and grew up thanks to the care of a doe. The span of his fifty-year life on the island far from any contact with human civilisation is first devoted to the acquisition of knowledge about the physical world that surrounds him in all its forms: animal, vegetal, and mineral using reason as a scientific method to unveil the secrets of this world. Once he is done with earthly matters, he looks up to the heavens, spurred by a driving force within him that manifests itself in the form of a shining light. Then begins a quest for the meaning of creation. He ultimately finds out that reason has its own limitations and that intuition is the only path to spiritual knowledge, the dead end to human knowledge. For Samar Attar³⁸:

the most important thing is to examine Hayy’s innovative and modern ideas, such as his theory of knowledge, scientific method, system of education, concept of equality, freedom and toleration, the individual progress to perfection and the use of reason as a basis of evidence in contrast to authority

38. A Syrian writer and translator who studied Comparative Literature in Syria, Canada, and the United States. She received a PhD from the State University of New York at Binghamton. She worked in Algeria, West Germany, and Australia. Attar self-translates her own works from Arabic into English.

in all its forms. These modern ideas seemed to have spread like fire from Moslem Spain to medieval Europe where once experiment was associated with black magic. (10)

Moses of Narbonne was the first to translate *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* into Hebrew in 1349, and the first Latin translation by Picodella Mirandola appeared in the second half of the fifteenth century (Attar 40). Leibnitz, too, expressed his admiration for the novel which he read in Pococke's translation (Attar 40). Spinoza is also believed to have either recommended its translation into Dutch or translated it himself (Attar 40).

The Jewish Dutch philosopher Spinoza³⁹—whose major work, *Ethics*, was translated by Eliot—is said to have paved the way for biblical criticism and the enlightenment era, but he paid the price for his Cartesian rationalism and criticism of the Hebrew Bible, and was eventually banned from his Jewish community. The interconnection with Goethe is plainly obvious first from this quote of Emanuel Deutsch's "Islam": "Baruch Spinoza, in whom Goethe—how much of this nineteenth century besides?—lives and moves and has his being" (192), and more importantly from Goethe himself when he asserted: "if I had to name the book that of all I know agrees best with my view, I could only name the 'Ethics.' I hold more and more firmly to worshipping God with this so-called atheist, and gladly leave to you and your allies everything to which you give, as your needs must, the name of religion" (qtd. in Pollock 396). As is also plainly obvious the interconnection between Goethe and Spinoza on one hand, and Ibn Tufayl on the other whose protagonist Hayy is not an adept of any conventional religion for he was neither a Muslim, nor a Jew, or a Christian, but a self-taught man whose perseverance in the quest for knowledge and wisdom, and whose sense of toleration towards the differences which he saw in others helped him gradually progress

39. Nurbhai & Newton assert that "Maimonides influenced Spinoza" and even draw attention to relevant similarities between biographical facts concerning the persecution and expulsion of both men's families respectively from Spain and Portugal (28).

towards perfection. “One of the things he [Hayy] discovers early in his development,” writes Attar, “is the individual differences existing among various beings including himself” (50). She further develops this point when she says that:

Hayy Ibn Yaqzan is the prototype of the tolerant man created by Ibn Tufayl, a philosopher who had formulated the concept of toleration at a critical historical juncture in order to cope with religious fanaticism which was a continuing threat to civil order and personal security in the second half of twelfth century Morocco and Spain. Hayy’s argument remains relevant and of considerable theoretical interest to us to this very day. There is no doubt, that it helped, directly, or indirectly, the major theorists of toleration, such as Spinoza and Locke, to develop their ideas in this respect. (50)

The German philosophy of *Bildung* apparently draws much from Ibn Tufayl’s concepts of self-education, self-learning, self-improvement and progress, all of which ultimately lead to an ideal state of human perfection and happiness. When applied on a much wider scale to any human society, and if each and every one of its citizens makes the effort to improve himself, these concepts will lead to the progress and improvement of all. Goethe’s *Bildungsroman* also reflects these same concepts which re-surface in Eliot’s fiction as Rignall relevantly points it out: “it is significant that her one article on Goethe’s work is devoted to his archetypal *Bildungsroman* . . . for many of her own novels could be described as *Bildungsromane* . . . The debt to Goethe is made explicit in *Daniel Deronda* . . . Goethe shows how true learning can only come through lived experience” (*GE EN 23*).

Yet, unlike Goethe who never shied away from publicly claiming his artistic and spiritual admiration for Hafiz’s Persian Sufi poetry, and bridging the gap between East and

West in his *West-östlicher Divan* (*West-Eastern Divan*⁴⁰), neither Lewes nor Eliot seem to share this interest in Sufism despite Lewes's thorough investigation of the German figure's life and his full knowledge of some Muslim Sufi philosophers, and Eliot's unquestionable Germanophile and Judeophile erudition. This indifference or lack of interest—shown by Eliot in situations or instances where others whom she admired for their talent and intellect had clearly expressed their admiration or respect for Islamic culture and even helped in establishing cross-cultural bridges between East and West—is palpable in most of the author's materials explored in this study. In their *George Eliot, Judaism and the Novels: Jewish Myth and Mysticism*, both Nurbhai and Newton acknowledge the fact that “mystic thought in Judaism [was] influenced by medieval Islamic mysticism” and that “Eliot was aware of this exchange of ideas” (54). She, however, never turned this “awareness” into intellectual interest and seems, for the most part, to be only interested in a *one-way* exchange of these very ideas, hence her reading of exclusively Hebrew and European authors on Islam—never (according to what is known so far about the books she had read in her lifetime) was there any mention of any original Arab or Islamic titles⁴¹ despite the fact that many of these sources were available through translation into some of the European languages that Eliot mastered.

Emanuel Deutsch seems to have no such problem for he even admits that Dante's *Divine Comedy* had “unconsciously” borrowed from the Prophet Mohammed's description of Heaven during his ascending voyage to the celestial spheres known in Arabic as *Mi'raj*: “Mohammed is not to be made responsible for some of his enthusiastic admirers when they transformed this Vision—a vision as grand as any in the whole *Divine Comedy* (which indeed has unconsciously borrowed some of its richest plumage from it), but which Mohammed,

40. In which “West” and “East” not only refer to Germany-Europe/Persia-Middle East, but also to the Christian/Muslim worlds.

41. Except a copy of George Sale's translation of the Quran and, probably, the translation of *The Arabian Nights*.

until he was sick of it, insisted on calling a Dream—into insipidity and drivel” (“Islam” 102). Both Deutsch’s European and Jewish identities were no hindrance to his sense of objectivity as a true scholar. In times when “*Mahommedanism*” was not an easy topic to bring about in Victorian discussions, he had the intellectual courage to stand forth and acknowledge the world’s “peculiar debt”⁴² to medieval Arab-Islamic civilisation:

The Arabs conquered a world greater than that of Alexander the Great, greater than that of Rome ... they, alone of all Shemites, came to Europe as kings, whither the Phoenicians had come as tradesmen, and the Jews as fugitives or captives; came to Europe to hold up, together with these fugitives, the light to Humanity—they alone, while darkness lay around; to raise up the wisdom and knowledge of Hellas from the dead, to teach philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and the golden art of song to the West as well as to the East, to stand at the cradle of modern science, and to cause us late epigoni⁴³ for ever to weep over the day when Granada fell. (“Islam” 123)

Although Eliot spent about three months (from January to March 1867) visiting Spain with Lewes, particularly Southern Moorish Spain (ex *Al-Andalus*), staying in Granada, Cordoba and Seville (*L & L* 490-91), and read many books related to Spain’s Arab history like Gibbon & Ockley’s *History of the Saracen Empire* (*L & L* 485) or Arab philosophy like Renan’s *Averroes and Averroism* (*L & L* 501) during that same period when she was writing *The Spanish Gypsy*, she does not seem to have been in the least impressed by all that the Moors left behind in terms of culture or civilisation. There is not one single note in her journals or one single line in her letters acknowledging—in more or less the same factual terms as Deutsch does above—any of the cultural traces that those Saracens or Moors might

42. See Eliot’s letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe on pages 89, 96-97.

43. In another of his essays “Arabic Poetry in Spain and Sicily”, Deutsch rephrases this idea of “fall” in a way that involves all humanity: “a fall ever to be wept over in the history of Spain, if not of humanity” (463).

have left after almost eight long centuries of presence in Europe. She seems to have gone blind in front of the architectural marvels of Alhambra Palace—a UNESCO World Heritage Site nowadays—those Moors had erected. All she saw from the towers of the palace she visited was the sun setting on the Sierra Nevada, or the moon glowing by night on those very towers! (*L & L* 492)

It is also puzzling to notice that despite her interest in, and her thorough knowledge of ideas, opinions and works by influent European intellectuals she admired, be they English, German or French and who, boldly and sometimes defiantly, expressed fair points of view concerning Islamic culture, philosophy, or civilisation like Deutsch, Carlyle, or Goethe, Eliot never dared (i.e. never had the intellectual courage⁴⁴) to express herself publicly, through an article or an essay—or more privately, in a letter or in her journals—on this issue. Most of the time, she kept either timidly allusive or rather elusive, always formulating her ideas and opinions through generally neutral or vaguely favourable statements or comments. Although she wrote and declared on many occasions, particularly towards the end of her life in 1873, that she had come to respect “all the great religions of the world” since:

they are the record of spiritual struggles which are the types of our own. This is to me pre-eminently true of Hebrewism and Christianity, on which my own youth was nourished. And in this sense I have no antagonism towards any religious belief, but a strong outflow of sympathy. Every community met to worship the highest Good (which is understood to be expressed by God) carries me along in its main current. (*Letters* 5:448)

It will certainly never clearly be known whether she included Islam among those “great religions” she had come to eventually revere; or also whether she included Muslims

44. Eliot’s mentor Emanuel Deutsch made that intellectual courage manifest in his essays. See “Islam”, “Judaico-Arabic Metaphysics”, “Early Arabic Poetry”, and “Arabic Poetry in Spain and Sicily” (all published in *Literary Remains of the Late Emanuel Deutsch*).

among “every community met to worship the highest Good (which is understood to be expressed by God)”. Even in such an expressive moment in which the open-minded and tolerant Eliot could not refrain from being sincere, she showed again her apparently “pre-eminent” interest in the religions and communities “on which [her] own youth was nourished”—and which she purposefully named—to the detriment of other races and religions that vaguely stand in the background, “great” yet nameless—which, it may be argued, is quite legitimate and understandable in regard to the continually expanding size and the almost endless boundaries of the then so vast Victorian empire. Moreover, Eliot’s acknowledgement of the pre-eminence of Judaism and her avoidance of crediting the contribution of Islamic culture to the West clearly contradicts Edward Said’s statement:

one of the great advances in modern cultural theory is the realization, almost universally acknowledged, that cultures are hybrid and heterogeneous and, as I argued in *Culture and Imperialism*, that cultures and civilizations are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality. How can one today speak of “Western civilization” except as in large measure an ideological fiction, implying a sort of detached superiority for a handful of values and ideas, none of which has much meaning outside the history of conquest, immigration, travel, and the mingling of peoples that gave the Western nations their present mixed identities? (*Orientalism* 348-49)

3.3. Eliot’s Perception of Islamic Mysticism

Eliot’s first encounters with Islamic culture are also manifest in her reviews. In 1854 she reviewed in *The Leader* Reverend N. Davis’s *Evenings in My Tent; or, Wanderings in Balad Ejjareed, Illustrating the Moral, Religious, Social and Political Conditions of Various Arab Tribes of the African Sahara*, and “seriously recommend[ed]” an anecdote that:

strikes as far more original than hysterics, investing the caprices of the lady with a religious sanction, so to speak:—“Amongst the many other absurdities common among the African females, there is one called Jenoon Feast, or the feast for the devil. . . . The Jenoon, or devil, causes a lady to fancy some article, either of dress or jewellery, and until her husband (the lady is always a married one) procures her the article, the Jenoon torments her in the most pitiless manner”. (331)

Rev. Davis, a non-Muslim and, what is more, an Anglican missionary was permitted “by particular favour” (331) by a tolerant and hospitable people from “Barbary” (331)—whom he later qualified in his book as “ignorant” and “superstitious” (331)—to attend this feast exclusively restricted to “African females” (331). The reader is then told that many lady guests start dancing to the music of a band, “work[ing] themselves into such a frenzy that from weakness they fell to the ground where they lay; till, recovering their strength, they recommenced their madness” (331), followed finally by their hostess—the *Jenoon* lady. This very nineteenth-century Tunisian scene that took place in the town of Nabeul “the ancient Neapolis” (331) is reminiscent of another one mentioned by Sprenger in his portrait of the *Sufis*:

At times they meet in the wildest revels; they listen to singing, dance, and use every means to work themselves into fits of frenzy, which they call extases. In this manner they ruin the health of mind and body, and induce a sickly exaltation of mind. Some of them even succeed in bringing on cataleptic insanity, which is the highest degree of perfection in ascetic life. (116)

For a *Sufi* disciple the trance induced by music and dance is meant to lead to an ecstatic psychic and spiritual state of consciousness likely to result in intuitive knowledge of a reality

otherwise unattained through the senses or human reason. Citing the Muslim *Sufi* philosopher Al-Ghazali, Sprenger again gives a detailed explanation of this ecstatic phenomenon.⁴⁵

Whether a *Jenoon* feast or a mystic dance of Sufi Whirling Derviches, the way is the same, although the anecdote of the *Jenoon* lady is a vulgar and commonly popular example of mystic trance. But Eliot did not seem to understand this cultural specificity in 1854, agreeing with Davis who called it a superstitious “absurdity”—perhaps she did understand it, but probably a little later, in the 1870s, when she started reading and being tutored by Deutsch. One of her notes, then, reveals her interest for the etymology of the word “jinn” whose North African or Maghrebian vernacular plural is “jenoon”: “Jinn (Ginn or Djinn) means veil, covering, disguise” (qtd. in Irwin 410), but again, only because Judaic as clear in Deutsch’s essay “Islam” where “jinn” are related to “Zoroastro-talmudical notions, which had penetrated into Arabia, these Jin listened ‘behind the curtain’ of Heaven and learnt the things of the future. These they then believed to communicate to the soothsayers and diviners” (83).

Here is another picture of *Jinns* that needs to be added to the already familiar one brought about by the translation of the *Arabian Nights* into many European languages. The genie in “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp” is but one of a wide variety of enslaved *jinns* at man’s service, each with his own role and function. Knowledge, then, may be transmitted by *jinns*. Being possessed by *jinns* is an idea deeply rooted in Arab-Islamic culture and commonly accepted among people. *Jenoon* feasts, like the one described by Davis more than a hundred and fifty years ago, are still held today in many Muslim countries, from Morocco to Indonesia, among even the learned and educated social classes though not for the same reasons; these feasts are part of a socio-spiritual therapy that meets the needs of a specific Arab-Islamic culture, which both Eliot and Davis failed to understand and transmitted to the British reader as a typical example of ignorance, absurdity and superstition.

45. See block quote on page 78.

3.4. Eliot's Acceptance of Judaism

There remains, however, one last question in this discussion of Eliot's intellectual attitude (or "sentiment" as she liked to say) towards Islam: why was she so (spiritually and intellectually) interested in Judaism as a religion, and not in Islam—despite her contemporaries' obvious interest in Islamic culture and religion, and despite the influences of Islamic Sufism on medieval Jewish mysticism that seems to have had a significant impact on Eliot's use of the mythical element in *Daniel Deronda*? She partly justified this exclusive interest in a letter she wrote in 1873 to her husband John Walter Cross in which she pointed to the spiritual kinship ("spiritual struggles") she felt with Judaism and on which her youth was equally "nourished" (*L & L* 610). In another letter, to Harriet Beecher Stowe this time, Eliot writes: "but towards the Hebrews we western people, who have been reared in Christianity, have a peculiar debt, and, whether we acknowledge it or not, a peculiar thoroughness of fellowship in religious and moral sentiment" (*L & L* 653). The "eminence" of the Jewish people, which also explains her admiration for them and her interest in their religion, may clearly be decoded in the following quote: "The eminence, the nobleness of a people, depends on its capability of being stirred by memories, and of striving for what we call spiritual ends—ends which consist not in an immediate material possession, but in the satisfaction of a great feeling that animates the collective body as with one soul" ("TM Hep!" 188). The historical heritage of a dramatic past with its racial and religious memory may also partly explain Eliot's sympathy with and support for Judaism as is obvious in her choice of the German rabbi Zunz's words that appear in the following epigraph from *Daniel Deronda*:

If there are ranks in sufferings, Israel takes precedence of all the nations,—if the duration of sorrows and patience with which they are borne ennoble, the Jews are among the aristocracy of every land,—if a literature is called rich in the possession of a few classic tragedies, what shall we say to a National

Tragedy lasting for fifteen hundred years, in which the poets and the actors were also the heroes? (2:347)

Nurbhai and Newton have another explanation for Eliot's interest in Judaism. In an appended note to their chapter "George Eliot and kabbalism" they succinctly write: "perhaps one of the major reasons for Eliot's attraction to Judaism was its opposition to conversion which could be taken to mean that literal belief in its theology was not essential" (199-200), and then they quote Emanuel Deutsch to support their point: "there was no occasion for conversion to Judaism, as long as a man fulfilled the seven fundamental laws.⁴⁶ Every man who did so was regarded as a believer to all intents and purposes" (200). Such a view may reasonably be accepted since it is known that Eliot rejected Christianity because of its rigid dogma. Now that she had at last encountered a religion that did not in any way compel her to believe in dogma or theology, and that also matched both her firm belief in universal moral values and her ideal vision of humanity, why indeed shouldn't she feel "attracted" to such a religion and its disciples? In his essay entitled "Religion", Oliver Lovesey goes even a little further than Nurbhai and Newton's "attraction" to plainly affirm that Eliot "embraced Judaism"—that is if the term "embraced" is understood for what it literally means ("Religion" 238).

Eliot apparently did not want her opinion on religion to be publicly known. Nancy Henry writes: "she was ambivalent about making her personal opinions directly public and increasingly resistant to the idea of revealing details of her past or present life" (*The Life* 238). In the closing lines of the above quoted 1873 letter to Cross in which she asserted that "all the great religions of the world historically considered, are rightly the objects of deep reverence and sympathy" (*Letters* 5:447-48) and in which, too, she admitted that "if there were not

46. The Seven Laws of Noah or the Noahide Laws: "In God's covenant with Noah in the aftermath of the Flood, the Creator extracts certain promises from Noah. . . . 1. Do not murder. 2. Do not steal. 3. Do not worship false gods. 4. Do not practice sexual immorality. 5. Do not eat the limb of an animal before it is killed. 6. Do not curse God. 7. Set up courts and bring offenders to justice" (Robinson 177).

reasons against my following such an inclination, I should go to church or to chapel constantly for the sake of the delightful emotions of fellowship which come over me in religious assemblies” (448), Eliot cautiously urged Cross to “please put this in the fire. It is scribbled in explanation to you only, and not meant for other eyes” (448). On some occasions, however, particularly in private letters, she happened to unveil the truth on her metaphysical beliefs. In 1859 Eliot made it plain in a letter to D’Albert-Durade that she had “not returned to . . . the acceptance of any set of doctrines as a creed, and a superhuman revelation of the Unseen” (*Letters* 3:231). To a question about “our future existence” she replied that her “most rooted conviction is, that the immediate object and the proper sphere of all our highest emotions are our struggling fellowmen and this earthly existence” (*Letters* 3:231). It is equally plain from an 1874 letter to Mrs Ponsonby that she still clung to her agnostic faith when she wrote that “the idea of God, so far as it has been a high spiritual influence, is the ideal of a goodness entirely human (i.e. an exaltation of the human)” (*Letters* 6:98). Despite her rejection of religious dogma in the early 1840s, however, she had striven since then after a substitute for “the idea of God”—as already discussed in the previous chapter—as she was aware that without it her construct of an ideal human world might well never come into existence. In 1869 Eliot believed that:

religion, too, has to be modified—“developed,” according to the dominant phrase—and that a religion more perfect than any yet prevalent must express less care for personal consolation, and a more deeply awing sense of responsibility to man, springing from sympathy with that which of all things most certainly known to us, the difficulty of the human lot. (*L & L* 534)

But having eventually found this substitute in “the ideal of a goodness entirely human”, Eliot unfortunately could not manage to achieve such ideal in spite of her genuine desire to live by it and, therefore, failed to show in all religions and all the children of Adam the same degree

of sympathy, concern, and interest. And if there is one who seems to share this final comment, it is Lovesey who writes: “Islam in George Eliot’s work is less sympathetically and far less extensively treated than Judaism” (246).

Conclusion

Many of the European and English intellectuals whom Eliot admired, such as Deutsch, Carlyle, Goethe, and Sprenger, spoke objectively—and even favourably—about Islam and the Prophet Mohammed in their lectures, essays, and books at a time when the general attitude in Victorian England and Christian Europe was plainly hostile. Eliot, nonetheless, preferred to keep her distance from such outspokenness and seems to have ignored the impact of Muslim philosophers, such as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Tufayl, and Ibn Arabi on Spinoza, Goethe, Pascal, Comte, Kant, and Maimonides, whose works she was unquestionably imbued with through her readings and translations. Rather, she decidedly focused solely on the Judaic part of the Judaeo-Islamic heritage from which European thought had greatly benefited from medieval times onwards. This interest in Judaism dates back to the period when she was coached by Emanuel Deutsch, her Hebrew mentor, in preparation for the writing of *Daniel Deronda*. Eliot was spiritually and intellectually interested in Judaism for many reasons: its spiritual kinship with Christianity, the eminence of the Jewish people, the sympathy she felt for them because of their dramatic past, and the absence of conversion in Judaism.

Even if she never openly acknowledged it, Eliot benefited through her European heritage from an indirect yet valuable impact of Islamic culture. “Meliorism”, the nectar she partly collected from the European philosophies she was in contact with, seems to share common conceptual grounds with Islamic Sufism: a perpetual quest for human improvement and spiritual elevation. This is the foundation of Eliot’s thought and the crux of her artistic ambition as a novelist, i.e. to elevate her fiction to the highest level of perfection. This partly explains why she integrated the mystical dimension of Judaism in her last novel *Daniel*

Deronda, which in turn, would make her involved in the Jewish question, as Himmelfarb put it: “this Jewish question was predicated upon a robust Judaism, the creed of a nation that could find its fulfillment only in a polity and a state” (147).

CHAPTER 4

George Eliot, Jewish Mysticism & Construction

in *Daniel Deronda*

Introduction

As already discussed in chapter 3, Eliot thoroughly studied Judaism. She was greatly interested in knowing more about it as a religion at a later time in her life when she got acquainted with, and coached by, Emanuel Deutsch in preparation for the writing of her much controversial novel *Daniel Deronda* in the 1870s. She focused on the Hebrew language, culture, and liturgy, as well as on the Torah and the Talmud. Eliot's companion, George Henry Lewes, had once addressed her publisher John Blackwood, who was greatly astonished by her knowledge of Judaism, in the following amusing words: "You are surprised at her knowledge of the Jews? But only learned Rabbis are so profoundly versed in Jewish history and literature as she is" (*Letters* 6:196). Moreover, in his *George Eliot's Intellectual Life*, Avrom Fleishman provides an extensive list of Eliot's readings on the subject.⁴⁷

In no other of her works is the association of identity and religion so remarkable as in *Daniel Deronda*. The novel holds two plots that subtly communicate thanks to the interaction of the protagonists Gwendolen Harleth and Daniel Deronda who symbolise the coexisting English and Jewish worlds in Victorian London. As Nancy Henry has put it, it is in *Daniel Deronda* that Eliot took:

everything further than she ever had before: the novel represents her most experimental novelistic structure . . . her most esoteric subjects, her most unusual metaphors . . . and her most ambitious moral and political vision. She

47. To consult the complete list of these readings see page 191 of *George Eliot's Intellectual Life*.

seemed to be pushing the limits of the realist novel genre she had helped to elevate as the dominant literary form of the Victorian period. (*The Life* 232)

This chapter first aims at understanding the literary reasons behind Eliot's reliance on the use of mythology in her fiction in general and Jewish mysticism in particular. This clearly shows through her presentation of Daniel as a *golemic* and an Adamic figure, which creates a parallel between the Jewish Cabala and Adam's quest for self-awareness and maturity on the one hand, and Eliot's aspiration to take the Victorian novel to its highest standard of literary sophistication on the other. Eliot's literary aspirations will be paralleled with the modernists' process of remythicisation. In addition to this first parallel, the chapter will also highlight a second one that relates the theme of sorrow in general with that of spiritual elevation. Unlike her other novels in which Eliot's theme of agony is related to individual protagonists, it is only in *Daniel Deronda* that she establishes a clear connection between spiritual elevation and the historical suffering of a whole community, i.e. the Jewish one. More than that, the novel takes this connection a step further by involving another dimension, namely, Jewish national identity and construction, which raises the following question: does this idea of Jewish construction find its embodiment in Eliot's political thought?

4.1. From Anti-“Hebrewism” to Sympathy

Seen from a retrospective view, Eliot showed in the late 1840s a prejudiced attitude towards the Jews as she explained it in a letter to J. Sibree in 1848. Although she expressed her admiration for “Hebrew poetry”, she found “much of their early mythology, and almost all their history . . . utterly revolting” (*L & L* 88). While acknowledging both Moses and Jesus as Hebrew prophets, she nonetheless thought the former “impregnated with Egyptian philosophy” and the latter “venerated and adored . . . only for that wherein He transcended or resisted Judaism” (*L & L* 88). Eliot even expressed doubts about the origin of Hebrew

monotheism and claimed it had been “borrowed from the other oriental tribes⁴⁸” (*L & L* 88). She then extended her prejudiced view to comprehend “everything specifically Jewish [as being] of a low grade” (*L & L* 88). More than that, Eliot showed a clear flirtation with anti-“Hebrewism” (*L & L* 610) when she wrote at the beginning of this same letter, referring to Voltaire’s view of the Jewish people: “My Gentile nature kicks most resolutely against any assumption of superiority in the Jews, and is almost ready to echo Voltaire’s vituperation” (*L & L* 88). Here is a sample of Voltaire’s “vituperation” that Eliot was “almost ready to echo”: “The Jewish people were, I own, extremely barbarous and merciless; massacring all the inhabitants of a wretched country, to which it had no more right than their vile descendants have to Paris or London” (*The Philosophical Dictionary* 340).

