

Henry James on George
Eliot: The Critical Muddle

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Abstract:

The present study attempts a meta-critical analysis of the major reviews that Henry James produced in response to the works of George Eliot. It also aims to demonstrate that James's critical reception of Eliot's writings was quite equivocal, if not contradictory. In order to account for James's manifest vacillation between positive, constructive valuation, and negative, unenthusiastic appraisal, the analysis explores the grounds of androcentric, androgynous, and gynocentric criticisms. In view of that, this study endeavours to show that, within the critical territory elicited by George Eliot's work, James's hermeneutics precociously engage in a debate with diverse feminist visions over the issue of the writing and reception of women's fiction.

Perhaps nothing illustrates better the ambivalence in James's responses to George Eliot than his strangely inconsistent description of her after they had first met; an opinion that perhaps sums up his revoking consideration of her work. In a letter to his father dated 10 May, 1869, James records his first impression of George Eliot:

She is magnificently ugly—deliciously hideous. She has a low forehead, a dull grey eye, a vast pendulous nose, a huge mouth full of uneven teeth and a chin and jawbone qui n'en finissent pas.... Now in this vast ugliness resides a most powerful beauty which, in a very few minutes, steals forth and charms the mind, so that you end as I ended, in falling in love with her. Yes behold me literally in love with this great horse-faced blue-stockings.... Altogether, she has a larger circumference than any woman I have ever seen (HJL I, 117).

This composite alloy of complimentary and, at the same time, adverse appellations is further hyperbolised by its deliberate oxymoronic make-up. But the most striking constituent of James's remarks is about Eliot having the largest "circumference" he has ever seen. This leads to the question of whether James is thinking in terms of boundaries—perhaps those of the male tradition—and whether he has come to realise that Eliot's is a territory that constitutes, to use Myra Jehlen's words, an "open access to the sea" (Jehlen 582) which thrusts aside the male linear absolutes.

It is commonly agreed that James's works are particularly expressive of feminine sensibility, but does this quality guarantee a gender-neutral criticism of Eliot on his part? In Eliot's days, the "ordinary female novelist" is "so weak and harmless" that she "almost disarms criticism." She also has a "fair right to feel aggrieved if she does not escape with—at the worst—a stray at her English" (Casey 167). Eliot, on her part, has always been entitled to a much superior criticism, and is not to be taken for an ordinary writer.¹ James, amongst a host of other critics, has unfailingly demonstrated her vigorous intellectual abilities, placing her beyond the common prevailing standard of criticism of female writers.

But James's dual function of art critic and of fictional artist has actually given him a double guise. At times he is the critic of Eliot's work, whence he becomes somewhat patronising and firm; and at other times, he is the artist, the creator, and participant, whence he becomes rather contemplative and sympathetic. This dualism, it can be argued, has essentially yielded a gendering of art as feminine, and of criticism as masculine. While art is associated with the leisurely aesthetic, criticism is identified with the professionally interpretive. Therefore, criticism becomes a "masculine genre...authored by men," and the feminine work of art becomes "the passive object" (Fisher 83). The implications of such a gendering are addressed in more detail at a later stage of this paper.

Yet, James, who constantly considered criticism a starting point and an apprentice genre, ceased to pursue the career of professional

critic after 1879. "I am struggling through long delay to get at something better than book reviewing," he wrote his brother in 1873, explaining that the "[m]ind is a slow progression, but a progression" (HJL I, 390-1). Two months earlier, he had also written Grace Norton that "in fact criticism of all kinds seems to me overdone, and I seriously believe that if nothing could be 'reviewed' for fifty years, civilization would take a great stride." He continued to reveal that to "produce some little exemplary work of art is my narrow and lowly dream" (HJL I, 351). Paradoxically, therefore, James who ended up espousing the cause of art, not of criticism, reversed the art and criticism gendering thesis by transcending androcentrism towards androgyny.

It is no coincidence that when James announces his resolution, he did it in response to Eliot's Middlemarch, of which his review was dated March 1873. The same letter reveals to Grace Norton that the "little exemplary" works of art "are to have less 'brain' than Middlemarch; but (I boldly proclaim it) they are to have more form" (HJL I, 351, original emphasis). Given James's declared intention to position himself in comparison with Eliot,² or rather to demarcate his own territory, it would be interesting to weigh up his "impartiality" in his review of Middlemarch.

