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George Eliot, the proto-Poststructuralist: The Essential Duplicity of Realism

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In this article I argue that there is an essential, but contradictory, duplicity in George Eliot's realism. Her work is suffused with; on the one hand, the need to represent life as it really is in order to cultivate morality and sympathy in her readership, and, on the other, the impossibility of ever representing reality with language. I explain how George Eliot uses her position at the extremes of this duplicity – between realistic necessity and realistic impossibility – and how she puts it to good use, to such an extent that it informs the narratives and determine the questions they seeks to explore. Basing my argument on, arguably, her three greatest works, I show that the duplicity is only embryonic in *Adam Bede* (1859), adolescent in *Felix Holt* (1866) and reaches maturity in *Middlemarch* (1871-72).

In her vital contribution to the realist theoretical canon, *Realism*, Pam Morris lucidly explains the epistemological problems that realist fiction encounters:

> During the second half of the twentieth century a new theoretical understanding of what constitutes reality developed … The new paradigm wholly rejects the human capacity for knowledge creation, recognising instead the constituting force of an impersonal system of language to construct the only sense of reality we can ever achieve.[1]

Realism's claim to have any access to reality, to supply a secure link between

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[1] Pam Morris, *Realism* (London, 2003), 27

signifier and signified, is challenged by this 'new theoretical understanding.' Derrida blamed the view that one can have access to reality through language on Western logocentrism[2]; the idea that the meaning of a word is centred in the external essence of the thing described, that the word has some definite relation to an entity in the actual world and that it is irreducible to anything else; whereas, '… language does not serve as a neutral or translucent means of communication. [We] can only ever 'know' reality by means of the conceptual categories [that a] language system allows [us].'[3] Reality, then, cannot be got at using language; however, many novelists begin writing on the supposition that it can. The mistake is an easy one to make, as Morris continues, '… our intuitive, commonsensical view of language is that words refer to a pre-existing reality beyond linguistics.'[4] She then attaches George Eliot to this collective of writers with the 'commonsensical' view; '… clearly this is the view of language informing the narrative of *Daniel Deronda*'[5]. What Morris has missed, however, is that the questions that plagued theorists during the second half of the twentieth century are the same questions that George Eliot begins to ask as early as *Felix Holt*, *The Radical* (1866).

In mapping out George Eliot's career it is possible to see an evolution in literary ideology that traverses from the 'commonsensical' view of language and reality, expressed in her pre-fictional career and *Adam Bede* (1859), to her later work, in which this very duplicitous or non-commonsensical view of language and reality inform the narratives and determine the questions they seeks to explore. A close look at George Eliot's career will show that she *was* aware of the contradictions of representing reality with language. As the dissenting preacher-come-thinker, Mr Lyons, put it in a discussion with Felix:

> I am an eager seeker for precision, and would fain find language subtle

[2] This, now axiomatic, term is succinctly developed in Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" (London, 1978)
[3] Morris, *Realism* , 27
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] *Ibid.*, 24

> enough to follow the utmost intricacies of the soul's pathways, but I see not why a round word that means some object, made and blessed by thy Creator, should be branded and banished as a malefactor.[6]

'Thy Creator', to Mr Lyons, is obviously God, but to the reader it is also the narrator, who is the *creator* of the characters. This passage, then, achieves its goal by complicating the relations between character and word, and between the narrator and the narrated; a complication that is at the heart of the theorists' debate, and one that creates a necessary duplicity in mimetic representation. This complication, when studied for long enough, starts to insist upon a radicalization that can stretch its consequences over the entire arena of social human discourse; the essence of this duplicity gestures towards the extremities of language use and can mystify the connection between a word and its meaning to render even the most simple written sentence undecidable or openended. Mr Lyons feels aggrieved that, even with his conception of God as 'Creator' and centre, the meaning of a word still has the potential to "play" or slip and can be 'branded and banished' as malefactors, because the meaning intended gives no guarantee of transference. He feels the tension of the ruptured link between signifier and signified; language is not subtle enough to follow the intricacies of the soul's pathways, because a signifier only ever points to another signifier in a "malevolent" deferral of meaning. George Eliot followed a path to the extremities of linguistics, in that she recognised that we can only deconstruct a discourse like realism from the inside, using the very same tools used in its construction.

The duality that George Eliot began to recognise is thus: on the one hand, her moral, realist literary ideology held sway over her style and mode of writing; she saw realism as socially necessary and was rather forceful about the moral responsibilities that powered it; writers, to George Eliot, had an undeniable duty to edify their readers by representing events that mirrored, in some way, real-life social and personal injustices; on the other hand, though, as her career

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[6] George Eliot, *Felix Holt* (London, 1931), 63

progressed, she became aware of the contradictions that this threw up. How can someone writing from their imagination claim any level of reality? And how can an artist expressing themselves with language rely on those words 'branded and banished as a malefactor' to accommodate an ideological thrust? This duality is at the heart of her career, yet it takes a while to develop. Her pre-fictional writings seem only preoccupied with the edifying element of literature. The essential duplicity, as I will show, is only embryonic in *Adam Bede*, adolescent in *Felix Holt* and reaches maturity in *Middlemarch* (and, perhaps, superannuation in *Daniel Deronda*).