In another striking letter, written twenty-eight years later by a much wiser, more mature and tolerant Eliot to the authoress of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the American abolitionist novelist H. B. Stowe, her attitude clearly changed:

But precisely because I felt that the usual attitude of Christians towards Jews is I hardly know whether to say more impious or more stupid, when viewed in the light of their professed principles, I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to. Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all Oriental peoples with whom we English come in contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us. . . . But towards the Hebrews we western people, who have been reared in Christianity, have a peculiar debt, and, whether we acknowledge it or not, a peculiar thoroughness of fellowship in religious and moral sentiment. . . . And I

48. Eliot does not seem to have abandoned this idea since she found supporting grounds for it in Deutsch’s *Literary Remains* as M. K. Temple explains it extensively in her essay “Emanuel Deutsch’s *Literary Remains*: A New Source for George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*” on pages 62 & 63.

find men, educated, supposing that Christ spoke Greek. . . . The best that can be said of it is that it is a sign of the intellectual narrowness in plain English, the stupidity which is still the average mark of our culture. (*L & L* 653)

4.2. Daniel: a *Golemic* & an *Adamic* Figure

Newton puts forward that “Deronda is initially an incomplete person looking for significance and meaning in his life. In terms of Jewish myth . . . this makes him a formless golem-like figure who needs a creator to breathe life into him” (73). A *golem*, as explained by the scholar, community activist, and Rabbi Chayim Bloch (1865-1948), is a Jewish mythical figure of a man made out of clay by some Polish Jews⁴⁹ who “after they have pronounced the wonderworking *shem-ha-mphorasch*⁵⁰ over it, it comes to life. . . . They call it Golem and use it as a servant” (26-27). There is here a striking linguistic similarity with the Arabic word *ghulem* (nominative masculine singular indefinite noun) mentioned in the Quran that also means “servant”: “There will circulate among them servant boys [*ghilmen* (nominative masculine plural indefinite noun)] especially for them, as if they were pearls well-protected” (*Translation of the Meanings of the Glorious Quran*, At-Tūr 52.24). Consequently, Daniel can be perceived as a servant who apparently has something to accomplish, and needs someone to “breathe life into him”, then show him the way. Likewise, the Victorian novel may have been regarded by Eliot as an unaccomplished *golem* that necessitated a better content to develop.

It is interesting to point to the similarity between the Jewish *golem* and Adam, the first created man. The three monotheist religions present him as having been a figure of a man made out of clay by God himself before he was gifted a soul. According to the Torah, the Bible and the Quran, Adam was obedient to his Creator until he was slyly misled by Satan. As

49. According to the Jewish myth, the creation of the *golem* is attributed—in addition to other creators—to the Polish Rabbi Yeouda Loew ben Bezalel (a.k.a. Maharal) at the request of his friend Mordecai Maisel, the leader and spiritual guide of the Jewish community in Prague. Note the striking similarity between the actual Mordecai and the fictional one in Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*.

50. It is usually spelled *Shemhamphorash*. It is translated from a Hebrew phrase meaning “the explicit name”. It refers to a name of the Hebrew God. Most commonly, it refers to the name *YAHWEH*.

a result, Adam was driven out of heaven down to earth. This episode may symbolically mark the end of human innocence and the beginning of human experience. Daniel, the *golem*, is an Adam too for he is looking for self-awareness. Literature itself could be personified as an Adam since it is in constant quest for maturity.

The clairvoyant Mordecai, a prophet-like figure in *Daniel Deronda*, is precisely the kind of spiritual mentor who could guide and support the *golem* in his mission. Daniel confirms Mordecai's role when he tells the latter: "It is through your inspiration that I have discerned what may be my life's task. It is you who have given shape to what, I believe, was an inherited yearning" (3:285). For Mordecai to "breathe life" into the empty *golem*, i.e. Daniel, he has to transmit all his knowledge to him so that "Deronda might receive from Mordecai's mind the complete ideal shape of that personal duty" (2:341). Guiding, elevating, and maturing emerge as dominant notions here, which draw a parallel with Eliot herself. As a matter of fact, in the same way Mordecai is a mentor to Daniel, Eliot, as an author, is undoubtedly the most appropriate person able to upgrade her proper novel—her *golem*—by improving its quality.

4.3. Jewish Mysticism, Literary Perfection & Spiritual Elevation

A key passage in *Daniel Deronda* is particularly enlightening about the Mordecai/Daniel relationship. When Mordecai was on his deathbed, he addressed Daniel in the following reveling words:

In the doctrine of the Cabala,⁵¹ souls are born again and again in new bodies till they are perfected and purified, and a soul liberated from a worn-out body may join the fellow soul that needs it, that they may be perfected together, and their earthly work accomplished. . . . It is the lingering imperfection of the souls

51. "Cabbala (also cabala, caballa, kabbala) . . . [is] an occult philosophy of rabbinical origin based on a mystical interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures" (Westley 133).

already born into the mortal region that hinders the birth of new souls and the preparation of the Messianic time. . . . When my long-wandering soul is liberated from this weary body, it will join yours, and its work will be perfected. (2:382-83)

This Cabalistic concept and goal of perfecting and perfection explained by Mordecai in the above quote is reminiscent of Eliot's literary and artistic ambitions. Indeed, she aimed at elevating the Victorian novel by updating its content and upgrading its language. In *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, Levine maintains that: "the voice of a higher culture [George Eliot] . . . created her art out of a cluster of rebellions, particularly against reigning . . . conventions. In England she was the single most important figure in transforming the novel from a predominantly popular form into the highest form of art" (1-2). As for Newton, he claims that: "[Eliot's] fundamental artistic commitment was to the novel, a literary form that, though well on the way to becoming dominant, in the nineteenth century was generally viewed as grossly inferior in artistic quality" (73). Therefore, the Victorian author of *Daniel Deronda* and the Jewish myth of Cabala share the same aim: reaching perfection.

The issue at stake now is to understand how the literary use of Jewish mysticism can help to improve the qualitative features of a novel. In their *George Eliot, Judaism and the Novel*, Nurbhai and Newton argue that Eliot employs the mythical dimension "to enable the novel to compete in complexity and philosophical range with tragic drama and epic poetry" (2). She includes the mythical element in her fiction in order to measure "her work by the highest literary standards of the past, such as Greek tragedy and epic poetry of the quality of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and there are allusions to both in her work as previous critics have noted" (Newton 73). As for Fleishman, he qualifies the mythical element in Eliot's fiction as "her strongest suit" and as indicative of "enrichment" (111). In this, Nurbhai and Newton would probably agree with the German rabbi Leopold Zunz whom Eliot quoted in chapter II

of *Deronda*'s second volume in the form of an opening German epigraph (translated in English):

If there are ranks in sufferings, Israel takes precedence of all the nations,—if the duration of sorrows and patience with which they are borne ennoble, the Jews are among the aristocracy of every land,—if a literature is called rich in the possession of a few classic tragedies, what shall we say to a National Tragedy lasting for fifteen hundred years, in which the poets and the actors were also the heroes? (2:347)

In essence, mythicisation is synonymous with richness in literature.

The other equation that obviously stands out from Zunz's quote is the causal relationship between sufferings and spiritual elevation. Indeed, Eliot believed in the "allegory of human moral development in which suffering itself becomes a form of baptism that brings the sufferer to fuller awareness and to the recognition of those higher human powers—mercy, sympathy, love" (Adams 188). The theme of sorrow—whether it has a religious connotation or not—is largely present in Eliot's writings. However, it is only in *Daniel Deronda* that affliction is directly linked to Jewry, therefore connecting two of the most topical themes: identity and religion.

The narrator in *Adam Bede* confesses: "I have come on something by the roadside . . . an image of great agony—the agony of the Cross" (368). The connection between agony and the Children of Israel is also reminiscent of Jesus Christ. In Islam, the Messiah (*Al-Massih*) is Jesus who is believed to be a prophet and a messenger. In Christianity, the Messiah is also Jesus who, however, is regarded as God who materialised to become the human part of an unbreakable Holy Trinity. According to Judaism, the Messiah (*Mashiach*) is an awaited Jewish prophet and ruler who will at the end of time appear on earth, guide his people, and restore peace and perfection among the nations. Mordecai had been waiting for this mythical

Jewish figure and saviour for a long time. He identified this leader with Daniel himself: “but the long-contemplated figure had come as an emotional sequence of Mordecai’s firmest theoretic convictions, it had been wrought from the imagery of his most passionate life . . . Deronda had that sort of resemblance to the preconceived type which a finely individual bust or portrait has to the more generalized copy left in our minds after a long interval” (2:295). The prophetic nature of knowledge existent in the novel—Mordecai who foresees the coming of Daniel, and Daniel who foresees his own Jewishness that unconsciously attracted him to visit the Jewish area of London and encounter Mordecai—obviously reveals both a powerful mystical experience and language that Eliot had chosen to adopt. It is striking to note that a century later another author resorted to the same Jewish mythicisation process as Eliot did. In James Joyce’s *Ulysses* the protagonist Leopold Bloom is Jewish. Not only do Daniel Deronda and Leopold Bloom share the same Jewish origins, but they also both lack a stable sense of identity. Just like in the Victorian *Daniel Deronda*, there also exists a Jewish parallel world to the Irish in the modernist *Ulysses*.

As discussed earlier, Daniel was regarded as a mythical Jew because of his mission, namely being the Messiah who was supposed to save his people. Leopold emphasizes the Jewishness of the Christian Messiah declaring: “Your God was a Jew. Christ was a Jew like me” (327). Such a statement highlights the theme of identity related to religion already encountered in Eliot’s novel. Leopold also qualifies the Jewish community as “[his] people . . . from Horeb” (375), and was himself named “Bloom Elijah” (330). In Judaism, Elijah is a prophet and the harbinger of the Messiah. Elijah is also a major figure in Cabala and is considered as one of the creators of the *golem* (Nurbhai, Newton 11), which grants him the power of shaping, perfecting, and giving life. All these allusions make of Leopold Bloom a mythical Jew and a creator, whose mission is to teach his people the way towards spiritual perfection. References to the “Torah, Talmud” (641) and a lot of other Jewish mystical books

are also to be found in *Ulysses*. What is interesting here is not only the mythical aspect added to the text through Judaism, but also the very semantic meanings of words like: Torah, Talmud, Mishnah, and Gemara. These Hebrew terms respectively signify in English: teaching, instruction, repetition, and completion or perfection. Again, and even in *Ulysses*, the reader comes through this spiritual notion of perfecting and perfection that humans may attain through the teachings and instructions of a prophet.

4.4. Modernists & Remythicisation

Randall Stevenson, a specialist in twentieth-century literature and the historical processes and pressures of modernity which shape it, explains that:

Many contemporary authors, the modernists in particular, viewed the new technologies, speeds and stresses of modern life a good deal more sceptically than enthusiastically, especially after the First World War. Rather than celebrating this modern experience, modernist authors were often chiefly concerned about its threat to the integrity of life and the individual, and more likely to react against than to accept what Nietzsche calls the conclusions of the “machine age”. (14)

Friedrich Nietzsche refers to this sceptic vision of modernity as “Modern pessimism” and defines it as “an expression of the uselessness of the modern world” (qtd. in Poplawsky 23). On BBC Radio 4, John Carey,⁵² Laura Marcus,⁵³ and Valentine Cunningham⁵⁴ discussed literary modernism.⁵⁵ All these scholars agree that the modern world witnessed political, social, cultural and economic break-ups that had a metamorphosing impact on literature in

52. Merton Professor of English literature at Oxford University.

53. Reader in English at the University of Sussex.

54. Professor of English language and literature at Oxford University.

55. “Literary Modernism,” *In our Time*, BBC 4, London, 26 April 2001, Web, 14 Feb 2013, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00547fv>>.

particular, and on art in general. Modern technology was linked with war, which sustained a deep hostility to the modern world and pushed modernists to be “anti modern”, except some of them, such as Virginia Woolf, who celebrated the city and the metropolis according to Laura Marcus. In the same mainstream Sara Blair proclaims that “if the landscape of modernity reads to [T.S.] Eliot and company as a symbolic wasteland, it appears for other writers to be a Mecca, a metropolis of multivalent possibilities” (166). T.S. Eliot criticised the contemporary world—more particularly twentieth-century London and modern man—in his famous poem *The Waste Land*. In the same way, James Joyce regarded Dublin as a wasteland in *Ulysses* and a city filled with “dead souls [who] are all pretenders in a way or another” (qtd. in Campbell 49). The First World War may be rated as the “apotheosis of destruction and of rupture,” affirms Cunningham. This spread a kind of “scepticism” and “hesitancy” among the modernist writers who were, according to Carey, living in the “flicker” and “searching for certainties”. Before WWI, writers abandoned the use of myth and mythologies in their writings and looked for something new and free of metaphysics, thus causing the “collapse of the grand metaphors” in literature. As a result, modernist writers stood far away from a literary tradition that may have given more depth to their work. The certainties that modernists were looking for were finally found after the war, a time when a kind of “remythicisation,” as Cunningham puts it, was restored. Most writers went back to ancient cultures such as Greek mythology, in addition to other traditions like the Troubadours for Ezra Pound, Judaism for James Joyce, Dante and Catholicism for T.S. Eliot, and Catholicism and ancient Egypt for D.H. Lawrence. In his essay “Arnold Dolmetsch”, Pound defines myth as “a work of art” (431). In his essay “Ulysses, Order, and Myth”, T.S. Eliot praises what he calls “the mythical method” that he believes to be “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (177). As maintained by Michael Bell, modernists viewed the fact of

incorporating myth within their writings as “a matter of *reculer pour mieux sauter*” (2). Bell added that: “Modern myth is not an attempted recovery of an archaic form of life so much as a sophisticated, self-conscious equivalent” (2). Generally speaking, modernist writers, too, have exploited the mythical to create layers of meanings in their texts and, therefore, give more significance to their works in the style of ancient literature.

4.5. Literary Allusion & Idealism

In addition to the Jewish mysticism in *Daniel Deronda*, the mythical element and literary allusion are also present in Eliot’s other novels. In *Adam Bede*, the narrator says “I turn without shrinking from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sybils, and heroic warriors” (181). In “Mr. Gilfil’s love story”, Eliot conjures up the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, but contrary to the original version, it is Tina, Gilfil’s wife, who is a talented musician. Newton puts forward the idea that *Adam Bede* contains literary allusions to both Hawthorne and Coleridge: “Hetty’s story is clearly influenced by that of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, as her name suggests. Hetty is also linked in her wanderings after the death of her baby with Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*. Myth and literary allusion, therefore, interact with realism from very early on in her fiction” (74). Yet, unlike romanticism in which myth prevails in the story, Eliot’s use of the mythical element is rather in the style of the modernist writers as “neither realism nor myth or symbolism dominate: they interact but have their own integrity” (Newton 77). The following explanation for the use of allegory by both Eliot and the modernists is particularly relevant:

With modernists such as Joyce or T. S. Eliot, there is a distancing effect between the realist dimension and the symbolic or mythic one. For George Eliot, at least, both have literary value but they remain incongruent. Another way of putting this might be that in both her work and that of the modernists’ allegory is being employed. (Newton 77)

Again, the passage above confirms the desire of both Eliot and modernist authors to distance themselves from the ideal side of myth. The mythical element in their works should rather be considered as allegories with real hidden meanings—as is the case in *Daniel Deronda* and the Jewish construction as it will be discussed further. The major exception in Eliot's fiction is *Romola*, where idealism prevails. Indeed, Romola is anachronistic for a fifteenth-century Florentine woman and looks rather like a modern one. When Sara Hennell writes to Eliot about Romola saying that the latter is “painted [as] a goddess, not a woman”, Eliot acknowledges: “You are right in saying that Romola is ideal—I feel it acutely in the reproof of my own soul in constantly getting from the image it has made . . . The various *strands* of thought I had to work out forced me into a more ideal treatment of Romola than I had foreseen at the outset” (*Letters* 4:103-04).

4.6. Jewish Identity & Construction

Another similarity between Eliot and Joyce is that both relied on the theme of the Jew in their fiction as a symbol of construction. As discussed in chapter 3 and highlighted above in Zunz's epigraph, Eliot's sympathy with the Jewish community may be explained by the fact that the latter have endured a dramatic past with its racial and religious memory. The forthcoming chapter will also supply evidence that Eliot was in contact with proto-Zionist figures such as Oliphant and Warren, and knew about the “great movement . . . among the Jews towards colonising Palestine” for a reconstruction of the old Israel (*GE & TBE* 117). Therefore, Eliot was already “aware that any literary representation of Jews will be a construction” (Newton 78). According to Nancy Henry, Eliot believed modern Judaism to be “a model that combined a religion of the past with a nationalism of the future . . . she began to explore its potential as an example of future national identity” to be constructed (*The Life* 231). Retrospectively, the major aim of Daniel who lacks a secure sense of identity is to recover and construct a Jewish one and return to the Promised Land. Throughout the novel,

Eliot keeps alluding to “the personal and cultural dangers of rootlessness and thereby enforcing the implicit argument for a reconstituted, modern Jewish identity based on national aspirations” (*The Life* 232). Likewise, in *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom has similar aspirations. In his *James Joyce, Ulysses, and the Construction of Jewish Identity*, Davison summarises this concept of construction in Joyce’s novel as follows:

Ulysses is about “questions” surrounding European Jewry: assimilation, Zionism, xenophobia, the psychology of scapegoating and stereotype. . . . Both the cultural position of “the Jew”, as well as normative Jewish identity, have changed irrevocably since Bloom’s day because of events Joyce did not live to see: the historicizing of Auschwitz, the maturation of American Jewry, the establishment of the state of Israel. (188)

As a matter of fact, both Eliot and Joyce prophesied the reconstruction of Jewish national identity in their respective *Daniel Deronda* and *Ulysses*, but neither of them saw its realisation during their lifetimes. However, this interest in the physical construction of the Jewish national identity in Eliot’s case may reveal other reasons. In 1876, four years before her death, Eliot wrote the following: “towards the Hebrews we western people, who have been reared in Christianity, have a *peculiar debt* and, whether we acknowledge it or not, a *peculiar thoroughness of fellowship in religious and moral sentiment*” (emphasis added) (*L & L* 653). It might be argued that Eliot borrowed from Judaism only those communal and moral values she needed to construct her model for both an ideal Britain and an ideal world. One should not forget though that Judaism is the only monotheistic religion that is fundamentally rooted in both a geographical reference and an ancestral claim to legitimate “territorial sovereignty” simply because consented by God’s allegedly unquestionable covenant. The survival of the Jewish identity, nation and state depends on the Promised Land. Such ideas of self-centredness inherent in the elect may also lead to unsteady and dangerous grounds as

those where Nurbhai and Newton, involving Eliot in their argument, apparently want to take the reader when they unambiguously write:

Since the establishment of a Jewish nation would be an initiatory influence on liberal nationalism elsewhere, the cohesion of the Arabs into a national force would, in this case, be dependent on the establishment of Israel. It was Eliot's view that nationalism, based on the Jewish formation of Zion, would not incite antagonism but would bring about the formation of interdependent societies, which in turn would culminate in the achievement of a global community. The zeal which would inspire the Arabs would be inextricable from the foundation of Israel. (152)

Nurbhai and Newton seem to have understood what Eliot actually meant to say when she made Deronda speak about the Arabs' potential revival and "great outburst of force" (*DD* 2:360). However, Nurbhai and Newton's reasoning in the above quote appears to be constructed as follows: its starting point is a pure theoretical assumption taken to mean literally what it suggests. Hence the establishment of the state of Israel is unequivocally presented as the *sine qua non* for "the cohesion of the Arabs into a *national force*" or "The *zeal* which would inspire the Arabs" (emphasis added) (Nurbhai, Newton 152). It becomes evident that discussing Judaism as a religion will always entail its other intrinsic ideological or political component, which would inevitably lead to the question of territorial sovereignty; here, the religious becomes inseparable from the political.

The idea of self-centredness also pervades the emergence of Israel's civilising hegemony over the whole world as Eliot herself "came to see the restoration of Israel as the dispensation which would lead to the *ideal state for the world*" (emphasis added) (Nurbhai, Newton 178). Even Britain is invited by Theophrastus to get inspired by and follow in the wake of the restored Jewish state and nation since "to regain its national shape or identity, it

should learn from the example of the solidarity of Judaism and the Jewish nation in forming itself” (Nurbhai, Newton 189). And even when Eliot clearly acknowledges British colonialism for the first time in her writings, her *mea culpa* is formulated according to Jewish-defining criteria: “We do not call ourselves a *dispersed* and a *punished* people; we are a colonising people, and it is we who have punished others” (emphasis added) (“TM Hep!” 188). Which other people were considered by Eliot as typically “dispersed” and “punished”? This self-centred pedagogical model which Judaism offers of itself, and to which Eliot seems to have fully adjusted her spiritual and ideological line of thought, is in fact a Judæo-centric model of a then “new” *world order*—so to speak—in which Jewish culture, religion and nationalism are represented as unequalled models of perfection or ideals that also have hegemonic power over the rest of the world’s nations. On a purely religious level, this has also been noticed by Bernard Semmel⁵⁶ who suggests that “Jews came to represent conscience, moral judges who might on occasion be unpleasantly censorious: if the Gypsy and the Christian were the id, the Jew was the superego” (121). While Semmel compares Gypsies, Christians, and Jews, Alicia Carroll,⁵⁷ on the other hand, contrasts the Islamic “things” with Jewish ones, and shows a clear awareness of Eliot’s “undeniable political bias” towards Islam when she writes:

Having some contact with real Jews and very little or none with Islam, Eliot, like Scott, Dickens, and Shakespeare, creates exotic, fairy-tale, make-believe visions of these others in her fiction, and her representations pack an undeniable political bias. They often associate things Islamic with the body and desire and things Jewish with an idealized vision of vocation and religiosity.

(222)

56. Professor Bernard Semmel (1928-2008) was an American historian and expert in British and British imperial history.

57. Associate Professor at the University of Auburn, Alabama. She is a specialist in nineteenth-century English literature and her research connects women’s studies, environmentalism, and nineteenth-century British studies.

Although Carroll is right when she says that Eliot had “very little [contact] or none with Islam”, she nevertheless misses the point that Eliot was well informed and documented about Islamic culture, history, philosophy, and the contribution of its civilisation to Europe through her readings of translated original Muslim sources, and also from the writings of her English and European contemporaries who acknowledged this contribution. To a certain extent, this sentiment of Jewish superiority that Eliot seems to presently acknowledge leads her far from her well-known sense of realism.

Conclusion

Like modernists, Eliot relies on the use of mythology in her writings as a tool for elevation and sophistication. In *Daniel Deronda*, she incorporates the Jewish Cabala and the myth of the *golem* making of Daniel the Adam who ultimately reaches self-awareness, and the Messiah whose mission is to spiritually guide his people, and who physically leads them to the Promised Land. Likewise, in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom affirms his Jewishness. He is identified with both Jesus Christ and Elijah—the harbinger of the Jewish Messiah—which elevates him to the status of a prophet supposed to teach his people the way to spiritual perfection. The Cabalistic aim at perfection and elevation echoes Eliot’s literary and artistic aspirations. Indeed, her major objective is to upgrade the Victorian novel and make it “the highest form of art” (Levine, *CC* 2) at a time when it was considered inferior in quality. Parallel to this quest for spiritual elevation and literary perfection, Eliot also considered Jewish communal solidarity and tenacity in fulfilling their national project as an ideal model for imperial Britain. She also made of the Jewish construction a requisite to the revival of the national identities of other nations, including the Arabs. However, the allusion to these Arabs occurs only once in *Daniel Deronda* in the form of an apparently vague generic term—as it will be demonstrated later on. She did not clearly refer in any way to the other Arab natives who had been living in the Holy Land of Palestine for centuries. Why? This question will be

discussed in the forthcoming chapter. It needs, however, to be first contextualised in the light of Eliot's attitude towards British colonial presence in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, her personal involvement in colonial investments and, finally, her position regarding colonial emigration.

CHAPTER 5

George Eliot, Arabs & British Colonialism

Introduction

Much of what has been written so far in the field of post-colonial literary criticism about Eliot's attitude towards British colonialism, if Edward Said's monumental work is excepted, says very little about the existence of Arabs in terms of national identity. When Eliot formulated her *mea culpa* at the end of her life, she designated the oppressed colonised peoples as "oriental" (*Letters* 6:301). And when she mentioned some of them by their names, she omitted to include Arabs among the "Jews" ("TM Hep!" 124), the "Hindoos" (126), the "Chinaman" (127), and the "Red Indians" (126). Despite her up-to-date knowledge at the time of both the geographical boundaries and the historical events that were taking place in the Arab world—either in North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, or the Middle East including Palestine—Eliot did not consider the inhabitants of this part of the world with the same degree of "sympathy and understanding" (*L & L* 653) as she did for the other "oriental peoples". When she talked about these Arabs in her reviews of colonial writings, she portrayed them through a narrow and a prejudiced view. If there is one aspect in Eliot's private life which may be cited as an unquestionable evidence of her involvement in the British colonial project, it is her active participation as a shareholder in British overseas companies, mainly railroad networks that actually facilitated the expansion of the Empire. This chapter will expand on the above issues, and take the discussion further to determine the extent to which Eliot adhered to the question of the restoration of the Jews as a nation with a state established in the Holy Land of Palestine. This discussion will also be contextualised with reference to the ongoing scholarly conversation about Eliot's attitude towards colonialism and the question of Palestine

as in the works of Edward Said, Saleel Nurbhai & K. M. Newton, Nancy Henry, and Avrom Fleishman.

5.1. Eliot's Book Reviews

5.1.1. With Reverend Davis in Tunisia, North Africa

In 1854, Eliot reviewed in *The Leader* Reverend N. Davis's *Evenings in My Tent; or, Wanderings in Balad Ejjareed, Illustrating the Moral, Religious, Social and Political Conditions of Various Arab Tribes of the African Sahara*. Talking in the introduction about the first English adventurers in Africa who may also be considered as being involved (one way or another) in scouting these virgin lands for colonising prospects, she writes: "Sad indeed is the catalogue of brave men, who have fallen victims to the climate, the hardships of the traveler's life, or the ferocity of the natives" (330). She then reveals to the reader her own, personal impression of the Arabs that she had mentally constructed mainly from her readings from the time she was a child till she grew up and became an adult. And that picture of the Arab is positively fascinating and "magical"—but only at first:

How little do we still know of Africa. In our childhood, its name exerted a mysterious power over our imaginations, dating from that terrible "African Magician" of the Arabian Nights. . . . In riper years, poetry and romance peopled this grand stage with fitting actors,—with the lofty, generous Arab, dwelling like a patriarch of old, in his goat-skin tent; scouring the sands on his matchless horse, yielding but to numbers, incapable of deceit or treachery. It must be owned that either the spell of the African magician still somewhat blinds our eyes, or these simple and noble sons of the Desert have degenerated strangely. (330)

Modern travelers, Eliot then affirms, draw a totally different picture of the Arab than that of her childhood and her more mature readings: “singularly cunning, rapacious, and cowardly, apparently incapable of truth, and sunk in abject superstition; in fact, as exhibiting all the vices of an oppressed race” (330). Although Eliot does not clearly decide whether the picture of the lofty, generous and noble Arab from her “riper years” should be updated in the light of fresh information by modern travelers, she nevertheless admits that his vices are those of “an oppressed race”. She chooses, however, to say nothing about the real identity of the oppressor nor about his role in inducing these vices.