This review stands as a demonstrative example of paradoxical criticism. The opening sentence already suggests James's vacillation between the promoting and the unconstructive judgment of Eliot's writings: "Middlemarch is at once one of the strongest and one of the weakest of English novels" (MM 424). Interestingly, James sounds hesitant about his own disputation and therefore, anxious to validate his scathing criticism. He soon rationalizes an implicit retraction: "[o]ur objection may seem shallow and pedantic, and may even be represented as a complaint that we have had the less given us rather than the more" (MM 424). Later, in a generously memorable description of Dorothea Brooke, James gives credit to Eliot's "monopoly" of a superior quality of representation in English fiction. He awesomely wonders: "By what unerring mechanism this effect is produced--whether by fine strokes or broad ones, by description or by

narration, we can hardly say; it is certainly the great achievement of the book" (MM 225).

But again, James does not wait to express aesthetic frustration about the decentralized narrative focus from Dorothea's career. He complains that Dorothea is "altogether too superb a heroine to be wasted; yet she plays a narrower part than the imagination of the reader demands. She is of more consequence than the action of which she is the nominal centre" (MM 225). Here he is manifestly weighing Eliot against his own literary standards. James is undeniably renowned for granting his heroines an unmatched centrality. Oscar Cargill praises him for making his heroine "focal rather than contributory, which neither Shakespeare nor George Eliot, however deeply interested in their heroines had done" (Cargill 79). The debate that James rouses over structural centrality of female characters and reception aesthetics is of great import to contemporary feminist theories. Arguably, and by the very act of reviewing Eliot's novels and offering remedial analyses of her female characters, James has actually achieved a breakthrough in today's gynocritics' scheme to recover female voice and experience and to anticipate the reactions of readers.

In the same review, James also draws on Eliot's portrayal of male characters, focussing on what he considers the antipodean rendering of Will Ladislaw and Tertius Lydgate:

Lydgate is a really complete portrait of a *man*, which seems to us high praise. It is striking evidence of the altogether superior quality of George Eliot's imagination that, though elaborately represented, Lydgate should be treated so little from what we may roughly (and we trust without offence) call the sexual point of view (MM 426).

Clearly, James eulogizes Eliot's resourceful imagination which empowers her to draw a complete portrait of a man, in an "impersonal" way, ensuing in the creation of a "vividly consistent, manly figure" which is "powerful, ambitious, sagacious, with the

maximum rather than the minimum of egotism, strenuous, generous, fallible, and altogether human" (MM 426).

James here assumes a different stance from the androcentric one expressed in his review of Felix Holt in 1866 where he was clearly inclined to Charles Reade's "great synthetic guesses" which entitled him to be "the most readable of living English novelists," and evinced him as a "distant kinsman of Shakespeare" (FH 128). Away from his previous detrimental comparison of Eliot with her male counterparts, James seems to amend and rework his earlier tendentious criticism by recognising that Eliot, with her "more philosophic...more broadly intelligent" manner excelled in her discerning and sensitive delineation of the other sex, which "Thackeray, Reade, and Fielding" failed to do. James insists that these three novelists "have won great praise for their figures of women: but they owe it, in reversed conditions, to a meaner sort of art... than George Eliot has used in the case of Lydgate...: to an indefinable appeal to masculine prejudice—to a sort of titillation of the masculine sense of difference" (MM 426). In this most enlightening distinction, James concedes that Eliot paragonizes the foremost English romancers in transcending gender-specificity, owing to her comprehensively human concern.

When in his review of Felix Holt James compares Eliot to Austen and Edgeworth, he makes it clear that, by her abiding by the novel of manners, she pursues her female predecessors' tradition faithfully. In his usual ebb-and-flow manner, James soon adds that she is "stronger in degree than either of these writers." To James Eliot's distinction is ascribed to the fact that she is equipped with a "certain masculine comprehensiveness which they lack," and which does not prevent her from being "eventually a feminine—a delightfully feminine--writer," and from possessing "the unbroken current of feeling and ... of expression, which distinguish the feminine mind" (FH 128). To James, therefore, Eliot's superiority to Austen and Edgeworth and to Thackeray and Reade is easily explained by her androgynous mind and by her possession both of the masculine intellect and of the feminine sensibility. To him, Eliot

is inimitably capable of constructing an isthmus between the personal and the universal.