Summarising Davis’s aim in writing this book about the Arabs of Africa, Eliot writes: “the main object of Mr. Davis’s book is to enforce his conviction that Africa can only be successfully explored, and its *wild hordes civilized*, by a *well-organised system* of missionaries” (emphasis added) (330)—this “ill-organized” missionary system that had caused “evil” and “irreparable injury to progress and to real civilisation” and “to the cause of the faith they profess to serve, which has resulted from their narrow bigotry and intolerance” (330).

Here, Eliot seems to protest against the ill-conducted imperialistic mission of the Church, accusing bigot and intolerant missionaries of causing great damage to “progress and to real civilisation”. In fact, she seems not only to share the reverend Davis’s opinion about this question, but also to fuel his argument with her personal point of view. More than that, she does not question—in any way, whatsoever—colonialism or imperialism as such although she appears to acknowledge the fact that this is an “oppressed [Arab] race”. In other words she seems to believe that had the missionary system been well-organised, progress and real civilisation would have prevailed in these backward Arab and African countries. And, consequently, progress and civilisation achieved by these missionaries among these ignorant indigenous populations would have been then proudly and honorably ascribable to “the cause

of the faith they profess to serve”. For Eliot, the question whether colonialism or imperialism is morally or ethically justified or acceptable does not arise at all. Like the reverend Davis (and many others), all she questions is the deficiency of the imperialistic machinery, i.e. the colonial or imperialistic mission which is badly conducted by an ill-organised missionary system. The core of the matter here is how to organise an apparently deficient colonial missionary system so that it efficiently contributes to the welfare of the Empire—not, and never, why such missionaries (or armies or settlers) were there in the first place.

A few lines further in the same review, Eliot selects “from the numerous anecdotes” in the reverend Davis’s book one which is “illustrative of the singular superstitions of the ignorant Arabs” and “interesting to the general reader” (331). It is about the eclipse of the moon in Tunis and the superstitious reaction of the “ignorant Arabs” who believed it was the end of the world in contrast with “the tranquility and composure of the Europeans”⁵⁸:

A lady describing this very scene in a letter to a friend of hers in Scotland, says, “I could not but feel sorry for many of these poor people, as they stared, with their faces pale from fear, trembling from head to foot, gazing on the darkened moon with intense earnestness, and at the same time speaking in a loud voice”, “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the apostle of God”.
(331)

A similar anecdote could be told, this time, about “Lord Derwentwater Lights” which appeared in the London sky in March 1716 and the superstitious verbal descriptions of which persisted in Scotland and England for many years:

Superstition sharpened or deceived the eyes of beholders in all parts of the country. The London Jacobites hailed this Aurora as a message from Heaven to cheer them after the depression caused by the execution of the sentence on the

58. This last quote is Davis’s, not Eliot’s.

Jacobite leaders . . . but men of both parties [Whigs and Tories] whose eyes were made the fools of other senses, agreed in seeing in the field of the sky armies fiercely engaged, giants flying through ether with bright flaming swords, and fire-breathing dragons flaring from swift and wrathful comets. They swore they heard the report of guns; they were quite sure they smelt powder. (Doran 160)

A parallel was quickly drawn between the reddish Aurora lights and the blood of the Scottish Jacobite rebel executed by the British. More than that, we have a vivid street description of the astronomical phenomenon by Lady Cowper:

First appeared a black cloud, from whence smoke and light issued forth at once, on every side, and then the cloud opened and there was a great body of pale fire, that rolled up and down and sent forth all sorts of colours . . . I could hardly make my Chairmen come home with me, they were so frightened, and I was forced to let my glass down and preach to them as I went along, to comfort them! All the People were drawn out into the Streets, which were so full One could hardly pass, and all frightened to Death. (Doran 162-63)

More than a century later, in 1853, and as quoted by Noaks in “Spiritualism, Science, and the Supernatural in mid-Victorian Britain”, the *Illustrated London News* observed and wondered:

Railroads, steam, and electricity, and the indubitable wonders which they have wrought, have not proved powerful enough to supersede and destroy that strong innate love of the supernatural which seems implanted in the human mind. Thousands of people in Europe and America are turning tables, and obstinately refusing to believe that physical and mechanical means are in any way connected in the process. (25-26)

Even in the circles of the Victorian literary elite, eminent writers could not escape the mysterious, influential power of the supernatural. Citing Royle's *Telepathy and Literature*, Pamela Thurschwell declares that the author "has catalogued *Daniel Deronda's* relentless incursions from the 'other world' of the Victorian supernatural. The novel 'is pervaded by ghosts and 'spirits', by forecasting, foresight and 'second sight', by strange intuitions, fantastical coincidences, instances of apparent telepathy or omniscience' " (91). Although *Daniel Deronda* has been "celebrated for its psychological realism", Thurschwell keeps arguing that "attempting to represent the workings of the human mind realistically, through all its sudden turns, unwanted memories and unconscious desires, inevitably brings one into the metaphorical and literal spaces of the supernatural" (91). Thurschwell eventually brings about an interesting point when she recalls Terry Castle, a literary scholar and critic interested in eighteenth-century British fiction, "point[ing] to this phenomenon as a legacy of the Gothic novel" (91). The outcome from this discussion of the persisting supernatural beliefs amid a rationalist, scientific and technological Victorian culture is that even Eliot's fictional or literary mind could not escape this typically Victorian paradox, and was likewise full of traces of the supernatural believed to originate in the eighteenth-century Gothic heritage. The Tunis eclipse anecdote, borrowed from Davis's *Evenings in My Tent*, represents a significantly biased interpretation of a natural phenomenon that Eliot selected, as a reviewer, to "illustrate the singular superstitions of ignorant Arabs".

5.1.2. With Richard Burton in East Africa & the Arabian Peninsula

In another review of Richard Burton's *First Footsteps in East Africa*, Eliot gives her appreciation of the grandeur of the renowned English traveler, explorer, spy, diplomat, and officer of her Majesty: "his expedition to Mecca [in 1853] was an exploit without parallel for skill and daring" (310). In fact, he started preparing for this exploit as early as 1848 "not only by learning the Koran and practicing rites and ceremonies, but by 'a sympathetic study of

Sufi-ism, the Gnosticism of El Islam, which would raise [him] high above the rank of a mere Muslim.’ Lady Burton writes: ‘This stuck to him off and on all his life’ ” (Burton xiv). It is worth mentioning at this point that the publication of his book *The Jew, The Gypsy and El Islam*, whose manuscript was ready as early as 1875 and from which the above passage has been quoted, was deliberately delayed until Burton retired from the civil service (1898) “owing to the anti-Semitic tendency” of its content (Burton viii).

A few lines further in her review, Eliot resumed an even more insistent praising of Burton’s colonial exploit: “while complaining of the book, we must express, at the same time, our admiration of the exploit which it relates. The writer only is to blame—the man is all which a man ought to be” (310). Eliot, here, does not express any protest against Burton’s violation of a city that is sacred to the Muslims although she keeps insisting on her respect of other races of fellow-men. Eliot never questions colonial presence in lands and places that belonged to other people; she rather seems to express concerns about literary issues like Burton’s lack of aesthetic narrative skills. When she summarises his book in her review “First Footsteps in East Africa” about discovering East Africa for the first time, Eliot innocently presents the reader with the arguments which obviously justified the British imperial move from Aden to an equally strategic naval base in East Africa—an old commercial route historically known as the monopoly of Arab sailors and traders: “it seems that Aden is an unhealthy station, and that on the opposite coast of Africa, to the south of the Straits of Babel Mandeb, there lies a district equally convenient for the purpose of a naval station, where the troops, instead of being cooped up in a fever-stricken peninsula, may have free command of an open, airy, and cheerful country” (310).

Likewise, the negatively marked picture Eliot presents in this review of what are referred to by Burton as the “half-*barbarous* tribes of *bastard* Bedouins, called Somals” (emphasis added) (310) is used to justify the colonial presence in a land so far away: “They

have given us trouble by murdering the crews of vessels which have been wrecked on their shores; and it has become at length desirable that we should by some means attempt to reclaim these tribes, perhaps gain a settlement among them, with *other possible consequences in the distance*” (emphasis added) (310).

After having justified the occupation of this African land, Eliot goes back to the British imperialistic hero to express her admiration again:

The man . . . who had ventured into Mecca would venture anywhere. Burton offered to carry letters in the disguise of an Arab: he would spy out the country and report upon it. In the winter of 1854-55 he set out on his adventure, and with careless audacity duly accomplished his task—accomplished it, also, we observe, in the character of an Englishman—for in the course of his journey he threw off his disguise, and travelled in his proper person as an officer from Aden. (310)

5.2. Colonial Investments & Emigration

Like Lewes, her companion, and Dickens or the Brontës, Eliot actively participated in the colonial project by investing her money in colonial overseas companies. One person who is thought to have encouraged her to invest her money in colonial business was Barbara Bodichon, her closest friend who was married to a French doctor. The couple used to winter in Algiers, a French colony then. Mrs. Bodichon was known as one of the earliest women’s rights advocates and activists. Referring to her devotion to the feminist cause and gathering of any writings relating to it, Matilda Betham-Edwards, the famous Victorian Francophile writer and traveler, recalls telling her lifelong friend Mrs. Bodichon in her *Reminiscences*: “you remind me of the Arabs . . . who pick up any scrap of paper bearing the name of Allah” (276). However, what is noteworthy about this woman is the connection she managed to create between the financial status of the mid-Victorian middle class spinster and the importance of

investing and placing money into overseas colonial businesses to share in the political control of the imperialistic system (Henry, *GE & TBE* 96-97). In her pamphlet *Laws Concerning Women*, Eliot's closest female friend Mrs. Bodichon wrote: "a woman can take part in the government of a great empire by buying East India Stock" (4). To have a clear idea of the amount of money invested by Eliot in the economic activities of the British Empire in the 1860s and 1870s, Nancy Henry extensively lists:

In addition to the Great Indian Peninsular and Madras Railways, Eliot owned stocks and bonds in Australia, Africa, Canada, and South America. These include: New South Wales, Victoria, Cape Town Rail, Colonial Bank, Oriental Bank, Melbourne and Hobson's Bay, Great Western of Canada, Scottish-Australian Investment Co., Buenos Ayres Great Southern Railroad, and Egyptian Bonds. At the time of her death, the colonial stocks made up just under half her total holdings. Other stocks directly connected to colonial trade (East and West India Docks, London Docks), domestic stocks (the Consols, Regents Canal), and foreign investments (Sambre and Meuse, Continental Gas, Pittsburgh, and Ft. Wayne) complete the portfolio. (*GE & TBE* 97)

Not only was Mrs. Bodichon interested in unmarried women's investments in the colonies, but she was also actively involved in emigration. It has already been mentioned that she herself would winter every year in Algiers, a French colony at the time. Mrs. Bodichon believed that British spinsters would find better opportunities for employment in overseas colonies and, therefore, live in a more independent way than at home (Henry, *GE & TBE* 97). Eliot never thought of emigrating, but when her sister Chrissey lost her husband she seriously considered accompanying her and her children to Australia and stay with them until they got accustomed to colonial life (Henry, *GE & TBE* 15-16). She was also convinced that her stepsons, Lewes's two sons, would find a much better life in the colonies (Henry, *GE & TBE*

42). She even thought of sending them to Algeria, but the couple finally opted for South Africa instead (Ashton, *G. H. Lewes: A Life* 219).

In relation with the issue of colonisation, Eliot appears as a pragmatic Englishwoman who never questions the occupation of other people's lands by force, but rather investigates the potential economic opportunities offered by the colonies for herself or her family. Her sense of pragmatism and her adoption of typical colonial attitudes can be seen through the investment of her money in colonial economy, and also in the way she believed in a better future for Lewes's sons in the colonies—among which Algeria, India, Australia and South Africa were seriously considered by both parents, Eliot and Lewes. Thanks to Mrs. Bodichon's helpful connections, Thornie was sent to Natal as a colonial farmer while his elder brother Bertie was almost on the point of traveling to Algeria to learn farming—probably following again Mrs. Bodichon's counsel—but eventually was sent to Glasgow for the same purpose (Ashton, *G. H. Lewes: A Life* 219).

Paradoxically though, this same youngest of the Lewes sons Thornie found a hero in the person of the Algerian emir Abdelkader when he read the poem written by Viscount Maidstone *Abd-el-Kader. A Poem in Six Cantos*. In a letter to Eliot on 3 February 1861, Thornie admitted that Abdelkader was a hero he admired (Henry, *GE & TBE* 54). The Algerian nationalist and freedom fighter emir was imprisoned in France and “became a celebrated cause among English radicals . . . or anti-Catholic Tories” (Henry, *GE & TBE* 54). Henry makes an interesting remark when she relevantly writes: “Thornie's heroes are anti-imperialist nationalists to whom he is connected by his belief, as an Englishman living outside England, in the ideals of freedom and national self-determination” (*GE & TBE* 54). This ideological contradiction is further explained by Henry who puts it in a somewhat ironical way: “to the extent that he showed any desire to direct his own future, he imagined himself participating in a national liberation movement, not a colonizing project” (*GE & TBE* 54).

It is surprising how the last statement in the above quote may, once slightly reformulated, be applied to Eliot's attitude to colonialism, or even to the Jewish national project. From all the examples already mentioned, either her reviews of colonial literature or her pragmatic involvement in colonial investments, there is evidence of Eliot's belief—like that of her stepson Thornie—in participating in an effort of “progress” and “real civilization”, “not a colonizing project”. In this respect she did not really differ from the common lot of her fellow citizens who considered these overseas lands as an opportunity for a better life that England could not offer them. Eliot believed in the 1850s that “emigration would enhance the development of the English race” (Henry, *GE & TBE* 17). She never considered emigration as illegitimate occupation or illegal expropriation of the native populations' land and, when she did, her *mea culpa* (made public only a year before her death in “TM Hep!”) that “we are a small number of an alien race profiting by the territory and produce of these prejudiced people” (“TM Hep!” 188) seems to have unfortunately come rather too late. This almost lifelong unthinking acceptance of colonialism is likely to have paved the way for her acceptance of the Jewish resettlement project and return to Palestine.

5.3. The Restoration of the Jews & the Arabs in *Daniel Deronda*

5.3.1. Henry, Fleishman & Eliot's Involvement in the Jewish Restoration

There is no need to indulge in sterile polemic and speculate about the mysterious identity of the “superseded proprietors” in *Daniel Deronda* (3:68), but a few points should be made in response to Nancy Henry's discussion of Edward Said's now too often cited and much criticised question regarding Eliot's silence about the Arab residents in Palestine at the time. In her *George Eliot and the British Empire*, Henry writes:

Mordecai's guiding vision concerns the restoration of the Jews to the Holy Land, lost to them centuries earlier, a dream frequently interpreted by critics of the novel as a form of Anglo-Jewish imperialism. Far from being Eliot's call

for Europeans to take what does not belong to them, the idea of the restoration of the Jews engages her sense of justice and reparation for wrongs committed, a view consistent with much of her fiction. (118)

Although Henry keeps repeating that Mordecai is a fictional character who does not necessarily express the author's opinion, she clearly makes Eliot's "sense of *justice*" and "*reparation* for wrongs committed" against the Jews inextricable from the "idea of the *restoration* of the Jews" (emphasis added). As for Theophrastus, Henry agrees to present him as making one with "the author [who] multiplies, and is present as Marian Evans Lewes, George Eliot, and Theophrastus" (*GE & TBE* 138). She herself quotes him to make her point in this discussion. It is true that Theophrastus/Eliot wonders whether Jews are "destined to complete fusion with the peoples among whom they are dispersed" or whether there are "in the political relations of the world, *the conditions* present or approaching for the restoration of a Jewish state planted on the old ground" (emphasis added) ("TM Hep!" 209-10). Yet, like Mordecai, Theophrastus/Eliot is also capable of flaring up and boldly asserting that "I share the spirit of the Zealots. I take the spectacle of the Jewish people defying the Roman edict, and preferring death by starvation or the sword to the introduction of Caligula's deified statue into the temple, as a sublime type of steadfastness" ("TM Hep!" 193). He/She likewise hopes for the rise of "some new Ezras, some modern Maccabees, who will know *how to use all favouring outward conditions*" (emphasis added) and "triumph by heroic example" in "making their people once more one among the nations" ("TM Hep!" 211). It is quite clear, now, that Mordecai's "guiding vision" (Henry, *GE & TBE* 118) is brought into life by Theophrastus/Eliot and made into a real project of return whose ultimate goal is "a Jewish state planted on the old ground" ("TM Hep!" 210). Eliot apparently firmly believed that a Jewish state and nation would come into existence as soon as those "favouring outward conditions" ("TM Hep!" 211) "present" or "approaching" were met ("TM Hep!" 210).

To insist on Eliot's condemnation of both British colonialism and the oppressive Turkish rule, Henry quotes her from two sources. First is quoted a letter to H. B. Stowe in which Eliot "criticizes the English on the grounds that 'a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us'" (*GE & TBE* 118). Next, intervenes Theophrastus who observes "that any people at once distinct and coherent enough to form a state should be held in subjection by an alien antipathetic government has been becoming more and more a ground of sympathetic indignation" (*GE & TBE* 118). On the same page, Henry also points to the historical fact that "mid-Victorian British travelers to Palestine, often motivated by Christian sympathies, complained about the living conditions of *Christian* communities under *Turkish rule* and about *British foreign policy*" (emphasis added) (*GE & TBE* 118). This quote obviously refers exclusively to the oppressed Christian communities in Palestine at the time. Henry eventually concludes that "Eliot wanted sovereignty for indigenous peoples—freedom from an 'alien antipathetic government'" (*GE & TBE* 118).

It is clear from her quote that Henry infers from Theophrastus's observation that the "alien antipathetic government" is the Turkish one. But who are Eliot's "indigenous peoples" for whom she wanted both "sovereignty" and "freedom"? Why does not Henry clearly name these people as she did for the "alien antipathetic" Turkish government? Within the historical context in which Henry has set her discussion, the "indigenous peoples" can only logically and exclusively refer to the various Christian communities settled in Palestine and suffering from precarious living conditions—not to Jews or to Arabs. But Eliot obviously never showed any intention to make these Christians who lived in Palestine the object of a "peculiar debt" or to include a "Christian part" in *Daniel Deronda*, let alone an Arab one.

Furthermore, Henry claims that "far from being Eliot's call for Europeans to take what does not belong to them, the idea of the restoration of the Jews engages her sense of justice

and reparation for wrongs committed” (*GE & TBE* 118). The question is: how could Eliot then make reparation and pay this “peculiar debt” to the Jews if the latter were not restored to Palestine? Either this reparation should concretely and realistically take the form of a historical return to the Promised Land or, otherwise, remain a pure naive fictional fantasy like *The Spanish Gypsy*’s homeland that Eliot decided to found in Carthage, North Africa, which in the fifteenth century—according to the historical setting of the poem—was an Arab land. Henry eventually brings the discussion to an end saying that “no one actually settles in the East” (*GE & TBE* 119). She also expresses her doubts as to whether Eliot really believed in the practicality of a Jewish state in the Holy Land.

In her *The Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography*, Henry reiterates the above argument when she writes: “the idealist element of the fantasy leads us to ask how likely she really thought it was that Daniel Deronda would help to establish a Jewish state” (169). Such incongruity as the one that appears in both stories between Eliot’s noble human feelings of justice and sympathy for the landless Gypsies and Jews on the one hand and, on the other, her failure to make reparation to both by literally settling the former in a purely imaginary homeland in Tunisia and keeping the latter away from the Promised Land leads the reader to question Eliot’s credibility both as a writer and as a person. Henry serves best the present purpose in demonstrating Eliot’s loss of credibility as a person: “her own practical support for nationalist causes at this time seems to have been minimal. She refused, for example, to contribute money to Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini’s cause in 1865 (*GEL* 4:200), and she and Lewes had no sympathy with Thornie’s desire to fight the Russians for Polish independence” (*The Life* 169-70).

Eliot was well documented on the Jewish resettlement and state question well before the writing of *Daniel Deronda*; she had many acquaintances among the politicians and

intellectuals who were actively involved in the preparation of the Jewish return, although Henry claims that Eliot:

had no wish to align herself with the efforts of certain Jewish and non-Jewish Englishmen, such as Moses Montefiore, Charles Warren, and Lawrence Oliphant,⁵⁹ to establish colonies in Palestine, perhaps because of her reservations about philanthropy in general or perhaps because of the aggressive Christianity that inspired men such as Warren and Oliphant. (*GE & TBE* 117)

Despite her lack of certitude, Henry quotes from a letter sent in 1879 by John Blackwood to Eliot about “a cry H.E.P. to Jerusalem and I imagine that Oliphant is in some manner the forerunner of work in these parts” (*GE & TBE* 117) to which Eliot “replied *evasively*: ‘there is a great movement now among the Jews towards *colonising* Palestine, and bringing out the resources of the soil. Probably Mr. Oliphant is interested in the work, and will find his experience in the West not without applicability in the East’ ” (emphasis added) (*GE & TBE* 117). This reply, being interpreted as “evasive”, makes Henry conclude that Eliot “has often been taken as an advocate of the colonization of Palestine based on isolated readings of *Deronda*, but her reluctance to celebrate early signs of its actual occurrence suggests that she distinguished between the idea of Jewish nationalism and the practices of religious (mostly Christian) colonizers” (*GE & TBE* 117). Henry goes on quoting from Blackwood’s second letter on the same question in which the latter “thought that she [Eliot], Benjamin Disraeli, and Oliphant were all ‘working to one end’ ” (*GE & TBE* 117). If Henry was right in her conclusion that Eliot had no connection with such people and their project, it is curious why a lifelong friend and editor “persisted” in associating one of his authors he knew best with such people and such project (Henry, *GE & TBE* 117). The other intriguing question is: how could this same lifelong friend and editor either misunderstand or be ignorant of Eliot’s—his best

59. According to Avrom Fleishman, Oliphant was “a friend of John Blackwood and a potential collaborator with Lewes in founding the *Fortnightly Review*, [he] was also an enterprising colonialist” (202).

author—views on the issue, particularly when Oliphant was also one of Blackwood’s regular authors and friend, and Lewes’s collaborator in founding the *Fortnightly Review*?

While Henry has interpreted Eliot’s reply to Blackwood’s first letter above as “evasive”, Fleishman finds it rather excited and notes that Eliot “seems quite *sanguine* about the prospect” (emphasis added) (203). This consequently confirms not her “reluctance”, as Henry seems to suggest, but rather her willingness to “celebrate early signs of its actual occurrence”, i.e. the colonisation of Palestine (*GE & TBE* 117).

5.3.2. The Identity of the Arabs in *Daniel Deronda*

It has been clearly established from Eliot’s own notebooks that she read Stanley’s *Palestine and Sinai* (Irwin 262) and Salomon Munk’s *Palestine: Description Géographique, Historique et Archéologique* (Irwin 39) in which she could find all the historical information she needed about the people who inhabited Palestine from time immemorial. Munk cited various Arab and also Christian sources to give vivid and objective descriptions of Jerusalem and its inhabitants since the Crusades, and even much earlier. In her notebooks, Eliot also quoted a long extract from an article published in *The Academy* in 1874 that supplied her with up-to-date information about the economy and the population of Jerusalem that amounted to “18,000, of whom about 5000 are Mohammedans, 8 to 9000 Jews & the rest Xtians of various denominations” (qtd. in Irwin 288); she also significantly noted that “the country could support a population many times larger than its present scanty number of poverty-stricken inhabitants” (qtd. in Irwin 288).

In “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims”, Edward Said notes “the total absence of any thought about the actual inhabitants of the East, Palestine in particular” (20) in Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*. This observation makes Nurbhai and Newton accuse Said of being partial in his reading of the novel since he “fails to mention Deronda’s comment on the Arabs” (151). Talking about the possibility for nationalities to witness a revival, Deronda said: “a sentiment

may seem to be dying and yet revive into strong life, . . . Nations have revived. We may live to see a great outburst of force in the Arabs,⁶⁰ who are being inspired with a new zeal.” To which Pash reacted, in the same dialogue: “That may hold with backward nations” (2:360). Is the adjective “backward”, with its apparently negative connotation, the choice of a fictitious character that involves in no way the author’s ethical responsibility? One could possibly argue that following Deronda’s above-quoted statement about Arabs, Mordecai, the Jewish patriarch and prophetic Hebrew figure in the novel, responded in a very positive way to the revival of Arab nationalism when he said “Amen” twice and expressed “a delight which was the beginning of recovered energy” (2:360). After a closer reading, however, it appears that Deronda’s comment in the novel about the Arabs’ potential revival and “great outburst of force” serves no other purpose but to remind Mordecai of the equally potential revival of Jewish nationalism and confirm or strengthen his conviction that his prophecy of both a strong Jewish nation and state will soon come true, which obviously induced his Amens, his “delight” and his “recovered energy”. No Arab national revival—let alone the Arabs’ inspiration “with a new zeal”—is ever likely to cause Mordecai’s delight or recovered energy.

Bernard Semmel, too, seems to head in this direction when he says that “(for Disraeli, and it would appear for Eliot as well, the term ‘Arab’ included the Jew)” (125). And he is not alone, as he is joined by Gertrude Himmelfarb who expands a little more on this intriguing use of the term “Arab” and claims that it “was commonly used to mean ‘Semite,’ including Jews as well as Muslims and Christians” (88). For Mordecai, at this stage in the story, this linguistic oddity certainly did not cause any problem since he too obviously understood “Jew” when Deronda meant “Arab”! But how can and why will the term “Arab” for a Victorian or any pre- or even post-Victorian include the Jew or the Christian? In her reviews of both the Reverend Davis and Richard Burton in the mid 1850s, Eliot did not in any way use the term

60. Eliot was probably referring to the Arab Renaissance or Awakening period of the late nineteenth century known as *Al-Nahda*, which saw political turbulence, and intellectual and cultural revival in some Arab countries, mainly Egypt, Syria and Lebanon.

“Arab” to mean any other community than the Arabs we know today. So, why should she use the same term in the mid 1870s to include either Jews or Christians? In the whole novel, this is the only instance in which the word “Arab” was used by Eliot.

Using a quote from one of Eliot’s letters, Nurbhai and Newton try to convince Edward Said that:

Not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom we English come into contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us. There is nothing I should care to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellowmen who most differ from them in customs and beliefs (*Letters*, VI, 301-02). (152)

Was it not possible for Eliot to, first, clearly refer to those “oriental peoples” or “races” by their names? Of all the Oriental nations and peoples that the British Empire occupied and oppressed Eliot/Theophrastus mentioned only the Hindoos and the Chinaman (“TM Hep!” 188). Any reader of her works must have noticed her redundant reference to a stereotyped global notion of an “East” or “Orient” that is vaguely, if not hardly delimited at all—when measured by the standards of her knowledge of the West.

Second, Eliot publicly dared at long last condemn British colonialism towards the end of her life when she wrote in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*: “we are a small number of an alien race, profiting by the territory and produce of these prejudiced people” (“TM Hep!” 188). Meanwhile, however, she continued to profit by “the produce of these prejudiced people” till the last day in her life through the profits she made from her transcontinental investments in colonial economy in Africa, Egypt, India, Australia, Canada and even South America. As a colonial shareholder, mainly in colonial railways, Eliot was in fact sharing both

in the expansion and the continuity of the British Empire—not in the independence or self-determination of those “prejudiced people” as she chose to call them. Henry did not miss this crucial point when she commented on a pro-colonial *Westminster Review* article from 1860: “far from encouraging the cooperation and independence of the Indian people, railroads and British investment in them developed into a justification for continued British rule” (*GE & TBE* 101).

As a final option, being herself a talented writer of international renown⁶¹ Eliot could have shared in the effort of rousing “the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellowmen” (qtd. in Nurbhai, Newton 152) as she herself wrote to H. B. Stowe and, thus, she could have helped in bridging the gap between East and West as many of her peers had striven to do. But as Henry acknowledges, Eliot’s “writing shows a decided avoidance of the realities of British colonialism” (*GE & TBE* 20). She chose, therefore, to turn to fifteenth-century Spain where a Holy war involved Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Gypsies, and wrote a romance in epic verse about the expulsion of the latter. Using quotes from *The Spanish Gypsy*, Lovesey writes: “the Moors have facilitated the Gypsies’ plan to escape exile in Africa, but ‘Moslem subtlety’ casts a calculating and wary eye upon the enterprise. The Moors speculate on whether there will be sufficient space for the Gypsies within, not Africa, but a Jewish, Christian, Moslem or Gypsy hell” (245-46). Such a stereotyped picture of the Arabs/“Moslems” is reminiscent of Eliot’s review of the reverend Davis’s *Evenings in my Tent*,⁶² in which she hesitated whether to still trust her childhood idealised image of the “lofty, generous Arab” (330). In *The Spanish Gypsy*, however, Eliot apparently wrote as if she had made up her mind as to what to believe about this Arab.

61. Eliot’s books were also read in the colonies: “the export of English literature, money, and sons to the colonies formed a pervasive and diverse culture of empire in mid-nineteenth-century England” (Henry, *GE & TBE* 2).

62. See block quote on page 112.

Conclusion

By and large, Eliot's position on Arabs in early years had totally altered when she grew older. The young Mary Anne who enjoyed reading the "magical" *Arabian Nights* was then fascinated by the "lofty" and "generous" Arab "incapable of deceit or treachery" ("Evenings in My Tent" 330). However, that same Arab soon turned into a person "singularly cunning, rapacious, and cowardly, apparently incapable of truth" (330), whom a more mature Eliot associates in *Daniel Deronda* with a certain category of people Pash called "backward nations" (2:360). In her review of Davis's *Evenings in My Tent*, Eliot describes those "ignorant" Arabs as sunken "in abject superstition" (330) and as indigenous populations whom the British missionaries should civilise. This opinion is similarly inherent in her review of Burton's *First Footsteps in East Africa*, in which she uses Burton's rude words to present the local populations as "half-barbarous tribes of *bastard* Bedouins, called Somals" (emphasis added) (310). Eliot, nonetheless, does not omit to praise Burton's spy mission in Mecca, and yet, she chooses not to express any protest against his violation of this sacred city—despite her insistence on the respect she claims to feel for other races. In truth, Eliot remained a shareholder in overseas colonial ventures till the end of her life. She even believed in a better future for her sister and her stepsons in those far away colonised lands. A year before her death, however, Eliot acknowledged that the British—including herself—were "a small number of an alien race profiting by the territory and produce of these prejudiced people" ("TM Hep!" 188). This almost lifelong unthinking acceptance of colonialism is likely to have paved the way for her acceptance of the Jewish resettlement project and return to Palestine. Indeed, the anti-Hebrew sentiment Eliot had in the 1840s turned in the 1870s into a more sympathetic attitude towards the Jews whose national project of a return to Palestine she apparently fully supported. Eliot, however, never mentioned the Arab natives who had been living in the Holy Land for centuries and who, like the Jews, should have been part of these

“oriental peoples” she “felt urged to treat . . . with such sympathy and understanding as [her] nature and knowledge could attain to” (*L & L* 653).

This same “sympathy and understanding” is, however, granted without limits to the people of her own lot, and promoted in her fiction as a tool which she uses to increase her reader’s awareness of the dangers of alienating the other. Despite her prejudiced views on colonial issues, Eliot remains a committed woman writer who targeted social progress through a progressive literature. Her fiction denounces the Victorian social flaws and injustices, and avoids literary conventions and stereotypes. The forthcoming chapter will discuss these issues and show how Eliot serves the woman question through her engaged literature rather than feminist militancy.

CHAPTER 6

George Eliot & Social Progress

Introduction

Eliot was not a feminist activist despite her rebellious, unconventional life and modern aspirations—both social and literary. She distanced herself from Victorian feminist militancy and, consequently, became the focus of criticism by contemporary feminists and, as Atkinson puts it, “the scapegoat for modernist frustrations with the Victorians” (75). One of the feminist modernists who tempers this judgement is Virginia Woolf who affirms in her essay “George Eliot” that:

George Eliot had far too strong intelligence to tamper with those facts, and too broad a humour to mitigate the truth because it was a stern one. . . . For her, . . . the burden and the complexity of womanhood were not enough; she must reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck for herself the strange bright fruits of art and knowledge. Clasp them as few women have ever clasped them, she would not renounce her own inheritance—the difference of view, the difference of standard. . . . (175)

The above-quoted statement by Woolf echoes Eliot’s vision expressed below in her 1855 essay “Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft”:

On one side we hear that women’s position can never be improved until women themselves are better; and, on the other, that women can never become better until their position is improved—until the laws are made more just, and a wider field opened to feminine activity. But we constantly hear the same difficulty stated about the human race in general. There is a perpetual action

and reaction between individuals and institutions; we must try and mend both by little and little—the only way in which human things can be mended. (205)

Woolf's quote clearly shows Eliot's lifelong striving not only to grasp the "complexity of womanhood", but also to reach beyond this complexity to stand out as a woman writer seeking to "pluck for herself the strange bright fruits of art and knowledge". Woolf's insightful analysis of Eliot, both as a writer and as a woman, rightly points out her constant will to distinguish herself from the common lot of Victorian feminists and female novelists by remaining faithful to her "difference of view, [her] difference of standard". The opening sentence in Eliot's quote explains the paradoxical nature of the woman question and goes beyond that to identify it with the "difficulty" underlining the "perpetual action and reaction between individuals and institutions". For her, "the only way" to achieve social progress is by progressively mending both "individuals and institutions". The *modus operandi* Eliot proposes is highlighted by the following fundamental notions: "woman", "human", "action and reaction" or relations, and "little by little" or progression.

In order to apprehend the links Eliot sees between these inter-related notions, this chapter will try to answer the following questions: how does Eliot view gender and how does she deal with the issue in her writings? To what extent can gender-based ideas be responsible for the malfunctioning of human relations? How does Eliot rely on writing as a tool to promote gradual social change?

6.1. Gender & Education

It is commonly known that, according to Victorian conventions, most of the intellectual domains such as philosophy, psychology, politics, science, mathematics, and history belonged to the male sphere, and therefore represented a restricted area for women who were thought to be intellectually inferior. Eliot herself ironically pointed to this issue when in 1844 she found out that Strauss had eventually discovered that his *Das Leben Jesu*

was being translated into English by a woman. Joking about the German writer's predictable reaction, Eliot wrote to her friend Cara Bray: "I do not think it was kind to Strauss to tell him that a young lady was translating his book. I am sure he must have some twinges of alarm to think he was dependent on that most contemptible specimen of the human being for his English reputation" (*L & L* 65). This comment points to the truth that gender discrimination was at work even among notorious intellectuals, be they conservative Englishmen or more open-minded Europeans. Charles Darwin asserts in his *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* that "the chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shown by man attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than woman can attain—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands" (311). In his *Essays and Aphorisms*, Arthur Schopenhauer affirms that "women are suited to being the nurses and teachers of our earliest childhood precisely because they themselves are childish, silly and short-sighted, in a word big children, their whole lives long" (qtd. in Grimshaw 63). If that was the line of thought of the most learned men, what could be said about the average members of society? Would parliamentary bills alone be sufficient to change their mindsets and behaviours or was the whole society in need of a deeper and more constructive process?

In any case, if a woman had attempted a real intellectual action at that time to raise human awareness, she would probably not have been taken seriously. Referring to his partner's male *nom de plume*, Lewes confessed to Mrs. Bodichon, that: "the object of anonymity was to get the book judged on its own merits, and not prejudged as the work of a woman, or of a particular woman" (*Letters* 3:79). It is commonly known that Eliot started writing fiction by the time she had moved to live with the already married George Henry Lewes. She was fully aware that her work would, without any doubt, be partially judged in relation to this daring, unconventional extramarital relationship. Indeed, this precocious

modernity was not well regarded at the time, but rather viewed as a disgrace that had earned Eliot the label of “fallen woman” (Röder-Bolton 96). Accordingly, she decided to publish her first work of fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, under a pseudonym. Eliot’s choice of a male pen name is also an indication of her desire to hide her gender so that her work would be rated objectively and seriously. This trick turned to be very successful and the *Scenes* was greeted with enthusiasm by Victorian readers who believed it to be the accomplishment of a highly intelligent man. “There was clearly no suspicion that I was a woman,” wrote Eliot in her 1857 journal, “they were all sure I was a clergyman—a Cambridge man” (*L & L* 218). On 28 February 1858, Eliot added that “Thackeray spoke highly of the ‘Scenes,’ and said *they were not written by a woman*. Mrs. Blackwood is *sure* they are not written by a woman. Mrs. Oliphant, the novelist, too, is confident on the same side” (*L & L* 254). The only person—and not anyone—who suspected Eliot to be a woman and yet acknowledged her as an able woman writer was Charles Dickens. On 17 January 1858, he sent her the following letter:

In addressing these few words of thankfulness to the creator of “The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton”, and the sad love-story of Mr. Gilfil, I am (I presume) bound to adopt the name that it pleases that excellent writer to assume. I can suggest no better one: but I should have been strongly disposed, if I had been left to my own devices, to address the said writer as a woman. I have observed what seemed to me such womanly touches in those moving fictions, . . . I shall always hold that impalpable personage in loving attachment and respect, and shall yield myself up to all future utterances from the same source, with a perfect confidence in their making me wiser and better. (*L & L* 248-49)

Before becoming a novelist, Eliot kept anonymous the articles she wrote for the *Westminster Review*. When, in 1855, Charles Bray had read and appreciated the essay

“Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming” ignoring the author’s identity, Eliot revealed him her authorship but asked for his discretion: “I . . . beg that you will not mention it as such to any one likely to transmit the information to London, as we are keeping the authorship a secret. The article appears to have produced a strong impression, and that impression would be a little counteracted if the author were known to be a *woman*” (*L & L* 196). It is also noteworthy to mention that John Chapman and Eliot were co-editors of the *Westminster Review* periodical—clandestinely for Eliot’s part—which made her the sole woman editor in the UK at the time (Brake 251). However, she would subsequently give up writing articles as she declared in 1858 after “having discovered that [her] vocation lies in other paths” (*Letters* 2:431). These “other paths” would turn out to be “writing *books* for some time to come” (*Letters* 2:431).

The present dissertation has already discussed in the previous chapters the fact that Eliot’s fiction is a vast arena in which various disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, mythology, and politics co-exist. Victorians regarded these fields as “provinces of masculine knowledge” (1:106) as affirmed by the narrator in *Middlemarch*. Eliot thought life to be “a great deal more than science” (qtd. in Ashton, *Versatile Victorian* 8) and believed in a literature that would mirror the complex aspects of human existence. Such literature would be an effective tool to progressively change mentalities, attitudes, and behaviours based on a real representation that would incite the mind to contemplate, ponder, analyse, understand, and eventually step forward. Mary Anne Evans was ultimately compelled to adopt a male identity cover in order to ensure acceptance and acknowledgement of her literary and intellectual capabilities by her peers.

Eliot was aware that “anything [was] more endurable than to change [their] established formulae about women, or to run the risk of looking up to [their] wives instead of looking down on them” (“Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft” 205). Therefore, only a man,

such as the supposedly male George Eliot, could venture to openly deal with politics in *Felix Holt*. The novel denounces Harold Transome's refusal to hear his mother's political opinions because they are "matters, which properly belong to men" (*FH* 40). A year before she started writing fiction, Eliot had sharply condemned "the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic" that "feminine fatuity" was responsible for in common Victorian female novels ("SN" 178). Eliot criticised such irresponsible authoresses who fuelled stereotyped ideas about women's intellectual inferiority and their second-class literature. This is one of the main reasons why Eliot greatly encouraged the education of women and considered it as the best solution for them to assert themselves both intellectually and socially.

In a letter to Miss Sara Hennell, dated 22 November 1867, Eliot admits that "the better education of women is one of the objects about which [she] ha[s] *no doubt*, and shall rejoice if this idea of a college can be carried out" (*L & L* 500). Eliot's husband, John Walter Cross, informs the reader that she "was deeply interested in the higher education of women, and that she was amongst the earliest contributors to Girton College⁶³" (*L & L* 726). In an 1867 letter to John Morley, Eliot wrote: "I would certainly not oppose any plan . . . to establish . . . an equivalence of advantages for two sexes, as to education and the possibilities of free development" (*Letters* 4:364). Moreover, when in 1878 London University had opened all its degrees to women, Eliot joyfully wrote to Mme Bodichon saying: "no doubt you are rejoicing too" (*L & L* 669). In another letter to the same correspondent dated 6 April 1868, Eliot further explained:

What I should like to be sure of, as a result of higher education for women—a result that will come to pass over my grave—is their recognition of the great amount of social unproductive labour which needs to be done by women, and which is now either not done at all or done wretchedly. No good can come to

63. Barbara Bodichon and Emily Davies founded Girton College: "the first attempt to offer women a liberal and classical education equal to men's" (Gargano 119).

women, more than to any class of male mortals, while each aims at doing the highest kind of work which ought rather to be held in sanctity as what only the few can do well. I believe, and I want it to be well shown, that a more thorough education will tend to do away with the odious vulgarity of our notions about functions and employment, and to propagate the true gospel, that the deepest disgrace is to insist on doing work for which we are unfit—to do work of any sort badly. (*L & L* 506)

In a nutshell, Eliot acknowledges here that her society was in need of a gradual educating process. This process was essential not only for women but also for men so that both would become aware of the defective gender-based notions that shaped the social norms and controlled individual lives. When these flaws were ultimately corrected, women would then be able to accomplish social productive “labour”, which they were formerly prevented from doing due to their gender. It is only then that “good [could] come to women” and that both genders would understand the uselessness of aiming “at doing the highest kind of work” “for which [they] are unfit” because insisting on doing something for which we have no talent or skill is obviously synonymous with an unproductive result, namely doing the work “badly”. Human intellectual abilities differ from one person to another according to his/her “sensibilities” and certainly not to his/her gender. Felix Holt explains to Esther that “thoughts, opinions, knowledge, are only a sensibility to facts and ideas. If I understand a geometrical problem, it is because I have a sensibility to the way in which lines and figures are related to each other” (123). This passage indicates that Eliot was cognisant of “the limitations of formal education” (Gargano 117). *Felix Holt* and her other novels seek to highlight “the rich possibilities of what she portrays as a more authentic self-education, directed by the goals and talents of the individual learner” (Gargano 117-18). Indeed, some people may have more sensibilities than others for one or several domains, which means that others could have

less—or even no—sensitivity for certain disciplines. One should then wisely focus on what one has the ability to progress in, enhancing therefore one’s chances of reaching excellence. This is probably the essence of what Eliot summarises as “the deepest disgrace is to insist on doing work for which we are unfit” (*L & L* 506). In her essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”, Eliot blames the category of Victorian authoresses who were vying to publish novels without having any sensitivity for writing. According to her, they lack “those moral qualities that contribute to literary excellence—patient diligence, a sense of the responsibility involved in publication and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer’s art” (202). Although these “silly novels” were widely acclaimed at the time, they nonetheless clearly reflect their authors’ untalented style, literary immaturity and reckless disregard for authorial moral responsibility, which in fact causes real damage to both the gender and the status of the genuine Victorian woman writer. As Eliot sarcastically words it: “when a woman’s talent is at zero, journalistic approbation is at the boiling pitch; when she attains mediocrity, it is already at no more than summer heat” (“SN” 202). Paradoxically though, when women’s writings reach excellence “critical enthusiasm drops to the freezing point” (202). “Fiction,” maintains Eliot, “is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men. A cluster of great names, both living and dead, rush to our memories in evidence that women can produce novels not only fine, but among the very finest” (203).

Eliot also sheds light on society’s share of responsibility in producing second-rate authoresses: “the standing apology for women who become writers without any special qualification is that society shuts them out from other spheres of occupation. Society is a very culpable entity, and has to answer for the manufacture of many unwholesome commodities, from bad pickles to bad poetry” (“SN” 203). This condemnation clearly attacks the limitations on women’s choice imposed by society. Such restrictions would always be at work as long as

women were denied access to knowledge, the source of intellectual ascendancy *par excellence*. On 4 October 1869, Eliot wrote:

Women ought to have the same fund of truth placed within their reach as men have; . . . And this unity in their faith can only be produced by their having each the same store of fundamental knowledge. It is not likely that any perfect plan for educating women can soon be found, for we are very far from having found a perfect plan for educating men. But it will not do to wait for perfection. (*Letters* 5:58)

Retrospectively, one should not forget that, despite their education, learned men such as Strauss, Darwin, or Schopenhauer believed in the intellectual inferiority of women. Given these prejudices, one can safely understand what a remark like “we are very far from having found a perfect plan for educating men” alludes to. To put it plainly, a change in the mindsets and a shift in mentalities are both necessary even for the most learned men. While his mother was telling him how much she had suffered under the intellectual restrictions imposed by her father, Daniel Deronda—“eager to know particulars that he feared his mother might not think of” (3:119)—asked: “was my grandfather a learned man?” to which his mother hastened to answer: “Oh, yes,—and a clever physician—and good: . . . A man to be admired in a play” (3:119). So, which aspects of education, according to Eliot, did these learned men essentially lack?

As already discussed in chapters 1 and 2 Eliot was a meliorist and, therefore, education for her was undoubtedly a broad notion. She certainly did not confine the term to one field of knowledge or another, but rather extended the concept to encompass anything life would offer—including painful experiences. Eliot once proclaimed: “I think a great awe in the contemplation of man’s delicate structure, freighted with terrible destinies, is one of the most important parts of education” (*L & L* 523). She grasped the fundamental importance of both

the heart and the intellect in acquiring the highest degrees of knowledge, and the noblest sentiments that life and experience could teach humans.

Eliot was a Victorian woman who managed to attain a remarkable level of intellectuality through self-education. John Fiske, the Harvard librarian, met Eliot in 1873 and was very impressed by her great intellect:

I never saw such a woman. There is nothing a bit masculine about her; she is thoroughly feminine and looks and acts as if she were made for nothing but to mother babies. But she has a power of *stating* an argument equal to any man; equal to any man do I say? I have never seen any man, except Herbert Spencer, who could state a case equal to her. . . . She didn't talk like a bluestocking—as if she were aware she had got hold of a big topic—but like a plain woman, who talked of Homer as simply as she would of flat-irons. . . . I never before saw such a clear-headed woman. . . . her knowledge is quite amazing. I have often heard of learned women, whose learning, I have usually found, is a mighty flimsy affair. But to meet a woman who can meet you like a man, . . . this is, indeed, quite a new experience. (qtd. in Collins 103-04)

It is clear from the above quote that Fisk was not only struck with Eliot's intelligence, but he above all associated such a bright mind with a man's. As discussed earlier, knowledge was believed to be exclusively reserved to men, but Eliot sought to change this conventional attitude through her writings. She devoted this part of art the majority of Victorians were fond of, i.e. fiction, to highlight what she regarded as major social flaws. She aimed at raising her fellow men's awareness of the dysfunctional human relations within Victorian society. By and large, Eliot targeted progress and evolution through a progressive literature that revisited gender-based notions such as human attributes and relations.

6.2. Human Attributes & Relations

Retrospectively, it is well worth remembering (as already discussed in chapter 2) that Eliot was inspired by French women intellectuals who gained the freedom of thought and whose intellectual abilities were encouraged and fully acknowledged:

women become superior in France by being admitted to a common fund of ideas, to common objects of interest with men; and this must ever be the essential condition at once of true womanly culture and of true social well-being. . . . Let the whole field of reality be laid open to woman as well as to man, . . . then we shall have that marriage of minds which alone can blend all the hues of thought and feeling in one lovely rainbow of promise for the harvest of human happiness. (“Woman in France” 62-63)

Men and women share the equal quality of being intelligent humans, capable of achieving excellent productivity if their abilities and intellects are rightly stimulated through constructive education and knowledge equally accessible to both. “ ‘Conscience goes to the hammering in of nails’ is my gospel,” says Eliot, “there can be no harm in preaching *that* to women at any rate. . . . I the more highly venerate those who are struggling in the thick of the contest. ‘La carrière ouverte aux taléns,’ whether the talents be feminine or masculine, I am quite confident is a right maxim” (*L & L* 238). On the last pages of Eliot’s *Life and Letters*, Cross writes:

[Eliot] was keenly anxious to redress injustices to women, and to raise their general status in the community. This she thought, could best be effected by women improving their work—ceasing to be amateurs. But it was one of the most distinctly marked traits in her character, that she particularly disliked everything generally associated with the idea of a “masculine woman”. . . . It was often in her mind and on her lips that . . . human beings should love one

another better. Culture merely for culture's sake can never be anything but a sapless root, capable of producing at best a shrivelled branch. (725-26)

This last image from nature, the most authentic environment, is reminiscent of Eliot's most powerful literary weapon of social contest, namely the art of realism. Chapter 1 had already examined the way Eliot relied on realism to extend the readers' sympathy to the most ordinary characters who lived in remote provincial areas. The forthcoming chapter will discuss how Eliot had used the same technique to expose the stifling Victorian social conventions, and bring into light the emotional and psychological agonies of women due to such environment. For the time being, this chapter will focus on the way Eliot portrayed difference as a real, living part of society to make the audience aware of the major flaws in categorising human attributes and of the consequent disparity in human relations.

Daniel Deronda and his mother are undoubtedly the best examples to start with. If one analyses Daniel's character relying on the conventional standards that apply gender to human attributes, one would soon come to the conclusion that Daniel has female attributes for he is a peaceful man who lacks aggression and who shows sympathy and compassion towards the others. The narrator draws attention to Daniel's difference saying:

You see this fine young fellow—not such as you see every day, is he? . . . he has notions of his own, . . . This state of feeling was kept up by the mental balance in Deronda, who was moved by an affectionateness such as *we* are apt to call feminine, disposing him to yield in ordinary details, while he had a certain inflexibility of judgement, and independence of opinion, held to be *rightfully* masculine. (emphasis added) (*DD* 2:61)

It is interesting here to point to the functional “we” used by the narrative voice to attest its social membership and to highlight the fact that social alienation is pursued in connivance with the most authoritative voices. Additionally, the adverb “rightfully” has a critical value in

this case as it is employed to highlight the gender-based general opinion. Daniel's sympathy for his fellow humans is described as "perhaps more than a woman's acuteness of compassion" (*DD* 3:190). Yet, this different man—who is very likely to be alienated from society because of that very difference—turns to be a prophet-like figure who is supposed to guide people. This high receptivity and compassion Daniel enjoys make him a noble and tolerant man whose personal development eventually leads him to self-awareness.

More importantly, Eliot sharply criticised in her essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" some authoresses who kept on producing the very stereotypes society expected them to produce. Eliot named such authoresses the "mind-and-millinery writers" ("SN" 187), and blamed them for relying on "the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic" in their fiction ("SN" 178). These stagnant women are contrasted in *Daniel Deronda* with his mother whom Eliot symbolically nicknamed the "Melusina" (*DD* 3:110), a mythical female figure also called "the serpent-woman" who represents "the spiral of involution and of evolution" (Alban 1). The Melusina may have been chosen as a symbol by Eliot for two reasons: the first being that she stands for difference. Indeed, she is half-human and half-serpent creature; her difference is not negatively perceived since it gives her the enchanted status of a fairy. Second, she symbolises the intricate "involution" and "evolution" struggle that Eliot wished to bring to light.

Daniel's mother is a woman with great artistic talent. When she was young, she aspired to become an artist. However, she reluctantly had to renounce her ambition because her father believed such an aspiration to be exclusively masculine. After she sorrowfully describes to Daniel the pains and sufferings she had gone through due to the forced patriarchal will upon her, he solemnly declares: "I enter into the painfulness of your struggle. I can imagine the hardship of an enforced renunciation", to which she firmly replies: "No . . . you are not a woman. You may try—but you can never imagine what it is to have *a man's force of*

genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl” (emphasis added) (*DD* 3:118). Again, the narrator is gendering the characteristic “genius” as masculine to denounce the social definition of it as such. Women were confined to intellectual “slavery” and Daniel’s mother expresses the psychological incarceration and emotional pressure she had experienced in the following terms: “this is what you must be; this is what you are wanted for; a woman’s heart must be of such size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet; her happiness is to be made as cakes are, by a fixed receipt. That was what my father wanted. He wished I had been a son; he cared for me as a make-shift link” (*DD* 3:118-19). In other words, gender-based conventions could be so dangerous to the point of dehumanising the most humane kind of human relations, namely the parent-child relationship, and reduce it to an emotionless mechanism based on authority and obedience.