Perhaps James had this idea still etched on his mind when he reviewed Eliot's poem "The Spanish Gypsy" in 1868. "Never, assuredly, was a somewhat inefficient spirit so richly supplied with the outward organs and faculties of maturity and manhood," he ambivalently comments (SG 283, original emphasis). At worst, by using the word "inefficient," James seems to charge Eliot with incompetence—a prejudicially disgraceful escort of most nineteenth-century women authors. At best, this word may be understood as part of James's habitual disapproval of Eliot's "diffuseness," and a reference to what he customarily sees as her inability to achieve the desired result with a reasonable economy of means. All things considered, this ambivalent description covers up the fact that James, in his carefully calculated posture of male critic, is employing a cross-gendered expression to propose that genius occurs when gender categorisation is transcended, or at least, recognised as optimistically relative.

In stressing Eliot's "difference" as a woman writer, James is precociously concerned with a central issue in today's feminist debates³. In describing her as "delightfully feminine," he seems to suggest that her difference should be understood as distinction. What James sees as the "masculine comprehensiveness" that accompanies the feminine "unbroken current of feeling and ... of expression," implies a manifest cross-gendering which points to the relativity of gender labelling and which, in turn, shows that James's criticism of Eliot is here fundamentally androgynous.

Yet, James detects in the portrayal of the figure of Will Ladislav⁴ a pronounced exception to Eliot's androgynous art. Ladislav "lacks sharpness of outline and depth of color." He is "the one figure which a masculine intellect of the same power as George Eliot's would not have conceived with the same complacency." To James, Ladislav is "a woman's man" (MM 426). Therefore, Eliot's masculine intellect is liable to defect and her feminine sensibility is

likely to betray her. In the case of Ladislaw, she is so individual that her woman's art inflates to deliver a "woman's man."

It is James's belief that "when you re-read coldly and critically a book which in former years you have read warmly and carelessly, you are surprised to see how it changes its proportions"(NGE 485). This can perhaps account for James's dual posture with regard to Eliot's novels. One of the most striking illustrations of this dualism is James's review of Felix Holt as a young debutant critic in contrast to his mature recollection of the effect of the same novel on him as an amateur reader.

Gordon S. Haight qualifies James as the "most exacting critic" of Felix Holt. The review he wrote for the Nation in 1866 illustrates "the confident rigor of an anonymous twenty-three-year-old" reviewer (Haight x). Using the imperial "our," and by a single pull of the oar, James eliminates three of Eliot's novels from the realm of mastership: "In our opinion..., neither 'Felix Holt', nor 'Adam Bede', nor 'Romola' is a master-piece" (FL 128). James, incarnating editorial authority, eschews the winnings begotten from his literary mother: "That she should be offered a higher place than she has earned, is easily explained by the charm which such gifts as hers in such abundance are sure to exercise" (FL 128, emphasis added). In an obvious screening of his own feeling of discomfiture at the potentialities of this charm, which remained engraved on his mind both as reader and critic, James avoids speaking out his gratitude.

In a different frame of mind, James recalls with nostalgia how he had received the novel of which he was preparing a review for the Nation in "ever so thrilled a state." He reminisces that "to read over the opening pages of Felix Holt makes even now the whole time softly and shyly live again"(Notebooks, 320). Similarly, in his autobiography, The Middle Years (1893), he recollects his first contact with Eliot's Felix Holt, explaining how he relished the reading of the novel when he was assigned to bed in sickness:

I had rejoiced without reserve in Felix Holt—the illusion of reading which, outstretched on my then too frequently inevitable bed at Swampscott during a couple of very hot days of the summer of 1866, comes back to me, followed by that in soothe of sitting up again, at no great ease, to indite with all promptness a review of the delightful thing, the place of appearance of which nothing could now induce me to name, shameless about the general fact as I may have been at the hour itself: over such a feast of fine rich natural tone did I feel myself earnestly bend....The book was not, if I rightly remember, altogether genially greeted, but I was to hold fast to the charm I had thankfully suffered it, I had been conscious of absolutely needing it, to work (MY 62-63).