A poignant illustration of the male sadistic domination that some women had to endure is the relationship between Gwendolen and her husband Grandcourt. Gwendolen “had been brought to accept him in spite of everything,” says the narrator, “brought to kneel down like a horse under training for the arena, though she might have an objection to it all the while” (*DD* 2:58). As for Grandcourt, he was:

perfectly satisfied that he held his wife with bit and bridle. By the time they had been married a year she would cease to be restive. He continued standing with his air of indifference, till she felt her habitual stifling consciousness of having an immovable obstruction in her life, like the nightmare of beholding a single form that serves to arrest all passage though the wide country lies open. . . . “What orders shall I give?”. . . His words had the power of thumb-screws and the cold touch of the rack. To resist was to act like a stupid animal unable to measure results. (*DD* 3:186-87)

Eliot's gritty realism in the above passage is relative to the cruelty of this social infamy. The blatant deterioration of human relations when they are wrongly and dangerously gender-based may reach the most degrading level of servitude. By comparing Gwendolen to a horse, an animal that is held with "bit and bridle", Eliot strongly condemns the inhuman humiliation of women caused by some men's greed for power and authority. The climax of horror lies in relating such a vicious situation to an act of torture with barbarous instruments like "thumb-screws" and "racks". Eventually, Gwendolen acts like an intelligent "animal" and submits to her oppressor in order to reduce the severity of the consequences.

The intellectual oppression of women is also maintained through social teachings and indoctrination. A lot of women were not only prevented from having access to knowledge, but had also been convinced that they actually were intellectually inferior to men. Such a case should not go unmentioned and *Middlemarch* contains a vivid illustration of it. The young and beautiful Dorothea Brooke accepted to marry the old and plain Mr. Casaubon for a very important reason: his erudition. "A wise man," she says, "could help me to see which opinions had the best foundation, and would help me to live according to them" (*MD* 1:63). As already referred to in chapter 2, Casaubon was working on a book he entitled *The Key to all Mythologies* and Dorothea's strongest desire was to accomplish something intellectually useful like copying passages for her husband. The trouble is that the passages were in Greek, a masculine branch of knowledge that Dorothea is less likely to be familiar with. However, as a devoted wife, she is willing to make efforts and learn the language. Dorothea therefore seizes the "precious permission" (*MD* 1:106) from Casaubon and starts working, but "she constantly doubted her own conclusions, because she felt her own ignorance: . . . Dorothea herself was a little shocked and discouraged at her own stupidity, and the answers she got to some timid questions . . . gave her a painful suspicion that here indeed there might be secrets not capable of explanation to a woman's reason" (*MD* 1:106-07). Dorothea's feeling of

intellectual inferiority has been long fuelled by years of social indoctrination, including that of her own tutor and uncle Mr. Brooke who tells Casaubon:

Such deep studies, classics, mathematics, that kind of things, are too taxing for a woman—too taxing, you know. “Dorothea is learning to read the characters simply,” said Mr. Casaubon, evading the question. “She had the very considerate thought of saving my eyes.” Ah, well, without understanding, you know—that may not be so bad. But there is a lightness about the feminine mind—a touch and go—music, the fine arts, that kind of things—they should study those up to a certain point, women should; but in a light way, you know. A woman should be able to sit down and play you or sing you a good old English tune. . . . (*MD* 1:108)

“We must not have you getting too learned for a woman, you know” (*MD* 2:301) is the kind of reaction Mr. Brook used to have when he saw Dorothea read a book. These narrative remarks mirror the real continuous call to order which Victorian women used to hear: a reminder of the intellectual restrictive conventions they had to comply with because of their gender.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver is faced with the same kind of sexist language and attitudes. She is a smart young girl who develops an early and strong interest for reading. Maggie is considered by her relatives and neighbours as naughty because she is different from other little girls and shows an “unnatural” interest in education. She is still a child when she starts reading interesting books such as *Aesop’s Fables* and *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (*Mill* 15), but the most striking of her readings is *The History of the Devil* by Daniel Defoe (*Mill* 15). When Mr. Riley asks Maggie to interpret one of the pictures in Defoe’s book, she answers with a disconcerting ease:

It's a dreadful picture, isn't it? But I can't help looking at it. That old woman in the water's a witch,—they've put her in to find out whether she's a witch or no; and if she swims she's a witch, and if she's drowned—and killed, you know—she's innocent, and not a witch, but only a poor silly old woman. But what good would it do her then, you know, when she was drowned? Only, I suppose, she'd go to heaven, and God would make it up to her. And this dreadful blacksmith with his arms akimbo, laughing,—oh, isn't he ugly?—I'll tell you what he is. He's the Devil *really* . . . and not a right blacksmith; for the Devil takes the shape of wicked men, and walks about and sets people doing wicked things, and he's oftener in the shape of a bad man than any other, because, you know, if people saw he was the Devil, and he roared at 'em, they'd run away, and he couldn't make 'em do what he pleased. (*Mill* 14-15)

Maggie's father “had listened to this exposition . . . with petrifying wonder” (*Mill* 15) and felt rather “uncomfortable at these free remarks” (*Mill* 16). Indeed, Maggie's interpretation of the picture was very unusual for her Victorian audience to whom “the Devil” in this case was supposed to be linked to women and witchcraft, and not to man whose mission was to maintain order. This archetypal idea of the guilty female was deeply anchored in people's minds for the Bible itself attributes the responsibility of Original Sin to Eve. Therefore, women's wit and brightness was wrongly associated with cunning and evil:

and when the woman [Eve] saw that the tree was good for food, . . . she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. . . . And the man [Adam] said [talking to God], the woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. . . . And the woman said, the serpent beguiled me. (*The Holy Bible: King James Version*, Gen. 3.6-13)

It follows from the above kind of reasoning that in case a father had a smart daughter he had to keep his pride in check because the cleverness of a female was synonymous with “trouble” (*Mill* 14). Indeed, Mr. Tulliver was disturbed with Maggie’s “unnatural” intelligence despite being amazed at her: “she understands what one’s talking about so as never was. And you should hear her read,—straight off, as if she knowed it all beforehand. And allays at her book! But it’s bad—it’s bad, . . . a woman’s no business wi’ being so clever; it’ll turn to trouble, I doubt. But, bless you!” (*Mill* 14). The “trouble” is that an intelligent woman was synonymous with an evil difference, hence socially alienated. She would be a threat to the males’ established intellectual exclusiveness and might disturb the conventional gender-based relationships, i.e. the dominion of men over women. This idea caused Mr. Tulliver’s “uncomfortable” feeling and he soon called his daughter back to order: “ ‘shut up the book, and let’s hear no more o’ such talk. . . . Go, go and see after your mother.’ Maggie shut up the book at once, with a sense of disgrace” (*Mill* 16). Eventually, he wished Maggie would have been a boy for it was such a waste for a girl to be so uselessly intelligent: “it’s a pity but what she’d been the lad,—she’d ha’ been a match for the lawyers, *she* would” (*Mill* 16).

“We are very far from having found a perfect plan for educating men” (*Letters* 5:58), reminds Eliot who gives a special attention to this particular point in her fiction. She highlights the crucial role of parents—including mothers who themselves are indoctrinated—and teachers in promoting a perpetual gender-based education. Therefore, sons become utterly convinced they are naturally intellectually superior to daughters, and as a consequence, a brother would always look down on his sister as an inferior being, even if he loves her so much. Such a brainwashed subconscious would never admit the possibility of a female being smarter than a male, even if she actually was. While he was not at all interested in education, Maggie’s older brother, Tom, was sent to “a downright good school, where they’ll make a

scholar of him” (*Mill* 13). Maggie, on the other hand, had to stay at home in spite of her intellectual ambition. When both her father and she went to visit Tom at his new school, the latter seized the opportunity to complain about the difficulty of his lessons. Maggie spontaneously proposed to help her brother, but his macho reaction turned to be very revelatory. Indeed, Tom replied very haughtily despite the fact that he loved his sister very much: “ ‘you help me, you silly little thing!’ said Tom, in such high spirits at this announcement that he quite enjoyed the idea of confounding Maggie by showing her a page of Euclid. ‘I should like to see you doing one of *my* lessons! Why, I learn Latin too! Girls never learn such things. They’re too silly’ ” (*Mill* 155). The intonation of the two italicised words in Tom’s speech may easily be inferred by any reader: a low degrading “you” versus a high superior “my”. But much more serious than that, Tom “felt rather disgusted with Maggie’s knowingness,” (*Mill* 155) when she had correctly answered his question—the kind of disgust one may feel when a moral value is violated. Tom eventually recovered delight when his teacher, Mr. Stelling, confirmed that women “ ‘can pick up a little of everything, . . . they’ve a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn’t go far into anything. They’re quick and shallow.’ Tom, delighted with this verdict, telegraphed his triumph by wagging his head at Maggie” (*Mill* 161). Unfortunately, even learned teachers participated in strengthening the males’ ideology of intellectual superiority. “Oppression” is the word Eliot had chosen to describe Maggie’s feeling in front of such “dreadful destiny” (*Mill* 161). Dorothea too “felt nothing but the dreary oppression” and “stood there in a moral imprisonment” (*MD* 2:90).

6.3. A Progressive Fiction for Social Progress

“We want to be taught to feel,” insists Eliot in her essay “Natural History of German Life” (184). Victorian society needed to learn that there existed more than one way to look at and deal with the other. Human beings cannot, and should not, all be carbon-copies of what a

particular society or system had defined as *the* ideal individual. The latter would be quite simply an instrument that serves the interests of an imposed way of thinking. When talking to Luke, the miller, Maggie suggests to him to read *Pug's Tour of Europe* in order to learn “about the different sorts of people in the world” (*Mill* 28).

Eliot's fiction exposes real facts concerning gender-based social flaws and their negative consequences, targeting at raising people's awareness. In front of such texts, the audience becomes more active rather than passive thanks to the interpretative tasks they need to carry out. This is a progressive literature that promotes both psychological and emotional evolutions. The reader is encouraged to start a process of *bildung* on himself, which is the first step towards social change. Eliot's aim is not a moralising one, but rather an educating one. In a letter to her friend Sara Hennell, Eliot wrote “I think ‘Live and teach’ should be a proverb as well as ‘Live and learn’ ” (*L & L* 85). However, her definition of education is not pure teaching or preaching, but rather an awareness of a whole range of feelings: “we want to be taught to feel” (“Natural History” 184). According to Elizabeth Gargano, Eliot “strove to educate her readers, not through injunctions or bald assertions, but rather through an imaginative experience of identification and sympathy” (117). The Victorian journalist and author E. S. Dallas affirms in his review of *Felix Holt, the Radical* that: “the secret of [Eliot's] power is to be found in the depth and the range of her sympathies. She gets to the heart of her characters, and makes us feel with them, care for them, like to know about them. Even if they are stupid people who lead dull lives, she has the happy art of making us take an interest in their story” (qtd. in Hadjiafxendi 143). As it will be further developed in the forthcoming chapter, Eliot revisited the gender-based literary conventions in her novels. Her belief in gradual social change makes her an evolutionary writer instead of a revolutionary one. Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi points to Eliot's “incrementalism”, a process through which small and gradual changes are targeted instead of few radical ones (141).

Moreover, it is also interesting to note that in 1856—only one year before she started to publish fiction—Eliot had put forward the following opinion: “the external conditions which society has inherited from the past are but the manifestation of inherited conditions in the human beings who compose it; the internal conditions and the external are related to each other as the organism and its medium, and development can take place only by the gradual consentaneous development of both” (“Natural History” 208). The external conditions of Victorian society were indeed changing, following an impressive industrial revolution. As a result, the subsequent emergence of an important urban literate class was in need of a parallel development of the internal conditions: mentalities and mindsets. Eliot had therefore chosen to address this new England through a progressive literature which relied on an update of content and an upgrading of language in a way that would reflect the real complexity of life.

“The historical conditions of society may be compared with those of language,” affirms Eliot, “one word stands for many things, and many words for one thing. . . . language must be left to grow in precision, completeness, and unity, as minds grow in clearness, comprehensiveness, and sympathy” (“Natural History” 208-09). Language in Eliot’s fiction targets evolution and constant motion as the author aspired “to express *life*” (“Natural History” 209). Therefore, in addition to having embraced regionalism in some of her novels, Eliot also included the language of poetry and other arts, philosophy, psychology, science, mathematics, politics, and history in her writings. Mr. Lyon revealingly confesses in *Felix Holt*: “I am an eager seeker for precision, and would fain find a language subtle enough to follow the utmost intricacies of the soul’s pathways” (71). This linguistic awareness, in turn, helped in shaping the complex psychological dimension in Eliot’s fiction, an art that sought to be closer to life.

Conclusion

As speculated in the introduction to this chapter, “woman”, “human”, “social relations”, and “progression” are indeed watchwords for Eliot. Each of these notions is crucial to understand the position she held on the woman question and the way she had been herself an actor in Victorian female fiction. Eliot deals with the issue of gender in her writings, and exposes the wrong social gender-based rules and limits denouncing them as dangerous flaws responsible for an important malfunctioning of human relations. She points to the fact that gender discrimination was at work even among the most learned men who, like the majority of Victorians, were in need of broader education. As a meliorist, Eliot extends the concept of education to every experience that can help to elevate a person and broaden his/her sense of tolerance. Through her fiction, Eliot denounces the fact that women were unjustly deprived of complete education because a great number of disciplines were considered as masculine. Contrary to the norm, she believes knowledge to be genderless and sees education as a legitimate right for both sexes. Confining women to intellectual slavery may lead to dehumanising male and female relations. Eliot strongly condemns the power relationships between men and women, and points a finger at the fact that the intellectual oppression of women is also maintained through social teachings and indoctrination. By relying on real representation of social life in her fiction, Eliot aimed at raising people’s awareness of gender-based social flaws and the dangerous impact on human relations. She targeted progress and evolution of mindsets.

The forthcoming chapter will keep the same line of thought as the previous one in an attempt to analyse how Eliot denounces and criticises social stereotypes in her fiction, and the way she avoids and revisits the literary ones.

CHAPTER 7

George Eliot & Stereotypes

Introduction

“Utopian pictures” can “hardly” be perceived as “a vivid presentation of how results have been actually brought about, especially in religious and social change” (Eliot, “Historic Imagination” 289). As already discussed in the previous chapter, Eliot believed realism to be the most appropriate literary expression to promote gradual and effective social change. “Our social novels,” writes Eliot in her essay “Natural History”, “profess to represent the people as they are, and the unreality of their representation is a grave evil” (183). Literary stereotypes, such as ideal characters and utopian plotlines, are unacceptable for Eliot whose position is made clear in her essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”, where she is sharply critical of authoresses who “have the peculiar impartiality of reproducing both what they *have* seen and heard, and what they have *not* seen and heard, with equal unfaithfulness” (181). Eliot regarded this “feminine silliness” as very harmful to both the quality of literature and the status of women writers (Haight, *GE: A Biography* 209). Therefore, instead of following the comfortable literary stereotypes that feminine audience in particular was familiar with, Eliot’s fiction forcefully contradicts them by exposing reality.

This chapter proposes to highlight Eliot’s attitudes towards both social and literary stereotypes. It will examine the way her novels denounce social conventions and go against literary ones. Based on Eliot’s writings—with a special focus on *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*—the present study will consider four points: the ideal woman and wife, motherhood and parenting, marriages, and the endings of Eliot’s novels.

7.1. The Ideal Woman & Wife

Who does not know the perfect and angelic fair-haired heroine who eventually attains utter happiness at the end of the story? Any reader may have met this stereotyped female character at least once in his readings. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the issue is ironically raised by a dark-haired female protagonist: the smart Maggie Tulliver who opposes such literary stereotype. Talking about Madame de Stael's *Corinne*, she affirms:

I didn't finish the book, . . . As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up, and determined to read no further. I foresaw that that light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable. I am determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. . . . If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. . . . I always care the most about the unhappy people. If the blond girl were forsaken, I should like *her* best. (356-57)

Not only does Eliot explicitly put a finger on a literary stereotype through Maggie's criticism, but she also extends human sympathy to the "forsaken" women of her society, whether fair or dark-haired.

In *Middlemarch*, however, the reader is reunited with that blondness he is so familiar with: "a few children in Middlemarch looked blond by the side of Rosamond, . . . In fact, most men in Middlemarch, except her brothers, held that Miss Vincy was the best girl in the world, and some called her an angel" (1:196-97). As a matter of fact, in addition to the physical beauty that it incarnates, angelic fairness is also synonymous with other characteristics of perfection. Indeed, Lydgate sees Rosamond as a perfect woman mainly because her appearance reflects "the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman—

polished, refined, docile, . . . moulded only for pure and delicate joys” (*MD* 1:293). As ironically detailed by the narrator below, an ideal wife for a Victorian man should embody:

perfect womanhood . . . an accomplished creature who venerated [her husband’s] high musings and momentous labours and would never interfere with them; who would create order in the home and accounts with still magic, yet keep her fingers ready to touch the lute and transform life into romance at any moment; who was instructed to the true womanly limit and not a hair’s-breadth beyond—docile, therefore, and ready to carry out behests which came from beyond that limit. (*MD* 2:235)

To all appearances, Rosamond Vincy meets all the criteria to become a model Victorian spouse as:

[she] never showed any unbecoming knowledge, and was always that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted verse, and perfect blond loveliness, which made the irresistible woman for the doomed man of that date. . . . She had no wicked plots, nothing sordid or mercenary; in fact, she never thought of money except as something necessary which other people would always provide. She was not in the habit of devising falsehoods, and if her statements were no direct clue to the fact, why, they were not intended in that light—they were among her elegant accomplishments, intended to please. (*MD* 2:78)

However, far from any idealism, Rosamond’s blondness and elegant feminine manners alone do not mean happiness incarnate. In point of fact, the angel-like beautiful young woman is not as perfect as Lydgate thought her—and wanted her—to be. The “little future” that Rosamond had “woven” (*MD* 1:206) was predicated upon her illusions and fantasies whereas, in fact, “she was not joyous: her married life had fulfilled none of her hopes, and had been

quite spoiled for her imagination” (*MD* 4:215). Through this particular example, Eliot is highlighting the huge gap between utopia and reality, namely disappointment.

The antithesis of such stereotypical image of feminine perfection is Mary Garth, a plain-looking woman who “had the aspect of an ordinary sinner: she was brown; her curly dark hair was rough and stubborn; her stature was low” (*MD* 1:197). Yet, “honesty, truth-telling fairness, was Mary’s reigning virtue; she neither tried to create illusions, nor indulged in them for her own behoof, and when she was in a good mood she had humour enough in her to laugh at herself” (*MD* 1:178). Like every character in Eliot’s fiction, whether dark or fair-haired, Mary, too, has to deal with the complexities of life.

In her essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”, Eliot criticises other categories of ideal literary heroines, including the utopian creation of what she has called the “mind-and-millenary” authoresses (178). These novelists portrayed female characters as purely flawless creatures, which was a good reason for literary criticism to fire up, and for men to carry on looking at women as intellectually inferior. A “mind-and-millenary” protagonist is absolute excellence personified; she is:

amazingly eloquent and . . . amazingly witty. She is understood to have a depth of insight . . . and her superior instincts are a sort of dial by which men have only to set their clocks and watches, and all will go well. The men play a very subordinate part by her side. . . . They see her at a ball, and they are dazzled; at a flower-show, and they are fascinated; on a riding excursion, and they are witched by her noble horsemanship; at church, and they are awed by the sweet solemnity of demeanor. She is the ideal woman in feelings, faculties, and flounces. . . . She was a genius, and “conscious of her originality,” and she was fortunate enough to have a lover who was also a genius and a man of “most original mind.” . . . “having, *from her great facility in learning languages*, read

the scriptures in their original *tongues*". . . Sanscrit is no more than a b c to her; and she can talk with perfect correctness in any language. ("SN" 178-82)

As a matter of fact, this category of writers is so idealistic because, according to Eliot, they themselves live in a bubble of luxury: "they write in elegant boudoirs, with violet-colored ink and a ruby pen" ("SN" 180). Eliot explains that:

Silly novels by lady novelists rarely introduce us into any other than very lofty and fashionable society. . . . The fair writers have evidently never talked to a tradesman except from a carriage window; they have no notion of the working-classes except as "dependents;" they think five hundred a year a miserable pittance; Belgravia and "baronial halls" are their primary truths; and they have no idea of feeling interest in any man who is not at least a great landed proprietor, if not a prime minister. ("SN" 180)

Nevertheless, the main point is that even in such world of glitter where everything around is immaculate, perfect women do not exist.

It is true that Eliot was quite a precocious woman for her time, but as a novelist she has chosen to be rather gradual and not too abrupt for the dominant ethos in Victorian England. She was aware that creating extraordinarily intellectual heroines who would have followed the same path as herself would certainly have been very idealistic and improbable for the period. As a realist author, Eliot focuses on the complexities and hazards of life, and highlights the potential dangerous psychological and emotional impacts of the social code on individuals. Contrary to conventional wisdom, none of physical perfection, good birth, self-accomplishment, or good manners spared any woman from bearing the serious consequences of the wrong choices fuelled by idealism and social conventions. The responsibilities of women towards society and the restrictions imposed on them are the same reasons for their errors, misfortunes, and confinement. Eliot knew that a real depiction of the imperfect social

state of women, rather than any delusion, would better serve the woman question. Bleak reality alone may stir up feelings of sympathy, and raise the awareness of the masses to eventually trigger progressive evolution of mentalities. Levine asserts that “although [Eliot] did not portray successful women who resisted the conventions of their culture, she brilliantly and sympathetically traced their defeats” (CC 2). In the introduction to *Felix Holt*, one can read: “there is much pain that is quite noiseless; . . . There are glances of hatred that stab and raise no cry of murder; . . . yet kept secret by the sufferer . . . seen in no writing . . . many an inherited sorrow that has marred a life has been breathed into no human ear” (11). Eliot’s fiction strongly cries out these silent pains so that every reader around may not only hear them, but most of all feel them. Every suffering character created by Eliot may be compared to a child to whom Eliot, like a loving mother, offers compassion and understanding. As the proverb goes, “mother is a verb, not a noun”.

7.2. Mothering & Parenting

Being a mother is a sacred role model for the Victorian woman, if not an integral part of her identity. According to the social code, maternity is the major end for a woman, which sweeps away any other ambition that goes beyond this framework. Childless wives were regarded by their lots and husbands as having failed in fulfilling their duties. Such women, like Nancy Cass in *Silas Marner*, feel “shut out from [their] due share of outward activity and of practical claims on [their] affections—inevitable to a noble-hearted, childless woman, when her lot is narrow” (265).

According to *the Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, “George Eliot . . . freely acknowledges not just that maternal propensities may find other outlets, but that not all biological mothers feel this commitment to their offspring” (167). Leonora, Daniel Deronda’s mother, explains why, in the past, she had chosen to give her child up for adoption: “I had not much affection to give you,” she says, “I wanted to live out the life that was in me, and not to

be hampered with other lives. . . . I did not want a child . . . I did not want to marry. I was forced into marrying your father . . . by my father's wishes and commands" (*DD* 3:111-12). As already noted in the previous chapter, Leonora is an ambitious woman with artistic aspirations, which has cost her patriarchal oppression. Leonora denounces social authoritarianism imposed on women, including their own feelings: "every woman is supposed to have the same set of motives, or else to be a monster. I am not a monster, but I have not felt exactly what other women feel,—or say they feel, for fear of being thought unlike others" (*DD* 3:114). This blunt criticism echoes another strong statement made by Eliot in her essay "Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft" about the "folly of absolute definitions of woman's nature and absolute demarcations of woman's mission" (203). "Nature," explains Eliot, "seems to delight in varying the arrangements, as if to show that she will be fettered by no rule; and we must admit the same varieties that she admits" (203). Women may have bigger ends in view than solely being perfect wives and devoted mothers as always expected. "It is a fact," remarks the narrator in *Felix Holt*, "perhaps kept a little too much in the background, that mothers have a self larger than their maternity" (112).

Moreover, Eliot extends parenting from its biological connotation to a much broader meaning. The fact that she has never had her own children, but still participated in raising Lewes's ones, may have influenced her understanding of motherhood and parenting. The eldest of Lewes's sons wrote letters to his stepmother, George Eliot, calling her "Mother" (Bodenheimer 190) and shared with her "the love of music and some talent at the piano" (Levine, *CC* 32). It may therefore be concluded that "the pleasures and trials of substitute parenthood entered fully into her psychological experience, and into the fiction she would produce for the rest of her writing life" (Levine, *CC* 32). Indeed, the theme of adoption is present in all of *Silas Marner*, *Felix Holt*, *The Spanish Gypsy*, and *Daniel Deronda* while "the institution was not legally formalized in England at that time. Figures on the frequency of

informal adoptions are impossible to obtain (partly because of the difficulty of determining what counts as adoption, if it is informal), and historians differ significantly in their guesses” (Novy 35). Eliot was already considering adoption as a sort of “pure, natural human relations” (*L & L* 401) despite the fact that the issue was still a very complicated one.

Silas Marner is undoubtedly the best illustration of Eliot’s view concerning adoption and parenting. “The novel,” affirms Novy, “treats its community’s valorization of heredity and its ideals of what is natural critically” (37). Silas is a lonely and poor weaver without any family who returns home one day to find a sleeping young child whom he names Eppie. The latter’s biological mother has just died from opium addiction and when he “pressed it to him”, the child cried “mammy” (*SM* 194). From that moment on, Silas has been a loving father to Eppie whom he treats as the child he never had. When she grew up, Eppie’s rich and socially influential biological father eventually claims her, but she chooses to remain with Silas, the only father she has always known and loved. The story of Eppie and her ultimate decision is a call for Victorians to have another look at the conventional meaning of parenting.

Eliot also draws a metaphorical parallel between motherhood and literature, her own domain of productivity. Indeed, in a letter to H. B. Stowe dated 6 May 1876, Eliot calls her novels “my spiritual children” (*L & L* 646) and refers to *The Mill* “as her youngest child” (qtd. in *CC* 166). In fact, Eliot started to write novels and became a “spiritual” mother thanks to her lifelong companion Lewes, who played the role of a progenitor and a protector of a long line of literary descent. He is said to be “the ‘onlie begetter’ of Eliot’s fiction” (Fleishman 93) in so far as he constantly and strongly encouraged her and acknowledged her artistic talent. Lewes was for Eliot “the perpetual optimist who protected her, said only good things about her work, and cheered her through endless moments of despair” (Levine, *CC* 32). As a literary critic and professional writer, he became Eliot’s literary agent and contact in editorship and publishing who “took charge of the initial negotiations” with Blackwood because Eliot was

hiding her identity (Levine, *CC* 29). Eliot would probably have never been a novelist without his support, and her novels would never have come into existence without his help. In other words, Eliot's twenty-five year unmarried domestic relationship with Lewes was a sort of an atypical union which gave birth to immortal children that have been adopted by readers and intellectuals worldwide.