James's voice is here clearly that of the fully grown novelist, recalling his former attachment to the novel, recognising that he has "shaken off the anxieties of circumspection and comparison," and considering that now his memory of Eliot is "an attachment pure and simple" (MY 61). Oblivious of the professional critic he had once been, he recaptures his experience as the avid reader who looks back on his reading of Eliot's novel with a sense of fulfilment after being treated to a "feast of fine rich natural tone" (MY 62). He readily acknowledges his indebtedness to the wealth it has provided, even to the point of revealing his appropriation of her ever-swelling legacy:

I find it idle even to wonder what 'place' the author of Silas Marner and Middlemarch may be conceived to have in the pride of our literature.... We simply sit with our enjoyed gain, our residual rounded possession in our lap; a safe old treasure, which has ceased to shrink, if indeed also perhaps greatly to swell...(MY 60-1).

In retrospect, James bluntly recognises his seizure of the "treasure," a fact that F.R. Leavis confirms when he declares that James "wouldn't have written The Portrait of a Lady if he hadn't read Gwendolen Harleth" (Leavis 85).⁵

Ambivalence in James's criticism of Eliot is not only due to his double persona as critic and reader; it is arguably also due to what Leon Edel calls "double vision." James has not only read Eliot's

works, but has also “seen [her] in the flesh” (Edel vi). This leads to the question of whether Eliot’s texts in any way effected a “controlling” power on James who had the (dis)advantage of knowing Eliot personally; and whether this power led him to self-regulation in his criticism, or to the practice of a kind of tokenism, or to the ingestion of a grudging acceptance of her works.⁶

In all his reviews of Eliot’s novels, James effortlessly evokes her figure and its imposing character by attempting to reach her mind through her familiar writings. To understand the importance of this dialogism in shaping his reviews, it may be useful to juxtapose James’s tangible advantage of accessibility with the wishful dialogic ideal that Adrienne Rich constructs on her way to Emily Dickinson’s mind. Motivated by the need to “connect” with her literary foremother, Rich struggles to attain Dickinson’s mind through asynchronous, phantasmagorical day-dreaming to grasp “the figure of powerful will” that was Dickinson. While a female reader’s major ambition is to “connect,” to “recuperate,” or to “formulate” (Schweickart 436), James’s scheme is different as he incessantly seeks to distinguish his own terrain from that of Eliot. In his review of Felix Holt, for example, he expresses tediousness because of Eliot’s “langueures of exposition”(FH 127) and resolves that his own novels will attain more “compactness and rapidity”(FH 128). Likewise, and through his “treasure” metaphor and his “more form”/ “less brain” resolution, James’s motivation is appropriation and rupture. Unlike Rich, his goal is not to draw the connections, but rather to outline the differences. In this, James conforms to “control and partition” (Schweickart 441) as opposed to Rich’s connection and recuperation. This classifies James in the category of male writers who “forget or mute half of their parentage” and who “resist[] the acknowledgment of female precursors” (Showalter 326).

Another form of appropriation can be detected in James’s forthright expression of exultation in what he considers as the instructive “spectacle” offered him by the union between Eliot and George Henry Lewes: “if the connection had not taken place we should have lost the spectacle and influence of one of the most

successful partnerships presented to us in the history of human affection" (LGE 47). Herein resides an additional venue of gendered partition. James is the observer, the possessor of the "gaze," and Eliot is the observed, the offeror of the spectacle.

James continuously identifies moral qualities with the feminine mind. He observes that the moral and intellectual world take the first position in Eliot's art which largely compromises the "personal spectacle" (LGE 51). Extending this argument, it is possible to argue that moral/aesthetic poles are determinant aspects of James's construction of gender. As an art critic, James usually uses the word "moral" with respect to the utility of art, as opposed to the aesthetics of enjoyment, or—in his own words—to the "pretty trivialities of art" ("The Madonna of the Future"18). Interestingly enough, this issue leads us again to the debatably gendered nature of art and criticism: criticism being masculine, hence, domineering; and art being feminine, hence, subordinated. The dialogic ideal is apt to reverse this subordination in favour of Eliot: James the male critic, who happens to be an art creator, approaches Eliot's texts with apprehension as to the controlling power that their reading effects; hence, it is his criticism that falls short of exercising dominance, and therefore, becomes dependent on her genius.

James's dialogism, notably in his "The Life of George Eliot" (1885), springs from immediate knowledge of the circumstances in which Eliot lived and worked. Still self-conscious of his anxieties of "circumspection" and "comparison," he quite tokenistically insists on reminding himself and her readers that she ought to be understood in the light of her own premises and with the consideration that her literary options are limited by her own environment.