7.3. Convention-based & Interest Marriage

Marriage has been a very common theme in Anglo-Saxon literature. From Shakespeare to Jane Austen, English authors have frequently treated the subject in their works. For protagonists to get married eventually and lead happy lives at the end of the book is the major recurrent literary convention that one may be the most familiar with in the history of storytelling. Modernist writers have criticised idealistic happy marriages in Victorian fiction, and maintain that "life was not like that because courtships were carefully chaperoned, couples had little opportunity to get to know one another before marriage, . . . and many marriages were motivated by money or social pressure" (Kern 145). In *Middlemarch*, for instance, Dorothea marries Casaubon shortly after she meets him; actually, after "three more conversations with him, [she] was convinced that her first impressions had been just" (1:48). This narrative comment is the first hint that confirms Dorothea's quick fall into the social trap. It is true that most of Eliot's heroines get married instead of rebelling against the social code as expected—given the unconventional way of life their creator had—but this in itself is a social criticism. Certainly, in Eliot's novels, idealised marriages based on social conventions tend to be very complex, not to say stifling experiences in which women painfully struggle and suffer.

The discussion about the condemnation of conventions in Eliot's fiction shall start with *Middlemarch* as it is the novel with the greatest number of marriages. *Middlemarch* denounces the wrong custom-based and idealistic choices of lifelong partners, and relates the

psychological and emotional claustrophobia that may result from that: “a perpetual struggle of energy with fear” (*MD* 2:304). The novel highlights the fact that the spouses’ ways of thinking and expectations are nothing but products of Victorian social indoctrination. Nurbhai and Newton affirm that “Casaubon and Lydgate marry because they see, in Dorothea and Rosamond, their ideals of female perfection. . . . Each ideal is rooted in control and is invested only with the characteristics the husbands would have them possess” (96), exactly as the social code has always taught them. Of course, the same thing could be said about the wives.

Rosamond Vincy targeted a higher social status than her family’s and considered “marriage as a prospect of rising in rank” (*MD* 1:298). In fact, she was not really interested in Lydgate as a person, therefore “it was not necessary to imagine much about [his] inward life . . . the piquant fact about Lydgate was his good birth” (*MD* 1:297-98). Roughly speaking, Rosamond saw in him her boarding card, so to speak, to the upper class:

Before they had ridden a mile she was far on in the costume and introductions of her wedded life, having determined on her house in Middlemarch, and foreseen the visits she would pay to her husband’s high-bred relatives at a distance, whose finished manners she could appropriate as thoroughly as she had done her school accomplishments, preparing herself thus for vaguer elevations which might ultimately come. There was nothing financial, still less sordid, in her previsions: she cared about what were considered refinements, and not about the money that was to pay for them. (*MD* 1:208)

Rosamond believed that “good housekeeping consisted simply in ordering the best of everything” (*MD* 3:292), and that a husband must keep up appearances and afford everything no matter what. She urged Lydgate, who was heavily in debt, to abandon his ambition for research and settle as a countryside doctor for the wealthy. “Poor Lydgate!” exclaims the narrator, “or shall I say, Poor Rosamond! Each lived in a world of which the other knew

nothing” (*MD* 1:297). This shaky marriage is doomed to a complete failure because it is based on nothing else but conventions. Both partners show selfish interests and lack understanding and tolerance. In truth, Rosamond asserts that she “would never do anything that was disagreeable to her” (*MD* 1:299). When her husband is compelled to sell the house in order to face the couple’s financial problems, she considers his attitude as an act of destruction to her: “if she had known how Lydgate would behave, she would never have married him” (*MD* 3:307). Eventually, Lydgate chooses to sacrifice his ambition to save his marriage. He settles as a town doctor for the wealthy, but “he always regarded himself as a failure: he had not done what he once meant to do” (*MD* 4:363) and he dies young, at the age of fifty. Ultimately, none of Rosamond or Lydgate is happy to be with the other.

The union between Dorothea and Casaubon is sheer failure, too, as it is also built on conventions and idealistic choices. As a matter of fact, the only thing Casaubon takes into account when choosing Dorothea as a wife are his personal interests. As for Dorothea, she naively believes that Casaubon is the ideal way out to escape social expectations from women, and become intellectually worthier. In other words, each of them expects the other to suit their needs. Coontz explains that “even the most enthusiastic advocates of love matches had believed that love developed after one had selected a suitable prospective mate. People didn’t *fall* in love. They *tiptoed* into it” (178). Mr. Brook, Dorothea’s uncle and tutor, lets readers know right from the beginning of the novel that she “ha[s] not the same tastes as every young lady” (*MD* 1:64). Dorothea is not “fond of show, a great establishment, balls, dinners, that kind of thing” (*MD* 1:64), which makes her think that “Casaubon’s ways might suit [her] better” (*MD* 1:64). Dorothea “did not look at things from the proper feminine angle,” (*MD* 1:164) claims the narrator, and she saw in Casaubon the opportunity to become a more learned woman since Victorian society did not offer her any other prospect of education. Blake denounces the responsibility of society for Dorothea’s wrong decision and claims that

such restrictive social “conditions ma[d]e a poor dry mummified pedant appear to an ardent young woman who has seen nothing better as a sort of angel of vocation and of the education that enables vocation” (55). Paris, on the other hand, asserts that “Dorothea is a victim of the conditions of civilized courtship, which do not allow the parties to gain much knowledge of each other” (29). Whatever the reasons, and both are most probably correct, it is clear that Dorothea’s decision to marry Casaubon is closely linked to the numerous social flaws around her.

Casaubon’s conventional and selfish motives for choosing Dorothea as a wife are explained as follows: “he had reflected that in taking a wife, a man of good position should expect and carefully choose a blooming young lady—the younger the better, because more educable and submissive—of a rank equal to his own, of religious principles, virtuous disposition, and good understanding” (*MD* 2:98). Casaubon “took a wife . . . to adorn the remaining quadrant of his course, and be a little moon that would cause hardly a calculable perturbation” (*MD* 1:163). However, the narrator admits and makes it clear that “society never made the preposterous demand that a man should think as much about his own qualifications for making a charming girl happy as he thinks of hers for making himself happy” (*MD* 2:99). Again, society is condemned.

It is necessary to point out that Eliot does not criticise marital life as such: “marriage,” declares Dorothea genuinely, “is a state of higher duties” (*MD* 1:63). She rather points a finger at the social hypocrisy this union is generally based on. Referring to the disastrous consequences of Dorothea’s marriage with Casaubon, the narrator declares:

Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling under prosaic conditions. Among the many remarks passed on her mistakes, it was never said in the neighbourhood of Middlemarch that such mistakes could not have

happened if the society into which she was born had not smiled on propositions of marriage from a sickly man to a girl less than half his own age—on modes of education which make a woman’s knowledge another name for motley ignorance—on rules of conduct which are in flat contradiction with its own loudly-asserted beliefs. While this is the social air in which mortals begin to breathe, there will be collisions such as those in Dorothea’s life, where great feelings will take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it. (*MD* 4:369-70)

“What lies outside” is a social environment which unfortunately perpetuates the same errors over time, even among modern and learned individuals. The feminist Lee Edwards criticised the fact that Dorothea had chosen to get married a second time instead of remaining free and independent.⁶⁴ But the real point is that Dorothea’s disastrous marital life with Casaubon is itself a criticism addressed by Eliot to the restrictive Victorian society that made of marriage the only possibility for women to achieve self-realisation. Having emerged more mature from this stifling experience, Dorothea fully understood that tolerance was still very far from reaching its zenith within her society. “People,” she acknowledges, “are almost always better than their neighbours think they are” (*MD* 4:180). It is as if Eliot had foreseen the continuity of this fashion of intolerance within societies, for she declares in *Middlemarch*’s finale that people “thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature [Dorothea] should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done” (4:366). Dorothea is an ambitious woman to whom society offered no other alternative than either remaining a rich widow, which was socially very correct, or

64. See Lee Edwards’s quote on page 4 in the general introduction to this dissertation.

getting married again, which was a lot less conventional but still possible.⁶⁵ Dorothea has chosen what she believes to be the best option for herself, the one that allows her to pursue her aspirations and positively contribute to society. If at the time Dorothea “could not be an M.P.,” says Austen, “she could be an M.P.’s wife” (119). True, Dorothea exerted a constructive influence on her new husband Will who “became an ardent public man” in London (*MD* 4:366). Blake extends further this idea clarifying that:

The present for Eliot’s readers was the recent passage of the second Reform Bill. *Middlemarch* treats the period of the first, and though it ends with its defeat, the historical perspective that shows this to be but temporary is built into the novel; for instance, to locate the story in “ante-reform times” is to locate it in relation to the ultimate passage of reform. Dorothea, through a husband who works for this passage, contributes something to a movement that is not defeated and that qualifies, . . . as a far-resonant action. (68)

So, Dorothea’s second marriage may be seen as a realistic solution since there was no alternative for her at the time to accomplish more than what society expected from her. Indeed, in her union with Will, Dorothea was more than a conventional wife and mother.

Through this second marriage, Dorothea also managed to set herself free from the control that Casaubon had tried to exercise over her. Before he died, Casaubon had added a codicil to his will in which he forbade Dorothea’s potential union with Will Ladislaw, otherwise she would lose the totality of her inheritance. By marrying Will, Dorothea, in fact, refused to give in to the blackmail of her former husband and therefore renounced her conventional role as the rich widow. Dorothea’s choice raised criticism around her, but the Rector of the town took her defence and denounced social hypocrisy: “I should not make any

⁶⁵ *Middlemarch* was published in 1871-72 but its setting goes back to the preceding years of the 1832 Reform Bill Act, when even men were still struggling and suffering from an unfair electoral system. As for women, they were “still not able to transcend circumstances” (Austen 127).

fuss about it. If she likes to be poor, that is her affair. Nobody would have said anything if she had married the young fellow because he was rich” (*MD* 4:337). Undoubtedly, the crux of the matter here is that the choice made by Dorothea was so shocking to Middlemarchers not only because they considered it wrong or inappropriate, but most of all because it was a woman’s personal and “true decision and not the pre-programmed following of a . . . rule” (Miller 140).

The comparison between Dorothea’s first wedding and her second one reveals that Eliot esteems the good in a marital union when it is not based on wrong social conventions. In the finale of *Middlemarch*, she writes “marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning” (4:358). Because it started on a much more stable basis, Dorothea’s second marriage is, consequently, more likely to be successful. Will was a penniless artist and “not well-born” (*MD* 4:369), yet his commitment to Dorothea was not induced by economic or status interests. Will was aware of the “impassable gulf between himself and Dorothea” that needed “to be filled up”, and he thus decided to leave in order to get “a thoroughly different position” such as “political writing, political speaking” that would assure him “such distinction that he would not seem to be asking Dorothea to step down to him” (*MD* 3:146). Will refused to be wrongly regarded as “the needy adventurer seeking a rich woman” (*MD* 3:218). In fact, he and Dorothea “were bound to each other by a love stronger than any impulses which could have marred it” (*MD* 4:365).

However, Eliot knew very well that genuine love was not as common in her society as it was in the utopian romances people used to read. In *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen ironically refers to the matter saying: “I wonder how girls manage to fall in love. It is easy to make them do it in books” (1:109). Gwendolen and Grandcourt are another illustration of a terrible marriage built on dangerous social norms, i.e. economic interests for Gwendolen’s part, and greed for power and authority for Grandcourt’s. Money was another social trap set by Victorian society for a woman whose major source of income was her father, her tutor, or her

husband. In other words, for a woman to have a sound financial position, she had to be born into money or marry into it. Marriage in this case is all about attracting a “good match” (*DD* 2:63). Talking about his niece, Mr. Gascoigne, Gwendolen’s uncle, remarks: “the point is to get her well married” (*DD* 1:110). And in order to get “well married”, a woman has to watch “the market’s pulse [which] makes index high or low” (*DD* 1:139).

The very pretty and graceful Gwendolen Harleth for whom “a man might risk hanging” (*DD* 1:9) “is really worth some expense . . . [and] ought to make a first-rate marriage” (*DD* 1:46). She is an orphan who agreed to marry the wealthy baron Henleigh Grandcourt out of economic interests to save herself and her family from poverty. She believes her physical beauty and her strong character to be persuasive enough assets that should permit her to manipulate her husband and get whatever she wants: “she was thinking of him, whatever he might be, as a man over whom she was going to have indefinite power; and her loving him having never been a question with her, any agreeableness he had was so much gain” (*DD* 2:51). Ironically, Grandcourt is, on his part, animated by his thirst for authority and has chosen Gwendolen as a wife in order to master her. Rather than being a complementary union between two lovers, this marriage turns to be an infernal power relationship between “a master” and “a slave”. Gwendolen becomes a daily victim of matrimonial cruelty. The novel denounces the psychological brutality and torture she is forced to experience. However, she remains silent out of love for her family because she sees her terrible situation as a sort of tacit agreement through which she “had sold herself, and had been paid . . . more than she had dared to ask in the handsome maintenance of her mother,—the husband to whom she had sold her truthfulness and sense of justice, so that he held them throttled into silence” (*DD* 3:171). Economic interests within marriages, domestic psychological violence, and mastery and dominion over wives are social infamies denounced by Eliot in this story. Grandcourt personifies the oppression of women, and his disappearance

would metaphorically symbolise an end to it. Gwendolen “did kill him [Grandcourt] in [her] thoughts” and she “saw [her] wish outside [her]” (*DD* 3:208) for Grandcourt eventually died of drowning in front of her. Eliot concludes the novel with a glimpse of hope for women and their social status. In fact, after Grandcourt’s death, i.e. the end of matrimonial tyranny, Gwendolen strongly affirms: “I am going to live, . . . I shall live. I mean to live. . . . I shall live. I shall be better” (*DD* 3:366-67).

7.4. Unconventional Narrative Endings

As already mentioned, Eliot was criticised for the marriage of Dorothea and Will at the end of *Middlemarch*, which was rated as very disappointing. It has also already been discussed how this marriage was, in reality, very unconventional for the time because, despite the fact of being a woman, Dorothea took a personal uncommon decision and chose to abandon both her inheritance and social status in order to be Will’s wife. Her own sister Celia could not help but blame her: “you have disappointed us all so. And I can’t think that it ever *will* be—you never can go and live that way. . . . marrying Mr Ladislaw, who has got no estate or anything” (*MD* 4:340-41). Sir James, Celia’s husband, believed that “there was something repulsive in a woman’s second marriage, and no match would prevent him from feeling it a sort of desecration for Dorothea” (*MD* 3:224).

Even more interesting than Dorothea’s atypical choice to marry Will is the more unusual decision made by Eliot while writing the story as Tick maintains that:

Research into the evolution of *Middlemarch* reveals that George Eliot began with a story only about Lydgate and Middlemarch and that she wrote herself to a standstill after two years. . . . some time afterward, she began a “Miss Brooke” piece, . . . At some point, though; her writerly intuition led Eliot to join the Lydgate-Middlemarch and the Miss Brooke stories. (231)

A conventional ending—and story—would have been to reunite the male and female heroes, i.e. Dorothea and Lydgate. A hint of a possible relationship between them was made by Mrs. Chettam who, when Dorothea and Lydgate were discussing, has remarked that they were having “a very animated conversation” (*MD* 1:157). But the two protagonists have rather unconventionally developed a relationship of friendship.

According to Kern, “realist epilogues offer resounding closure with marriages” (146). A few pages further, he affirms that “the modernist marriage does not provide closure at the end but a resounding irresolution that opens new narrative threads” (152). It is true that *Middlemarch*, for instance, ends with the marriages of Fred and Mary, and Dorothea and Will, but, as discussed earlier, the novel also places other marriages at central stage, namely the ones of Dorothea and Casaubon, and Rosamond and Lydgate. This shifts the traditional structural role of marriage as a device of finality to a sensitive social topic that deserves primary focus and analysis. Contrary to “the typical English novel of this period [which] ended in marriage, as if acquiring a spouse would resolve all of life’s problems” (Yalom 185), Eliot’s fiction adopts a different pattern that “opens new narrative threads” (Kern 152). According to Tick:

What is remarkable about Eliot’s closure, however, is that none of these biographical charts serves solely as a concluding statement; at the same time that we are told about what is to come, we are appealed about what has gone before. The narration in *Middlemarch* ceases not because there is nothing more to say but because there is nothing more to ask. . . . the series of concluding narratological statements is delicately balanced by complementary questions. Fred and Mary’s last wistful exchange, for example, is not about their success but rather about Farebrother’s earlier self-sacrifice, which promoted their marriage; we are forced at that moment to reflect upon rights and wrongs, gains

and losses, rewards and punishments. . . . Each of these reflections is calculated to stimulate, rather than satisfy, the reader's imagination: more can be said about each of these events, we realize, though no narratological words are left with which to try to say it. (234)

The point here is that both Eliot and modernist writers targeted an active audience who would develop awareness of both the situation and the historical period in which they evolved. Readers have the ultimate role in constructing the future events still to be written. Eliot could have said more in her closures but she did not because "such endings opened up possibilities" (Kern 151). For instance, Will and Dorothea's unusual marriage ending "constitutes a true historical event" (Miller 140) as it was very daring for the time without necessarily being immoral. Such a novelty was meant to incite the Victorian reader's imagination about a new, more modern, and more tolerant future to be woven. Eliot subtly points to both understanding and feeling as necessary conditions for a more mature reader to grasp the essence in a text and act as a potential co-author, so to speak. At the end of the novel, when Celia asks her sister for an explanation about her unexpected decision to marry Will, Dorothea's answer is: "no, dear, you would have to feel with me, else you would never know" (*MD* 4:343).

Daniel Deronda's ending is also thought-provoking. Kern affirms that modernists "ended with unresolved scenic compositions and close-ups of . . . couples facing an uncertain future" (145), which is exactly what happens in *Daniel Deronda* in which the protagonists Daniel and Gwendolen do not get conventionally married as expected, even after Grandcourt's death. Instead, Daniel marries Mirah with whom he immigrates to Palestine, heading towards an "uncertain future".

In the *The Mill on the Floss*, however, Maggie Tulliver marries neither Stephen nor Philip, thus preventing the story from any kind of potential happy ending. The novel finishes

with her and her brother Tom dying of drowning. Maggie had, through death, accomplished “an uncompromising moral triumph” (Levine, *CC* 173), which is a nonconformist closure and a refusal of submission. “Conclusions,” asserts Eliot, “are the weak point of most authors, but some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion which is at best a negation” (*L & L* 226). Maggie’s death is undoubtedly the sort of “negating ending” that “shatters the fiction and brings us back sharply and painfully to real life” (Pearson 46).

Conclusion

As this chapter has tried to show, Eliot’s fiction—particularly *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*—covers and criticises the major literary and social conventions of the Victorian period. The myth of the ideal, elegant, perfect-mannered, angelic, fair-haired woman who ultimately leads a happy life is totally banned from Eliot’s novels. Whether fair-haired or dark-haired, pretty or ordinary, the protagonists’ fates and the complexities of life they face are the fruits of their own choices. When decisions are convention-based, the consequences may be serious, psychological struggles and emotional agonies. Society and its restrictions are definitely to blame in this matter and Eliot’s literature sharply condemns both. Moreover, Eliot refuses to idealise her heroines, relying on epic descriptions and great accomplishments in the fashion of the “mind-and-millenary” writers. She rather focuses on the aspirations and feelings of these women, however commonplace or “childlike” they may be (*MD* 1:69). “The growing good of the world,” says the narrator in *Middlemarch*, “is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (4:371). Eliot highlights the huge gap between social dictatorship and reality: women may have broader aims and bigger aspirations for social roles other than those of model wives and devoted mothers, as is usually expected. Marriage is not as rosy as it is imagined to be by some naive and socially indoctrinated Victorian young women. Interest-based marriages may turn to be terrible claustrophobic experiences with disastrous consequences for the deluded

spouses. However, it is important to note that Eliot does not criticise marriage as such, but rather the social hypocrisy that underlies it. As maintained in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, Eliot “frequently reminds her reader how foolish it is to live in one’s imagination and to write one’s future on the basis of pre-existent, fanciful plots, particularly those which center on romance” (171). Eliot’s aim is to present the Victorian audience with non idealistic social realities through literature in order to raise the reader’s awareness. By avoiding literary stereotypes and denouncing social ones, Eliot targeted the emergence of a more mature audience who would experience a change of mentality. Just like modernist fiction, Eliot’s novels rely on unconventional open endings as a device to stimulate the readers’ imagination and develop their abilities to consider different possibilities and weave new future events.

For Victorian readers to become more active, they had to look beyond the narrow, and sometimes unfair, limits framed by the social code. They were in need of knowing about each other’s sufferings caused by the stifling rules they were expected to respect. Eliot considered feeling, understanding, and tolerance as keywords to reach such an aim through an authentic art that may have access to the depths of the human heart. “The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist,” asserts Eliot, “is the extension of our sympathies . . . Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot” (“Natural History” 183). In her review of Ruskin’s *Lectures on Art and Painting* in *The Leader* of June 1854, Eliot claims that “the aim of Art, in depicting any natural object, is to produce in the mind analogous emotions to those produced by the object itself” (qtd. in Henson).

In line with Eliot’s opinion on art, the forthcoming chapter will examine the extent to which she has been an artist herself, and the way her fiction involves the arts and reflects their effects on the reader.

CHAPTER 8

George Eliot & the Arts

Introduction

“The fullest example of such a whole is the highest example of Form: in other words, the relation of multiplex interdependent parts to a whole which is itself in the most varied and therefore the fullest relation to other wholes. . . . the highest form, then,” says Eliot, “is the highest organism, that is to say, the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena” (“Notes on Form in Art” 435). Artist at heart, Eliot perceived form as a “relation of multiplex interdependent parts to a whole”. The previous chapters have confirmed the coexistence of various disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology, mythology, politics, and social dimension, in Eliot’s fiction. As for the present chapter, it will bring to light more grounds for appreciating Eliot’s artistic talent. Poetry, painting, sculpture, motion, and interior design represent different expressions of art, yet they are intimate elements that can be reunited in the most complex form of them all, i.e. literature. When the arts are grouped in “the highest organism”, the result is a genuine simulation of life experiences and the maximum probability for attaining human emotions, which is nothing but the most sacred aim for Eliot as a novelist. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, Eliot’s various and thorough readings, her frequent European travels, and her multiple enriching encounters with thinkers, writers, and artists from different horizons had strongly shaped her mind, interests, and tastes turning her into an accomplished cosmopolitan intellectual strongly endowed with artistic talent.

The present chapter proposes to explore Eliot’s relationship with the arts and the way they are celebrated in her fiction, with particular emphasis on painting. The Irish literary critic and poet Edward Dowden—a contemporary of Eliot—acknowledged her novels to be

“primarily works of art, and George Eliot herself is an artist” (qtd. in *A Century of GE Criticism* 65). Using mainly Eliot’s novels as primary sources, the present chapter will try to demonstrate that her literature is full of instances confirming her commitment to the arts. It shall equally attempt to show that Eliot’s writings do not only highlight her deep knowledge of the arts, but, above all, prove the author’s mastery of language that granted her the ability to arouse in the reader the same strong emotions as any visual art would.

8.1. Poetry: Eliot’s Epigraphs

Even if it apparently has nothing to do with visual arts, poetry remains a creative and aesthetic genre of art essentially dependent on visual form. It combines beauty and meaning in order to tickle the ears and penetrate the hearts, producing a great impact on listeners and readers. Like any good artist, Eliot was fully aware of the power of poetry and did not miss to explore its shores adding it to the long list of her literary interests. On top of being a translator, a book reviewer, an essayist, and a novelist, Eliot was also captivated by the art of poetry and left her readers two volumes of narrative and lyrical poems.⁶⁶ However, the relevant point to this discussion is not her poems as such, but rather her tendency to include poetry (that she wrote herself) in her fiction, making of the former an integral and complementary part of the latter. In other words, this section is interested in the connection established by Eliot between her poetic epigraphs and her prose chapters.

It is no coincidence that Eliot started to incorporate poetic epigraphs seriously in her novels—namely, *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*—in the 1860s and 1870s, that is to say the same period during which she had started writing poetry. This clearly indicates Eliot’s keen explorations of the domain, and reveals the importance she had attributed to it. To include an epigraph in a chapter was not a very common practice during the Victorian period; famous novelists such as William Thackeray or Charles Dickens did not

66. George Eliot, *The Complete Works of George Eliot: Poems*. Vol. 1 & 2 (N. York: Harper, n.d.).

adopt it (Jacobs 62). Although it is part of the romantic heritage, this technique may be regarded as Eliot's special touch at the time along with Elizabeth Gaskell and Thomas Hardy, who would adopt it later on (L. Hughes 104). An immediate positive reaction to Eliot's poetic quotes was formulated by her publisher, John Blackwood. In a letter he addressed to her on 30 April 1866, he enthusiastically wrote: "how admirable your mottoes are. Many of them I imagine to be your own" (*Letters* 4:250). Being a novelist with high aspirations, Eliot did certainly not intend her epigraphs to be mere sources of admiration, but rather a lot more technical and meaningful.

In a letter to her admirer Alexander Main, Eliot confesses that "a quotation often makes a fine summit to a climax" (*Letters* 5:404). Obviously, the "climax" is her chapter of prose, the "summit" is the epigraph itself, and they both maintain a relationship of fineness. To put it simply, Eliot's poetic quotes add subtlety to her prose. According to Tye, Eliot's epigraphs are "a serious prolepsis of theme, action and character, with, here and there, a humorous side" (237). Genette, on the other hand, affirms that "the use of an epigraph is always a mute gesture whose interpretation is left up to the reader" (156). In the light of these comments, it would be interesting to examine one epigraph from each of the last three novels by Eliot and attempt to understand their functions.

Felix Holt opens with some smooth lines of poetry in which Eliot delicately sets the atmosphere of the first chapter and summarizes its main events. In addition to be "a serious prolepsis of [the first chapter's] theme" (Tye 237), the epigraph remarkably encapsulates the flow of emotions of a hurt mother whose son has emigrated far away. It writes:

He left me when the down upon his lip

Lay like the shadow of a hovering kiss.

"Beautiful mother, do not grieve," he said;

"I will be great, and build our fortunes high,

And you shall wear the longest train at court,
 And look so queenly, all the lords shall say,
 She is a royal changeling: there's some crown
 Lacks the right head, since hers wears nought but braids."
 O, he is coming now—but I am grey:
 And he—(*FH* 12)

Harold Transome had departed from his local Midlands for fifteen years in order to build up a trading career in Smyrna, leaving a sad and disappointed mother behind. He eventually came back as a very wealthy gentleman.