As a result, James's willingness to display open-handed sympathy towards Eliot has mostly involved tacit criticism. James attributes to Eliot qualifiers which suggest limitation and parochialism, such as "invalidical" and "provincial." Keeping in view the established quality of internationalism and cosmopolitanism of James's writings, this ascription stands as highly implicational. In his

insistence on defining her sources of knowledge as being deskbound, in his qualification of *Romola* as carrying “to a maximum the in-door quality” (GEL 56), in his remark that her imagination enabled her “to sit at home with book and pen, and yet enter into the life of other generations”(GEL 57-58), and in his description of her as the “home-keeping Mrs. Lewes”(GEL 39), James seems to imply a covert self-comparison with Eliot. Added to this is his clear-cut judgement that her letters, which he considers as his “first glimpses of her mind,” have a “provincial strain” as they “reflect a meagreness and grayness of outward circumstance” (GEL 42). In the exit to the record of her life, he again—quite ambivalently—stresses the idea of her confinement and restriction by describing her as the “sedentary, serious, invalidical English lady...without adventures or sensations” (GEL 62).

This is perhaps why James consciously exonerates himself from Eliot's influence. He is even resolute in reminding that:

To her own sex her memory, her example, will remain of the highest value; those of them for whom the “development” of woman is the hope of the future ought to erect a monument to George Eliot. She helped on the cause more than any one, in proving how few limitations are of necessity implied in the feminine organism. She went so far that such a distance seems enough, and in her effort she sacrificed no tenderness, no grace. There is much talk to-day about things being “open to women;” but George Eliot showed that there is nothing that is closed. If we criticize her novels we must remember that her nature came first and her work afterwards, and that it is not remarkable they should not resemble the productions, say, of Alexandre Dumas (GEL 62, emphasis added).

Recognizing the gendered perspectives in the reading of Eliot, James insists that she can be a model to other women, but not to himself. In some ways, James may sound as intrinsically condescending when consigning her to a partial female audience. But regardless of his overtly disavowed literary indebtedness to her, he effectively resonates a visionary insight into contemporary feminist

concerns by evoking the praxis of her writing. In fact, James calls to mind the trendiest sequence in gynocritical reading where “author, character, and reader can unite in an exploration of what it means to be female,” where “they can even assert a collective identity as ‘we women,’” and where “the reader is gratified by having her anger, experience, or hopes confirmed by the author and narrative” (Eagleton 9). To James, Eliot has successfully furnished the female tradition with a “positive source of strength and solidarity” rather than a “negative source of powerlessness” (Showalter 326).

Finally, in his reminder that her “nature came first and her work afterwards,” and in his enlightening evocation of Dumas, James warns against a “patriarchal” misreading which risks to trivialize her work and implies a precocious distrust of the androcentricity of the literary canon. He in fact considers that, by commanding the art of addressing her own gender, Eliot has contributed to the establishing of a female tradition which can—in Showalter’s terms—“generate its own symbols which are not simply the obverse of the male tradition” (Showalter 326). Therefore, James underscores Eliot’s literary emblems which surpass the reductive determinant of being not more than reactionary to the monism of the canonised male tradition.

Endnotes

¹The Athenaeum reviewed Eliot’s Novels and called her a “great master” in 1871, ranked her among “the highest” in 1880 with Dickens and Thackeray, and called her and Charlotte Bronte “literary queens” in 1892 (Casey, 162).

²Gordon S. Haight asserts that James “was inclined in his reviews to rewrite every one of George Eliot’s works to secure the single unified theme that was to distinguish his own” (Haight, x)

³ Elaine Showalter points out that the primary goal of feminist criticism is “no longer the ideological dilemma of reconciling revisionary pluralisms but the essential question of difference.” She asks the imperative question: “how can we constitute women as a distinct literary group? What is the difference

of women's writing?" ("Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" in Modern Criticism and Theory, 312)

⁴ James thinks that Eliot is "evidently very fond of him" (MM 426).

⁵ Gwendolen Harleth is the heroine of Eliot's Daniel Deronda. Leavis uses the heroine's name as a label to what he considers the best part of the novel.

⁶ For more information on the issue of "control" see Jonathan D. Culler, On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

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