The epigraph Eliot had composed for her twenty-third chapter of *Middlemarch* is quite humorous. Briefly, Fred Vincy did not wish his father to know he was indebted because of his expensive habits. So, he decides to sell his horse and buy a new one he can resell at a good profit in order to pay his debt. Unfortunately, the new horse turns to be wild and lames itself at a struggle. Fred feels miserable at his bad luck and has no other choice but to confess his financial troubles. The four-line poetic epigraph that introduces this chapter is very witty. Indeed, it starts by ironically praising “first-rate” “horses of the Sun” that “whip Apollo!” God of the sun and light. The striking subtlety is that Apollo has probably not been chosen by Eliot in this very particular case just for his quality of being God of the sun. Much more than that, Apollo is, first, God of oracles and knowledge who prophesies right from the beginning of the chapter Fred’s forthcoming bad luck; second, he is God of plague, healing and medicine who is supposed to cure Fred’s horse after having inflicted an injury on it and, third, God of poetry and art, which is literally the icing on the cake. The final lines of the poem amusingly foretell that the character, Fred, will “eat his head” and “will beat [these horses] hollow” (*MD* 2:3).

The plot development of chapter four in the section “Maidens Choosing” in *Daniel Deronda* is delicately knitted by a short poem full of weaving imagery. The epigraph reads:

We please our fancy with ideal webs
 Of innovation, but our life meanwhile
 Is in the loom, where busy passion plies
 The shuttle to and fro, and gives our deeds
 The accustomed pattern. (*DD* 1:340)

The novel’s chapter is about the wealthy upper class Catherine Arrowpoints and her German-Jewish music instructor Herr Klesmer. They are in love with each other despite the fact that they “normally” should not because of their different social backgrounds. According to such severe social norms, their attachment becomes an abstract “fancy” and an “ideal web” that can exist only in their imagination, and which is not likely to turn into a real relationship. When Catherine’s parents knew about it, their reaction was, of course, in line with the controlling “loom”, i.e. the Victorian social code that would never allow such a crazy “innovation” to come true. After a long debate between the parents and the lovers, Klesmer was eventually obliged to leave, fulfilling the “accustomed pattern”.

More than just having poetic aspirations, Eliot showed a true talent for poetry and was able to write and include “blank verse, couplets, a triplet, quatrains, octosyllabics, decasyllabics, and a sonnet” in her novels (Tye 240). Poetic epigraphs were an asset for Eliot to enrich the content of her fiction, to embellish it with a touch of originality, and to somehow soften the realities of realism that she had committed herself to. However, whatever the nature of Eliot’s epigraphs, they should be considered as integral parts of her works and not as separate entities: “I seek by my works as wholes than by an assemblage of extracts,” said Eliot once to her admirer Alexander Main (qtd. in Price 131). Therefore, one may argue that Eliot purposefully aimed at building up a close connection between poetry and prose in her

fiction, thus creating an artistic interrelation. This is reminiscent of the relationship between poetry and painting, i.e. the *ut pictura poesis*⁶⁷ (“as is painting so is poetry”) and of Eliot’s great fascination with visual arts.

8.2. Painting: Eliot’s Linguistic *Tableaux*

In her essay “Story-Telling”, Eliot claims that “the modes of telling a story founded on these processes of outward and inward life derive their effectiveness from the superior mastery of images and pictures in grasping the attention” (286). Evelyn Ender affirms that:

Visual images are the building blocks of George Eliot’s construction; put together, they create a picture that is immensely rich, . . . It is no minor accomplishment to master a topographical description to the point where it looks like a painting, and Eliot had often been admired for this achievement. (80)

Moreover, Henry James acknowledged that Eliot’s fiction as a whole is “a picture . . . vast, swarming, deep-coloured, crowded with episodes, with vivid images, with lurking master-strokes, with brilliant passages of expression” (qtd. in *A Century of GE Criticism* 81). In fact, Eliot relied on different expressions of art in her novels, always targeting reality.

8.2.1. Realism

As aforementioned, Eliot intended her fiction to be as close to the real world as possible. Therefore, her art sought to express the complexities of life, and this principle shaped her preference for paintings that belong to the tradition of realism. In her essay “Notes on Form in Art”, Eliot explains: “artistic form, as distinguished from mere imitation, begins in sculpture and painting” (433). However, she surely meant the kind of paintings by the Flemish and humanist scholar and painter Peter Paul Rubens, whom she praised using the

67. Remember Eliot’s artistic affinity with Ephraim Lessing already discussed in chapter 1 from page 32 to 38.

following terms: “Rubens, more than any one else, makes me feel that painting is a great art, . . . His are such *real*, breathing men and women, moved by passions, not mincing and grimacing, and posing in mere aping of passions! What a grand, glowing, forceful thing life looks in his pictures” (emphasis added) (*L & L* 261).

Eliot’s novels are full of references that praise realist painting and show a clear dislike for idealism. Many passages are themselves so picturesque, so delicately lit up, shadowed or coloured, and so visually stimulating that one can justifiably consider them as fine pieces of paintings. “It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise,” says the narrator in *Adam Bede*, “I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions” (181). No need to mention here that realism is the reason why Dutch paintings are admired in the above excerpt: “it is Dutch paintings which, for Eliot, fulfil . . . her own criterion of excellence in art—truth” (Henson 79). Italian paintings, on the other hand, are criticised because they are less genuine, more idealistic. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the narrator establishes the connection between Mrs. Tulliver and the “Madonnas of Raphael” as follows:

Mrs. Tulliver was . . . healthy, fair, plump and dull-witted; in short, the flower of her family for beauty and amiability. But milk and mildness are not the best things for keeping, and when they turn only a little sour they may disagree with young stomachs seriously. I have often wondered whether those early Madonnas of Raphael, with the blond faces and somewhat stupid expression, kept their placidity undisturbed when their strong-limbed, strong-willed boys got a little too old to do without clothing. (9-10)

Another straightforward idealist versus realist clash of paintbrushes is the following expressive passage from *Adam Bede* in which Eliot claims the importance of painting real, “faithful represent[at]ions] of commonplace things” (183):

Paint us an angel, if you can, with a floating violet robe, and a face paled by the celestial light; . . . but do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, . . . those rounded backs and . . . weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world . . . Therefore let Art always remind us of them. (182-83)

This realist portrait is nothing but an Eliotian expression of truth-telling, as if the artist—bound to remain faithful to what is real—were “in the witness-box narrating [his] experience on oath” (*AB* 179). Whether for an artist or a writer the expression of truth, or the faithful depiction of reality, remains a matter of utmost importance, mainly because of its ethical implications. Although the writer may feel free to offer the readers idealised portraits of any of his characters, he ultimately refrains from doing so because of the moral urge that reminds him he owes a duty of truthfulness to his readers. “I might refashion life and character entirely after my own liking; I might select the most unexceptionable type of clergyman, and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasions,” says the narrator in *Adam Bede*, “but it happens, on the contrary, that my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind” (179).

Thirty-three chapters further, Eliot puts her language skills into practice to paint, with realist expressiveness, two remarkable Dutch school portraits:

There were two pretty pictures on the two sides of the wall in the cottage. On one side there was the broad-shouldered, large-featured, hardy old woman, in

her blue jacket and buff kerchief, with her dim-eyed anxious looks turned continually on the lily face and the slight form in the black dress that were either moving lightly about in helpful activity, or seated close by the old woman's arm-chair, . . . On the other side of the wall there were the two brothers, so like each other in the midst of their unlikeness; Adam, with knit brows, shaggy hair, and dark vigorous color, absorbed in his "figuring;" Seth, with large rugged features, the close copy of his brother's, but with thin wavy brown hair and blue dreamy eyes. (AB 491-92)

Not only does Eliot skilfully paint the realist portraits of both the Bedes mother and brothers, but she also more interestingly displays them according to the Dutch school fashion. Indeed, according to *Dutch Art: An Encyclopaedia*, "the most striking feature" about the hanging pattern of pictures was "their almost obsessive concern with symmetry" (107). As a matter of fact, Eliot respects this decorative convention by placing the portraits she painted "on the two sides of the wall in the cottage" (AB 491).

8.2.2. Colours

In addition to realism, Eliot relies on a palette of bright colours to bring her scenes to life and ensure maximum impact on the emotions of her audience. She uses shiny colours to describe her characters, aiming at a sensational entrance as is the case with Hetty: "the golden light was lingering languidly among the upper boughs, . . . Ah! There she comes. First a bright patch of colour like a tropic bird among the boughs, . . . then a deep-blushing, almost frightened, but bright-smiling girl" (AB 132-33). Another colourful picture of Hetty, but in pink and white this time, captures all of her beauty, freshness, and pureness: "If ever a girl looked as if she had been made of roses, that girl was Hetty in her Sunday hat and frock. For her hat was trimmed with pink, and her frock had pink spots sprinkled on a white ground. There was nothing but pink and white about her" (AB 189). Eliot also paints a sparkling fresh

morning portrait of Dorothea that breathes vitality, youth, and radiance. The human warmth incarnated by Dorothea beautifully contrasts with the coldness of the snow outdoors. Yet, both the “gem-like” woman and “the crystalline” snow are equal in terms of purity: “there was gem-like brightness on her coiled hair and in her hazel eyes; there was warm red life in her lips; her throat had a breathing whiteness above the differing white of the fur . . . a sentient commingled innocence which kept its loveliness against the crystalline purity of the outdoor snow” (*MD* 2:88).

In *Felix Holt*, Eliot offers the reader a stunning colourful picture of a surrounding landscape that is almost a living painting:

As the morning silvered the meadows with their long lines of bushy willows marking the watercourses, or burnished the golden corn-ricks clustered near the long roofs of some midland homestead, . . . everywhere the bushy hedgerows wasted the land with their straggling beauty, shrouded the grassy borders of the pastures with catkined hazels, and tossed their long blackberry branches on the corn-fields. Perhaps they were white with May, or starred with pale pink dog-roses: . . . the purple-blossomed ruby-berried nightshade, of the wild convolvulus climbing and spreading in ten-drilled strength till it made a great curtain of pale-green hearts and white trumpets; . . . Even if it were winter the hedgerows showed their coral, the scarlet haws, the deep-crimson hips, with lingering brown leaves to make a resting-place for the jewels of the hoar-frost.

(4-5)

Eliot deploys this natural colourful carpet for any reader endowed with artistic sensibility to appreciate. One should not forget that Rousseau energized Eliot’s intellect, awakening her “to new perceptions—which has made man and nature a fresh world of thought and feeling to [her]” (*L & L* 101). Eliot, therefore, links man and nature making of the former’s sensibility

and receptivity conditions to appreciate and connect with the latter. As she writes in her essay “Natural History”: “selfish instincts are not subdued by the sight of buttercups” (183).

Sometimes, however, Eliot shades off her *tableaux* using pale colours to highlight softness and delicacy. In the *Scenes* for example, Janet’s “rich pale beauty” is compared to a delicate “tall white arum that has just unfolded its grand pure curves to the sun” (235). Discolouration may also be exploited by Eliot to express weariness and depression, like “the old faded green curtain” (467) in *the Mill on the Floss* that echoes Stephen’s words when he told the downcast Maggie that she “look[ed] so pale” (466). In a portrait of the schoolmaster Bartle Massey, a simple touch of grey and special emphasis on the yellow are enough to bring out the idea of fading and age: “from the place where he sat he could make nothing of the old map of England that hung against the opposite wall, for age had turned it of a fine yellow-brown, . . . [his] face wore its mildest expression: . . . the blue veins stood out like cords under the transparent yellow skin, and . . . the gray bristly hair” (*AB* 237-38). In *Middlemarch*, Fred points to Mrs. Waule’s gig saying: “the last yellow gig left, . . . when I see Mrs Waule in it, I understand how yellow can have been worn for mourning. That gig seems to me more funeral than a hearse” (1:182). Therefore, for Eliot yellow could go beyond its common connotation of fading and age to also include death.

Eliot relies on black and red for creepy portrayals. The devil, for instance, has been “colored” by Tom “with his paints . . . the body all black, . . . and the eyes red, like fire, because he’s all fire inside, and it shines out at his eyes” (*Mill* 16). But, it is more interesting yet to discover how Eliot associated the same red and black with other images such as “Bluebeard”,⁶⁸ the “turban”, the “scarf”, and the “sword” in order to create a dramatic effect

68. Bluebeard is an old French folktale whose surviving version was written by Charles Perrault and published in 1659. It is the story of a nobleman who used to murder his wives. In the eighteenth century, the tale was orientalistised by setting it in the Ottoman Empire making of Bluebeard a Turkish tyrant called “Abomelique” whose wife was named “Fatima” (Hermansson 51). “The Turkish Bluebeard; a common English depiction of the French noble tyrant, is often ascribed to the influence of the *Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, itself illustrating a Bluebeard tale in the frame story of King Schahriar and Scheherezade” (Hermansson 14).

underscoring violence and blood thirst. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the narrator describes a scene in which:

[Tom] had had recourse to that unfailing source of the terrible, burnt cork, and had made himself a pair of black eyebrows that met in a satisfactory manner over his nose, and were matched by a less carefully adjusted blackness about the chin. He had wound a red handkerchief round his cloth cap to give it the air of a turban, and his red comforter across his breast as a scarf,—an amount of red which, with the tremendous frown on his brow, and the decision with which he grasped the sword, as he held it with its point resting on the ground, would suffice to convey an approximate idea of his fierce and bloodthirsty disposition. (193)

The “turban” on Tom’s head automatically suggests a mental picture of a Muslim, a Sikh, or a Hindu but the clarification is provided a few lines further when Maggie tells her brother that he looked like “Bluebeard” (193). Only then, Tom “drew the sword from its sheath, and pointed it at Maggie” (193). As a matter of fact, Eliot has surely meant the Turkish Bluebeard in the above passage for three main reasons: first, it was the widespread version of the tale at that time; second, Eliot was not very enthusiastic about Islam; and third, she did not really have great esteem for the Ottoman. In truth, there is no direct evidence of Eliot’s dislike for the Ottoman Empire, but the events and narrative remarks in *Felix Holt* are very indicative of her negative attitude. Indeed, the fact that Harold Transome had made his fortune in Turkey, the lofty way of life he led, and the system of inheritance, were negatively perceived in the novel. “Such desires make life a hideous lottery,” says the narrator in *Felix Holt*, “where men and women who have the softest beds and the most delicate eating, . . . have a very large share of that sky and earth” (23-24). The narrative draws a clear parallel with the system and very nature of the Ottoman Empire, even if Nancy Henry argues that “Harold does not import this

pleasure-seeking mentality from the Ottoman Empire, . . . Rather, the narrative implies that he inherits his love of pleasure, along with a tendency to gain weight, from his biological father” (*The Life* 155-56). However, some lines further she goes on admitting that “the overtly complicated legal plot of *Felix Holt* is intended to expose the injustice of a system of inherited wealth in which the unworthy may be rewarded and the worthy denied. . . . Inheritance is a system based on bloodlines and legitimacy” (156), which was the very core of the Ottoman Empire’s policy. In the *Encyclopaedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, Joseph and Najmabadi affirm that:

Unlike some monarchies, the Ottoman Empire was entirely identified with the Ottoman dynasty, . . . the production of an heir to the throne was of paramount importance . . . a child inherited all titles and power from the father . . . In the case of the Ottomans, legitimacy of birth and legitimacy of power were one and the same. (350)

It is true that the Ottoman Empire is not the fairest example of system making, but then no monarchy is. It is also not the most indicated reference when it comes to territorial expansion, but then again no imperialism or colonialism has ever been. Finally, it is surely not the best illustration of peaceful spread of religious faith, and so were not the Inquisition and the Crusades. The major point here is that Eliot, again, uses two different sets of balances for facts which should have inspired in her equal ethical and moral repulsion. Instead, she chooses to draw a stereotyped, critical portrait, i.e. the childish disguise of Tom as a “fierce” and “bloodthirsty” bearded Turkish tyrant holding a sword, which suggests a prejudiced attitude to the Ottoman.

Talking about the Ottomans in this “painting” section is reminiscent of the cultural contact between Renaissance Europe and the Islamic world, and the great Raphael who immortalised this rich historical exchange of knowledge in his famous fresco *Scuola di Atene*

(*The School of Athens*) in which one can contemplate groups of scholars discussing ideas, among them Ibn Rushd wearing his turban. *The School of Athens* is an excellent representation to appreciate the *chiaroscuro*⁶⁹ technique that Raphael had used to create shadows, shape, and depth.

8.2.3. Light/Darkness

Eliot, too, relies on the technique of *chiaroscuro* (Sharma 102) to portray some of her characters' faces—like modern spotlights in a theatre—as she did with Dinah in *Adam Bede*: “some of the rays fell on Dinah’s finely moulded cheek, and lit up her pale red hair to auburn” (75), and “the bright low-slanting rays of the early sun, . . . made a glory about her pale face and pale auburn hair” (496). As for Will Ladislaw, he is pictured with a smile that “was delightful . . . it was a gush of inward light illuminating the transparent skin as well as the eyes, and playing about every curve and line” (*MD* 1:372). It is also possible to find scenes where Eliot applies the light versus darkness contrast to the whole setting in order to create a more impressive effect: “It was past midnight” when Maggie “was seated in her little parlor toward the river, with one candle, that left everything dim in the room except a letter which lay before her on the table” (*Mill* 554). In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea and Will were having a conversation during a “sombre” storm (4:321), when suddenly “there came a vivid flash of lightning which lit each of them up for the other” (4:322). As for Peter Featherstone, he was sleeping in a room where “the dry wood sent out a flame which illuminated every crevice, . . . the next moment the movement of the flame communicating itself to all objects” (*MD* 2:174). The following excerpt from *Felix Holt* is particularly interesting as Eliot uses different sources of light along with grey, paleness, darkness, and a mirror to accentuate the play of light, shadow, and reflection:

69. A technique based on a strong contrast between light and darkness/shade used in painting, drawing, and even photography. It has its roots in the Italian Renaissance and was restored in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, especially by the Dutch School. The Italian word “*chiaroscuro*” literally means “light-dark” and is also known in French as “*clair-obscur*”.

Mrs Transome had on a dark warm dressing-gown, hanging in thick folds about her, and she was seated before a mirror which filled a panel from the floor to the ceiling. The room was bright with the light of the fire and of wax candles. . . . [she] had herself unfastened her abundant grey hair, which rolled backward in a pale sunless stream over her dark dress. (361)

Eliot's artistic lighting and darkening of the settings may go beyond the visual effect and connote something else, as in *Felix Holt* when Mrs. Transome "looked out into the dim night; but the black boundary of trees and the long line of the river seemed only part of the loneliness and monotony of her life" (455-56). Then, "suddenly she saw a light on the stone balustrades of the balcony that projected in front of Esther's window, and the flash of a moving candle falling on a shrub below" (456). The source of light that comes from Esther's room is, in fact, the glimpse of hope for Mrs. Transome and the warmth that could brighten up the dark "loneliness and monotony of her life". Esther is associated with the image of light and the idea of hope because "there was mercy in her young heart" (456). *Adam Bede*, too, reveals an interesting *chiaroscuro* that conveys symbolic meaning. It is an alternation of light and darkness which represents despair, then a surge of hope, and eventually total hopelessness. The "sweet pale face" of Dinah looks "like a white flower" (*AB* 452) that inspires Hetty with hope while she was helpless in her prison cell, sinking into a "dark gulf" (*AB* 453) of sorrow:

As Dinah crossed the prison court with the turnkey, the solemn evening light seemed to make the walls higher . . . The turnkey . . . struck a light as he entered the dark corridor . . . A jet of light from his lantern fell on the opposite corner of the cell, where Hetty was sitting . . . The door closed again, and the only light in the cell was that of the evening sky . . . Hetty hung on this something that was come to clasp her now, while she was sinking helpless in a

dark gulf; . . . The light got fainter as they stood . . . Hetty sat in dull despair, . . . it got darker and darker till there was only a pale patch of light on the opposite wall. (*AB* 452-54)

Sometimes, Eliot uses unreal or mental *chiaroscuros* in order to highlight the characters' state of mind. Maggie's inner struggle, for example, is expressed in terms of light versus darkness imagery. Maggie decides to break with Stephen out of duty because her cousin Lucy is in love with him too. The pain and loss she feels when she receives a letter from Stephen begging her to come back to him is described in the following terms:

When Maggie first read this letter she felt as if her real temptation only just begun. At the entrance of the chill dark cavern, we turn with unworn courage from the warm light; but how, when we have trodden far in the damp darkness, and have begun to be faint and weary; how, if there is a sudden opening above us, and we are invited back again to the life-nourishing day? . . . She sat quite still, far on into the night, with no impulse to change her attitude, without active force enough even for the mental act of prayer; only for the light that would surely come again. (*Mill* 556-57)

Eliot relies on the absence of light to paint dark portraits that reflect the gloomy and complex personality of some of her characters. The following passage about Casaubon is undoubtedly a good illustration: "Poor Mr Casaubon himself was lost among small closets and winding stairs, . . . With his taper stuck before him he forgot the absence of windows, and in bitter manuscript remarks on other men's notions about the solar deities, he had become indifferent to the sunlight" (*MD* 1:357-58). The darkness and confinement that surround Casaubon and invade his mind eventually affect Dorothea in a very negative way: "how was it that in the weeks since her marriage, Dorothea had not distinctly observed but felt with a stifling depression that the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in

her husband's mind were replaced by anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhere?" (*MD* 1:354).

Sunshine, however, is for Eliot a means to illuminate (Henson 93) and brighten up her canvases: "the mid-day light that fell on the close pavement of human heads [and which] was shed through a line of high pointed windows, variegated with the mellow tints of old painted glass" (*AB* 436), or "the sunshine which pierced the screen of jasmine on the projecting porch at her right, and threw leafy shadows on her pale round cheek" (*Mill* 301). Sunlight may as well bring warmth, tranquillity, and comfort to Eliot's pieces of paintings, as is clearly shown in the extract below:

The sunshine was on them: that early autumn sunshine which we should know was not summer's, even if there were not the touches of yellow on the lime and chestnut: the Sunday sunshine, too, which has more than autumnal calmness for the working man, the morning sunshine, which still leaves the dew-crystals on the fine gossamer webs in the shadow of the bushy hedgerows. . . . The autumnal Sunday sunshine soothed him; . . . love was so like that calm sunshine that they seemed to make one presence to him. (*AB* 507)

By illuminating some of her colourful scenes, Eliot probably wished to emphasise the brightness of the colours used. In *Adam Bede* one can read: "And over all steamed the delicious June sunshine through the old windows, with their desultory patches of yellow, red, blue, that threw pleasant touches of color on the opposite wall" (201). A few pages back, there appears a particularly well-illuminated and radiant scene: "there is always a stronger sense of life when the sun is brilliant after rain; and now he is pouring down his beams, and making sparkles among the wet straw, and lighting up every patch of vivid green moss on the red tiles of the cowshed, and turning even the muddy water . . . into a mirror for the yellow-billed ducks" (*AB* 73).

In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brook is surrounded by sculptures in the Vatican Museum, yet she does not look at them. Instead, “her large eyes were fixed dreamily on a streak of sunlight which fell across the floor” (1:341). This scene subtly mixes painting, *chiaroscuro*, and sculpture.

8.3. Sculpture: George Eliot, the Sculptor

It is commonly known that, in addition to painting, Eliot equally showed a particular interest in the art of sculpture. During her European travels, she and Lewes visited a great number of museums and appreciated a lot of ancient sculptures. Detailed descriptions of these visits and full lists of the masterpieces she contemplated are gathered in her *Life and Letters*. Eliot’s novels reflect her inclination for sculpture, and quick statistical data may show this.⁷⁰

More significantly, there are some passages where Eliot herself acts like a sculptor, moulding one of her characters’ faces, as in the following quote from *Adam Bede* in which she sculpts the face of Bartle Massey, the local schoolmaster: “the grizzled bushy eyebrows . . . and the mouth . . . was relaxed so as to be ready to speak a helpful word or syllable in a moment. . . . the schoolmaster’s nose, an irregular aquiline twisted a little on one side . . . the blue veins stood out like cords under the transparent yellow skin as ever” (237-38).

The following extract from *The Mill on the Floss* is quite interesting as Eliot describes Maggie’s arm in very light terms, associating her with the statue of Athena—goddess of wisdom, arts, crafts, and skill—kept in the temple of the Parthenon, built in the goddess’s honour on the Athenian Acropolis:

the varied gently lessening curves, down to the delicate wrist, with its tiniest, almost imperceptible nicks in the firm softness. A woman’s arm touched the soul of a great sculptor two thousand years ago, so that he wrought an image of

70. Indeed, words like “sculpture”, “sculptured”, “sculptor”, “statue”, and “statuesque” appear twenty times in *Daniel Deronda*, nine times in *Middlemarch*, seven times in *Adam Bede*, six times in *Felix Holt*, five times in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, two times in *The Mill*, one time in both *Silas Marner* and the *Scenes*.

it for the Parthenon which moves us still as it clasps lovingly the timeworn marble of a headless trunk. Maggie's was such an arm as that, and it had the warm tints of life. (476)

Moreover, Eliot tends to establish comparisons between sculptures and her characters. Relating the episode of Hetty's trial, the narrator explains that "all eyes were strained to look at her, but she stood like a statue of dull despair" (*AB* 441). In *Middlemarch*, Rosamond is described as "a sculptured Psyche modelled to look another way" (4:9). Mrs. Irwine is said to be "as erect . . . as a statue of Ceres" with "a large black veil . . . very carefully adjusted over the crown of her cap, and [that] falls in sharp contrast on the white folds about her neck" (*AB* 56). As for Mr. Lush, he was about to meet a lady whose "figure was slim and sufficiently tall, her face rather emaciated, so that its sculpturesque beauty was the more pronounced" (*DD* 1:203). Again, in *Daniel Deronda*, a "handsome" Italian man is described as "calm, statuesque" and "impassive" (1:4). Even a "wooden doll, which, so far as mutilation is concerned, bears a strong resemblance to the finest Greek sculpture, and especially in the total loss of its nose," affirms the narrator in *Adam Bede* (73).

However, of all Eliot's characters Gwendolen Harleth is the one whom she has excessively compared to a statue: "she looked like a statue into which a soul of Fear had entered" (*DD* 1:82-83); "she was perfectly silent, holding up the folds of her robe like a statue" (*DD* 1:189); she was "dressed in black, without a single ornament, and with the warm whiteness of her skin set off between her light-brown coronet of hair and her square-cut bodice, she might have tempted an artist to try again the Roman trick of a statue in black, white, and tawny marble" (*DD* 1:361-62), and she "sat like a statue with her wrists lying over each other and her eyes fixed" (*DD* 3:363). There exist many other instances where Gwendolen is "petrified" by the author, so to speak, but a particularly interesting scene where Eliot brings two titans together, namely Shakespeare and Greek mythology, is worth

mentioning. As a matter of fact, Gwendolen was about to attend a select party in which she would have to take part in a performance. Her desire to “appear in her Greek dress” and take up “a statuesque pose in this favourite costume” (*DD* 1:79) made Rex think of “Hermione as the statue in Winter’s Tale” (*DD* 1:80). It is noteworthy that the Shakespearian Hermione life-like statue was inspired by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in which the artist Pygmalion had sculpted a statue which he loved so much that the strength and sincerity of his feelings brought it to life.

In *Felix Holt*, little Harry and Job were playing hide-and-seek surrounded by statues while “Mrs. Holt sat on a stool, in singular relief against the pedestal of the Apollo” (410). McCormack suggests that Eliot describes this “action in a spirit of ironically amusing juxtapositions” because the children are playing “among the pedestals of statues that stand in a stony dignity with [their] activity” (22). This juxtaposition is even more powerful as the playing boys are purposefully depicted as vivid and colourful birds. This gives more life and animation to this scene and accentuates the contrast with the cold and motionless sculptures: “Harry, in his bright red and purple, flitted about like a great tropic bird after the sparrow-tailed Job, who hid himself with much intelligence behind the scagliola pillars and the pedestals” (*FH* 410). This idea of action versus “the stony” leads to Eliot’s following artistic accomplishment: the way she suggested movement and stillness.

8.4. The Art of Motion: Eliot & Movement

Eliot sometimes uses her pen in the same way a camera is used to capture scenes in movement, zoom in on a detail, or freeze the described scene. In *Daniel Deronda*, for example, Gwendolen describes the state of women as follows: “We women can’t go in search of adventures . . . we must stay where we grow, or where the gardeners like to transplant us. We are brought up like the flowers, to look as pretty as we can, and be dull without complaining. . . . and that is the reason why some of them have got poisonous” (1:189-90). In

the above extract, Eliot draws attention to the oppressed condition of Victorian women on which she expands through a succession of sentences all of which work towards one end: their comparison with pretty, yet dull flowers forced to stay where they are or where they have been forcefully transplanted. In fact, the pause key has been literally pressed to highlight both their stagnant social condition and their depressed state of mind. Henson argues that “Eliot uses the present tense to set scenes and often to freeze women as figures in a landscape” (85).

The opening chapter of *Felix Holt* illustrates the way Eliot sets a dead calm atmosphere where everything is so sluggish that it seems like a slow-motion scene:

There were grand trees, motionless in the still sunshine, and, like all large motionless things, seeming to add to the stillness. Here and there a leaf fluttered down; petals fell in a silent shower; a heavy moth floated by, and when it settled, seemed to fall wearily; the tiny birds alighted on the walks, and hopped about in perfect tranquillity; . . . No sound was to be heard louder than a sleepy hum. (18)

On the other hand, agitation, fear, and despair are successively expressed by an up-and-down movement, shudder, and then total sinking: “She roamed up and down . . . and she sat down to rest . . . Hetty started up again, . . . She walked through field after field, . . . the land seemed to dip down a little . . . She set down her basket, and then sank down herself on the grass, trembling . . . and presently her head sank down on her knees” (*AB* 389-90). Another up-and-down movement is subtly implied by Eliot through the use of either positively or negatively marked words: Mr. Casson “in his present high position, was necessarily very much in contact with his inferiors. How to reconcile his dignity with the satisfaction of his curiosity” (*AB* 14). Eliot employs a very simple vocabulary in order to create a wave-shaped movement where one would situate “high position” and “dignity” at the top, whereas “inferiors” and “curiosity” would naturally be placed at its bottom.

The following visual description of the provincial society in *Middlemarch* is almost a graph on a modern monitor that translates the fluctuations of social aspirations and their up-and-down motion. Shifts in social rank are expressed in the following terms:

Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement: had not only its striking downfalls, its brilliant young professional dandies who ended by living up an entry with a drab and six children for their establishment, but also those less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse . . . Some slipped a little downward, some got higher footing: people denied aspirates, gained wealth . . . some were caught in political currents, some in ecclesiastical . . . while a few personages or families that stood with rocky firmness amid all this fluctuation, were slowly presenting new aspects in spite of solidity. (1:164-65)

Commenting upon this same passage, Hillis Miller points to the visual aspect of Eliot's portrayal. He describes the "storyteller in *Middlemarch*" as a "scientific observer" (62), and the passage above as one presenting "an extremely complex physical entity in which . . . each element is . . . constantly in movement" (62).

8.5. Interior Design: Eliot & Decoration

Eliot shows a particular artistic concern over the furnishings of her characters' interiors, acting like a refined designer who combines creativity and aesthetics. In *Adam Bede*, Eliot chooses to decorate the rector's study with a "great glass globe with goldfish in it" standing on "a scagliola pillar", and a "crimson damask easy-chair" (171). According to Flanders, the previous example points at Eliot as a modern decorator who precociously uses contemporary ornamental items because:

these objects are unlikely at the turn of the nineteenth century. It was only in the 1830s that “wardian cases”, the precursor to both the terrarium and the aquarium, first appeared. . . . A few aquariums, as luxury items among the aristocracy, appeared earlier, but it is implausible that a country rector, thirty years before, would have been so advanced. Even less likely was his red damask easy chair. Upholstered furniture was then a rarity: it was in the 1820s and 1830s that coil-spring upholstery began to appear, and the love for red was later still, becoming really popular only in the 1850s and 1860s . . . [it was only in 1868] that the artist (and subsequently arts administrator) Charles Eastlake, in his *Hints on Household Taste* (1868), noted that by now many households had “crimson curtains, crimson sofa, crimson everything”. (161)

Grandecourt’s house is described as enjoying “a brilliant light in the hall,—warmth, matting, carpets, full-length portraits, Olympian statues” (*DD* 2:115), which gives an immediate impression of well-being, height, and grandeur. Most stunning is Eliot’s ability to create a three-D effect by emphasising the height, depth, and width of space, multiplying impressive decorations, and bringing additional light to the whole. The following extract from *Adam Bede* is undoubtedly a good illustration:

It was one of those entrance halls which make the surrounding rooms look like closets—with stucco angels, trumpets, and flower wreaths on the lofty ceiling, and great medallions of miscellaneous heroes on the walls, alternating with statues in niches. . . . The broad steps of the stone staircase were covered with cushions to serve as seats for the children, . . . The lights were charmingly disposed in colored-paper lamps, high up among green boughs, . . . The lamps were already lit, though the sun had not long set, and there was that calm light

out of doors in which we seem to see all objects more distinctly than in the broad day. (285-86)

On occasion, however, Eliot creates an eccentric atmosphere using exotic decorative objects and “curiosities” that she exhibits under “bright moonlight”. In “Mr. Gilfil’s Love-Story”, one reads:

The bright moonlight was streaming through the windows, throwing into strange light and shadow the heterogeneous objects that lined the long walls. Greek statues and busts of Roman emperors, low cabinets filled with curiosities, natural and antiquarian; tropical birds and huge horns of beasts; Hindoo gods and strange shells; swords and daggers, and bits of chain-armour; Roman lamps and tiny models of Greek temples; and, above all these, queer old family portraits. (*Scenes* 103)

Eliot adds a Gothic touch by calling the house a “Manor” (105) and comparing Caterina, who was walking there in a white robe, to a ghost come “to revisit the glimpses of the moon” (103).

Conclusion

Eliot’s fiction is an incredible network of several interrelated expressions of the arts. Her mastery of language granted her the ability to arouse in the reader the same strong emotions as visual arts naturally would. Indeed, Eliot incorporated in her novels all the artistic forms known to her at the time, ranging from poetry and painting to sculpture. From poetry, she took epigraphs that she deviated from their romantic aesthetic goal, and to which she assigned functional roles like, for example, expressing prolepses and anticipating the flow of emotions in the chapter. From painting, she adopted the German art critic Lessing’s *ut pictura poesis* to depict whole scenes in her narratives using language in the same way a painter uses

his brush, and introduced colours to convey emotions and feelings inherent in these passages. She also turned to Dutch painting and borrowed the *chiaroscuro* technique to use the light versus darkness contrast to focus both on significant elements in the external physical settings and on the characters' psychological and emotional states, in the same way spotlights keep going on and off above the stage props and the comedians' heads in a modern theatre. Eliot also imitated sculptors when she moulded her characters' faces and described their various postures using relevant language related to statuesque shapes and textures. She equally sought modern effects in her fiction by skilfully controlling the inner motion of her narratives, using either sluggish description to render the calmness in some of her scenes, or assigning up-and-down movements to the pace of her narrative either to reflect the agitation of her characters or to contrast the gap between their social status and aspirations. These sluggish tableaux, purposeful focuses on characters and situations, and reflective pauses on the one hand, and the up-and-down descriptive movements on the other respectively suggest the slow-motion movements, the close-ups and the freeze-frames of a modern film camera, and the visual fluctuations of a graph on a monitor. Finally, Eliot also proved to be a refined designer who combines creativity and aesthetics in her fiction. She shows a particular artistic concern over the furnishings of her characters' houses, and acts like a modern decorator who precociously used contemporary ornamental items such as aquariums and the crimson colour. Eliot had also the ability to create a three-D effect by emphasising the height, depth, and width of space, multiplying impressive decorations, and bringing additional light to the whole. This chapter has attempted to tackle the most important of forms of art Eliot frequently uses in her fiction, but there remain other artistic aspects that would certainly be interesting subjects for a more detailed study.

CONCLUSION

Findings & Evaluation

The first two chapters have done much to demonstrate that George Eliot was indeed a cosmopolitan intellectual whose writings show traces of European intellectual and literary influences that partly originate from a common Judaeo-Christian heritage. These influences are rooted in two major European cultures: the German and the French. Her lifelong contact with German culture spurred her receptivity to German philosophical concepts such as Humanism and the *Bildung*. Eliot's affinities with French writers and thinkers are the result of a lifelong interest in French culture. The writings and ideas of Pascal, Comte, Rousseau, Sand, and Balzac inspired both her intellect and her fiction.

The third chapter has likewise done much to argue that Eliot's European cosmopolitanism is not restricted to a Judaeo-Christian heritage, but also partly extends its roots to a common medieval Judaeo-Islamic heritage of which she was fully aware and about which she was well documented as is shown in her notebooks, journals, letters, book reviews, and fiction. Much more than that, Eliot was familiar with the works of medieval Islamic Sufi philosophers like Al-Ghazali, and equally acquainted with the Jewish-French orientalist Munk's *Mélanges De Philosophie Juive et Arabe* whose title clearly points to the borrowings that Judaic culture and philosophy made from its Islamic counterpart. These same borrowings would re-emerge at a later historical stage in late medieval and Renaissance Europe through the works of Spinoza, whose *Ethics* she herself translated, as well as through those of Kant, Pascal, and Goethe whom she admired and kept reading to the end of her life. Eliot, however, turned her back on this Islamic heritage upon which much of European thought, culture, and science is built. Drawing on her spiritual kinship with western Judaeo-Christian heritage and

from the “peculiar debt” towards the Hebrews, Eliot finally turned herself into an apologist for Judaism.

The dissertation has also hopefully demonstrated that not only did Eliot promote Judaic culture with its moral values and mysticism, which she used as a tool for literary sophistication in her fiction, but she also embraced its inherent historical claims to a return to the Promised Land, which would ultimately legitimise the establishment of a Jewish national state on this same land. In the same way Eliot had formerly chosen to ignore the significant contribution of Islamic civilisation, she likewise chose, again, to ignore the Palestinian Arabs whose presence and number were plainly known to her from her readings. Contrary to some European and English intellectuals Eliot drew much from, such as Carlyle, Goethe, and Deutsch who fairly, and sometimes even boldly, committed themselves either in writing or in lectures to express their opinions about Islam and Islamic culture before a predominantly hostile Victorian audience, Eliot’s reserved interest in Islam was solely restricted to sparse marginalia in her reading sources and controversial allusions in her fiction.

As for her stance on race and colonialism, another finding that this dissertation has reached is manifest in the investigation of Eliot’s book reviews of colonial literature that clearly reveals her prejudiced view of Arabs and Muslims, whether in North and East Africa or in the Arabian Peninsula. She preferred to praise the heroic deeds of a spying Burton and criticise the malfunctioning of the British missionary machinery and its failure to properly “civilise” the “ignorant” backward North African Arab men and women. Like the colonial missionaries and explorers of the time, she viewed the British Empire as a humanising, civilising project rather than a colonising one and to which she totally adhered, believing it would bring progress and emancipation to the wild, superstitious indigenous populations. Moreover, overseas lands offered then an opportunity for a better life. Eliot encouraged the youngest of her stepsons to immigrate to Algeria, but he ended up in South Africa with his

elder brother. As a colonial investor in the British colonies, Eliot was actively contributing not to the progress and the “civilisation” of “these prejudiced people,” but to the expansion and continuity of the British Empire. Although she acknowledged towards the end of her life all the wrongs done to the oppressed peoples at the hands of Imperial Britain and expressed her respect not only for the Jews but also for all Oriental peoples and religions, this *mea culpa* to which she apparently has tardily inched her way lacks the moral credibility any reader is rightly to expect from such a humanist writer with constant faith in such universal values as sympathy, compassion, tolerance, altruism, and in her personal doctrine of meliorism. Indeed, it takes courage to denounce the prejudices caused to these colonised people, but it may take sense to continue investing in and making profit from their lands.

Most significantly, however, this dissertation suggests that even if Eliot herself coined the term “meliorism” to designate this doctrine, she seems to have been unaware of the common conceptual ground it shares with the twelfth-century Andalusian Muslim philosopher Ibn Tufayl’s Sufi view he developed in his *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, a philosophical novel in which the autodidact protagonist achieved self-improvement both in worldly and spiritual terms in complete isolation from human civilisation. Ibn Tufayl’s philosophical concepts of self-education, self-knowledge, and self-improvement have migrated from Muslim *Al-Andalus* through the Latinised version of his novel *Philosophus Autodidactus* to the rest of Europe, and eventually re-surfaced as the German *Bildung* philosophy, which Goethe would later introduce in literature as the *Bildungsroman*. Eliot apparently seems to have been the last link in this long chain of transmission. Her lifelong quest for self-improvement, and self-development as an individual, would later merge with her meliorist belief in gradual social progress.

In examining some of the literary affinities Eliot seems to share with the modernists, this thesis tried to point to Eliot’s modernity for the time. She may indeed be considered as a

progressive writer who promoted social progress through her fiction by denouncing gender-based discrimination, conventional social norms and stereotypes. Eliot distanced herself from the Victorian stereotyped notions of the ideal woman and wife, mothering and parenting, happy marriages and conventional endings in her novels, and adopted a rather modern view—if judged from a modernist standpoint—in which marriage does not represent a narrative ending, but rather weaves new threads that invite the reader to get involved in the story and imagine different possible closures. Positioning her work within a modern perspective, Eliot seems to have also anticipated the modernists' interest in human psychic life by exploring her fictional characters' inner conflicts and struggles in an effort to perceive the complexity of the invisible factors at work within the individual self, and better apprehend the reality of human existence. Eliot's affinity with the modernists does not seem to end here, but further extends to the use of myth and allegorical allusions which find their sources in classical mythology and Jewish mysticism. Like modernism, yet unlike romanticism, myth in Eliot's fiction is not at the core of her narratives but rather parallels and interacts with the realist dimension. For both Eliot and the modernists, myth and allegorical allusions are not used for their idealist and purely aesthetic values; they are more interested in the potential richness of the hidden multi-layered meanings they create for the reader to interpret.

Eliot's modernity, as this dissertation attempted to demonstrate, not only shows through her literary affinity with modernist writers but, as aforementioned, it also manifests itself in her meliorist view which encouraged her to expose in her novels strict gender-based social norms that undermined human interpersonal relations within Victorian society. She noticed that gender discrimination was common practice even among the most learned men of England and Europe like Darwin, Strauss and Schopenhauer. Education for Eliot was the solution to this discrimination as she believed it a legitimate right for both sexes. Although Eliot attended Boarding school in her early youth, she was compelled to quit in 1839 after her

mother's death. Even if she had wished to continue her higher education, she would have certainly been faced by the closed doors of the prestigious universities of Oxford and Cambridge as women were not allowed at the time to enrol in these academic institutions. She, therefore, decided to pursue her education through self-learning and self-improvement, two principles to which she committed herself and her writing for the rest of her life, and of which she would make a foundation for her meliorist doctrine. Consistent with her view on equal opportunities of education for both men and women, Eliot equally condemned the use of power by either men or women in any kind of relationship in which one seeks domination over the other. She made her position clear as regards this issue and denounced the confinement of women to intellectual slavery which, in her view, is not only maintained through social teaching and indoctrination, but may also lead to dehumanising male and female relationships. Compared to the progress achieved by other European societies, particularly the French one, Eliot was aware of the flaws of Victorian society, and used her fiction as a pedagogical tool to promote education, emancipation of women, and human tolerance and sympathy. She was much criticised for her lack of involvement in Victorian feminist activism; she preferred to dedicate her thought and writings to a decisive commitment to an evolutionary progress of her society, rather than a radical, revolutionary one. Keeping her distance from romance and idealism, Eliot chose to depict her people in a realistic way that would bring about an effective evolution of mentalities, and eventually lead the Victorians to reach the standards of modern European nations amid the other industrial, scientific, and intellectual changes that were taking place at the time. Viewed from this historical perspective, Eliot appears as a progressive, modern Victorian writer.

In a final attempt to follow through with the exploration of the manifestation of Eliot's modernity, this thesis equally pinpointed her talented intellectual ability to make use of the diversity of her European artistic culture and integrate it in the form of literary techniques in

her novels, which ultimately confirms her modernity as a writer endowed with remarkable versatility. From her frequent travels across Europe and her visits to German, Dutch, French, Italian and Spanish museums and art galleries that were home to a rich variety of sculptures and paintings, Eliot gathered an immense cosmopolitan knowledge about European arts that provided her with the artistic expertise she would subsequently need in an attempt to make of her fiction a sophisticated work of art.

Thus, Eliot's modernity lies in the resourceful use of her intellectual, literary, and artistic aptitudes to exploit this European culture, with all its richness and diversity, to first achieve her own self-improvement and progress both as a person and as a writer, and ultimately those of her own society and the human race. This European cultural heritage, however, is umbilically connected with Islamic culture to which it is much indebted. It is within this historical background that this research has proposed to recontextualise this Victorian writer.

Implications

In a broad sense, this dissertation has built up on the research carried out by modern and contemporary critics in their effort to propose a re-reading of George Eliot's thought and writings, and recontextualise them as regards her European intellectual heritage, her interest in Judaism, her stance on race and colonialism, her role as a social reformer, and her use of the arts in her fiction. Most significantly, however, this thesis is meant as a contribution to Victorian studies in demonstrating that the findings made so far by contemporary critics to link Eliot's thought to a European intellectual heritage have either deliberately or unknowingly chosen to restrict this heritage to its Judaeo-Christian origins. By investigating various sources like Eliot's readings, correspondence, notebooks, book reviews, and fiction this dissertation has hopefully pointed out that this Judaeo-Christian heritage owes much to Islamic culture and civilisation as well. Islamic philosophy and Sufism, through the works of

Al-Ghazali, Ibn Arabi, and Ibn Tufayl, have later re-emerged in the writings of the Jewish Maimonides and Spinoza, the German Kant and Goethe, and the French Comte and Pascal with whom Eliot was most familiar. Even though she never acknowledged this Islamic intellectual legacy, she had nonetheless benefited from its impact on European philosophy to lay the foundations for her meliorist view on both individual and social development and progress, which she promoted in her writings. This thesis has equally shown that while Eliot's enthusiastic interest in Judaic culture has been thoroughly researched, traditionally receiving particular attention from scholars, her attitude towards Islam has been largely understudied. The various materials and sources the dissertation has explored show that Eliot has chosen to keep her distance from the fair, outspoken opinion on Islam expressed by some English and European intellectuals whom she admired; she expressed, instead, rather prejudiced views on the followers of this religion, and Arabs in particular. This thesis has drawn critical attention to Eliot's attitude to the Muslim Arabs of North Africa, and confirmed that she shared views on their ignorance and superstitions that were similar with those of the religious missionaries and the colonial explorers of the time. The dissertation has likewise further investigated Eliot's adoption of political ideas such as the return of the Jews to the Holy Land of Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state there, despite many critics' attempt to demonstrate the contrary. In this respect, this investigation confirms Edward Said's post-colonial thesis about Eliot's absence of thought about the inhabitants of Palestine. Despite both her tardy acknowledgement of the wrongs done to colonised people at the hands of the British Empire and the respect she claimed to have for all oriental races and religions, Eliot's sense of pragmatism ultimately prevailed and kept her investing in and profiting from the riches of these same races and their lands. This dissertation has finally come to the conclusion that Eliot's shallow and contradictory attitude manifest in her belief in participating in an effort of human progress and civilisation, not a colonising project, shows an unthinking acceptance of

colonialism and a prejudiced view of Arabs and Muslims. Compared with her overtly expressed interest in Judaism whose moral universals and political national project she has fully embraced, Eliot clearly reveals a lack of interest in Islam; yet whatever attitude she might have had towards this religion, it may be associated with the prejudiced view she certainly held about its followers.

Benefits of the Research

The main benefit of this research is manifest in the perspicacious approach it proposes to consider Eliot's stance on significant intellectual, political, literary, artistic, and social issues of her time from a perspective that invites a much further exploration and investigation into her various writings than what has been done so far. The findings of this research ultimately call for a recontextualisation of this Victorian writer according to the standards of modern literary criticism. In an attempt to address the research gap stated in the general introduction, this dissertation has hopefully redirected the current general research interest in Eliot's attitude towards colonialism to a much closer examination of her writings in regard to Muslim populations living under colonial rule in the nineteenth century. It has also further examined the extent of Eliot's knowledge of medieval Islamic thought, essentially through Judaic philosophy and mysticism, and of the East-West intellectual exchange she was well aware of at the time but which did not find her support—as it did for her European contemporaries—and which she chose to ignore in her writings. The dissertation subsequently points to Eliot's adherence to the idea of Jewish reconstruction that would ultimately lead her to promoting the possibility of a return to the Holy Land of Palestine and the founding of a national Jewish State in the absence of any concern for the native Palestinian Arabs about whose presence and number she was nonetheless well-informed from her own various reliable reading sources. Moreover, this dissertation builds up on the latest academic research that discusses Eliot's social facets, particularly her idea of social progress and her rejection of

gender-based stereotypes as expressed in her writings. In order to raise the awareness of not only her British fellow citizens, both men and women, but also to achieve, beyond that, universal human sympathy, tolerance, and compassion, Eliot made of her fiction the appropriate setting for a realistic exposure of the social flaws that undermined Victorian society. She ultimately managed to turn her fiction into a progressive artistic tool with which she aimed at promoting the idea of social progress. The dissertation also draws attention to the parallel between the effects created by Eliot's original use of some artistic forms and techniques in her fiction and the ones induced by the manipulation of some modern artistic devices.

In short, the main benefit of this research is the recontextualisation it proposes to make of Eliot's thought and writings in the light of the intellectual, literary, and artistic dimensions of her cosmopolitan background within a twenty-first century perspective.

Future Research Perspectives

Although this dissertation hopes to have extended its area of study regarding Eliot's cosmopolitan intellectual culture to include the contribution of Islamic thought in enriching the European intellectual heritage and, subsequently in shaping some of her progressive ideas about individual self-improvement, a lot more remains unexplored and may lead to objective assessment and identification of ideas which may have also been exploited by Eliot through European intellectual channels in order to frame her own personal thought. These ideas, borrowed mainly from Islamic philosophical writings, may also have found their way into her writings. Future academic research and literary criticism may investigate Eliot's novels in search of these Islamic influences.

In connection with the aforementioned research prospect, further attention may also be paid to Eliot's perception of Islam as a religion and its followers—an area that has received too little attention from Victorian scholars. Owing to its limited access to biographical

sources, this dissertation has shown its research limitations in clearly assessing Eliot's attitude to this religion. Her private biographical data could probably reveal more about her personal views as they did with regards to Christianity and Judaism.

A further research perspective could lead to additional findings about Eliot's modernity, particularly in relation with modern aspects that appear in her fiction, clearly prefiguring modernist literature. This dissertation has discussed some of these aspects and established a parallel with modernist literary techniques and interests in open endings, the psychological complexity of the characters, and the hidden multi-layered meanings suggested by the use of myth and allegorical allusions. Both Eliot and modernist writers consider the reader as an active rather than passive participant in interpreting literary texts. In this respect, K. M. Newton has considered Eliot as a proto-modernist. Further investigation in this direction will certainly help widen the scope for any researcher interested in re-reading Eliot's texts in order to properly define their recontextualisation.

Final Word

In an attempt to delimit the contours of Eliot's intellectual cosmopolitanism, and link it with her sense of progress and modernity, this thesis has invested—to the best of its research ability—all its investigative efforts in recontextualising George Eliot as a cosmopolitan, progressive, and modern Victorian writer. In doing so, it has tentatively worked towards a historical and geographical mapping of Eliot's lifelong intellectual journey in quest of renewed, refreshing knowledge. This journey took her from the confined and too familiar boundaries of Victorian England to the discovery of a more exciting intellectual life on the old European continent. This journey, however, would not stop there as Eliot kept drifting away, mainly through her readings and travels, from her initial European route to harbour in the end at the equally exciting medieval ports of *Al-Andalus*—as she herself preferred to call by its

Arab name this tiny, yet bright and prosperous oasis on the large map of Europe at a time when the latter still lived in the Dark Ages.

Eliot was not only aware of the rich intellectual exchanges that had taken place along this route between Judaeo-Christian Europe and the Islamic world, but she also most benefited from them in shaping her vision of human ideals which she promoted in her fiction. She chose, however, to credit both the Jewish and European elements of this heritage and disregarded—whether deliberately or not—the Arab and Muslim ones. Except for a few sparse allusions, she banned almost all reference to Islam and Islamic civilisation from her writings.

What this dissertation has most importantly attempted to do—besides emphasising Eliot's overtly acknowledged debt to Judaism and to European thought, literature, and arts—is, first to restore credit to the contribution of Islamic thought to Eliot's intellectual self-improving journey, and to show that her perception of both Arabs and Islamic culture is a biased and a prejudiced one. It is striking how Eliot's religious and racial prejudices towards Arabs and Muslims in her Victorian times find an echo in the current state of the world.

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