In "The Natural History of German Life", George Eliot sets out a manifesto that encourages writers to 'represent people as they are'[7]. The same sentiment is behind her much-talked-about intermission in Chapter XVII of *Adam Bede*. The story pauses for a while and we hear a reader chastise the novelist's characterisation. This, now seminal, display of rhetoric is the ultimate example of her early, almost militant, crusade of realistic literary ideology. A reader complains, 'You might have put into his mouth the most beautiful things', to which the narrator replies 'Certainly I could, if I held it the highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be'[8]. The suggestion is, then, that a novelist's 'highest vocation' is to represent things as they *have* been, or *might* be. 'I might refashion life and character', she continues, 'entirely after my own liking'[9]. The rhetoric is palpable. Of course, she is not suggesting that she is writing entirely after her own *un*liking or somehow against her will. What she *is* saying is that there are certain moral principles that guide her writing; that the novel rests on a particular moral fulcrum which compels or obliges the story in some way. For the novel to achieve its moral end there needs to be some way of connecting the relations between language and life, or between art and life. She plays with the idea that this connection needs to be qualified, '… to give a faithful account of men and

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[7] George Eliot, *The Natural History of German Life* (*WR*, July 1856), 62
[8] George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Edinburgh, 1901), 265
[9] *Ibid.*

things *as they have mirrored themselves in my mind*'[10]. However, George Eliot is aware that the qualification may render the connection impossible, when she admits '… the mirror is doubtless defective'[11].

The mirror is George Eliot's mind, but there is another distorted mirror in the process of reflection: language. George Henry Lewes made the same qualification in an article in the *Westminster Review*. Sounding like a magistrate, he prefigured George Eliot's idea of a narrator narrating her story under oath, in his averment that 'Art aims at the representation of Reality i.e. Truth … [and] no departure from Truth is permissible, *except* such as inevitably lies in the nature of the medium itself'[12]. This get-out clause shows the crux of the duplicity; we know that language struggles to get anywhere near the real, but, to Lewes, an artist is by no means allowed to depart from "truth", even if he is using a medium which can only ever achieve "falsehood". Eight years after this firm announcement of literary prescriptivism, George Eliot seems aware of its over-cooked intensity when she has Mrs Transome say to her son, Harold, '… it seems easy to deal with farmers and their affairs when you only see them in print'[13]. On the level of plot, Mrs Transome is referring to the mismanagement of Transome Court, the country estate she had been left to deal with while her son was abroad in the colonies. On a level above this, it is passing judgement on the plutocratic government trying to legislate on matters of which they have no experience. But, also hovering behind this statement is a sense that George Eliot is passing judgement on her former narratorial stance. If we take 'print' to mean language, we can see that she is half-conceding that the printed word cannot take the reader any further into reality, because its mode of conveyance is language. It is easy to remain at the level of word, but difficult, as in impossible, to go in any way beyond it. George Levine was on the same

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[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] George Henry Lewes, "Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction" (*WR,* October 1858), 493

[13] George Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 99

track when he remarked that '… whatever else it [realism] means, it always implies an attempt to use language to go beyond language'[14].

Duplicity is, again, tangible as the narrator describes a meeting between Esther and Felix. The two are caught musing on the possibility of being lovers, when we hear that '… he [Felix] was accustomed to observe himself. But very close and diligent looking at living creatures, even through the best microscopes, will leave room for new and contradictory discoveries'[15]. Of course, the microscope George Eliot uses is language and hers is one of the very best; but still, the contradiction arises. Mimetic representation, typically in George Eliot, is given a scientific counterpart. She peers through her lingua-scope, as it were, and is aware of the contradictions it brings to life. Perhaps most remarkable, however, is that we are referred to the duplicitous contradictions that realism encounters while being given a structurally measured realistic illusion. The suggestion is that readers should observe Felix in the same way he observes himself – closely and diligently – but with some contradictions in mind. This dynamic sets up an illusory realistic space that we have to peer into, like a scientist looking into a microscope, to see Felix observing himself. This element, therefore, is vital to understanding the essential duplicity of George Eliot's realism; she questions the assumption of realism within a carefully constructed, *illusory* realistic space.

An example of the careful construction is when Felix fixes Esther's watch as it has been '… losing a long while …'[16] and so an illusion of realistic time is created in the novel. The narrator draws attention to this by suggesting that Esther somehow sits outside of it: her watch is slow, so her life within the realistic space is slow; Felix fixes her watch and drags her back to the same level of illusory time that the other characters reside in. It is this that prompts her

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[14] George Levine, "The Realist Imagination" from *The Realist Novel*, (ed.) Dennis Walder (Oxford, 2006), 240
[15] George Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 213
[16] *Ibid.*, 208

inheritance of the Transome Estate to come to fruition, as she is nudged into par with the novel's chronotopic settings. Realistic allusion by realistic illusion remains a dominant feature of George Eliot's aesthetic, at the same time as she becomes aware of the inherent and self-effacing cognitive weaknesses of realism. There is a sense that she is trying to lift herself up by her bootlaces.

This is an extreme position to assume, not because of the subtlety of her perception of language but because of what the consequences of her perception of language entail; the extent to which she uses realism to step "outside" of realism, and uses language to step "outside" of language, and so uses discourse to show the extreme limitations of discourse in general. If language and discourse cannot access the real then what does this mean for theology, for philosophy, for epistemology, for history, and, most importantly, for the impetus that ignited her literary endeavour in the first place, for ethics? What this double-binded observation of language means for all of these interrelated disciplines is that the medium they use for precision and literalism can only ever achieve inaccuracy and metaphor; the best we can hope for, as Hamlet knew, is direction through indirection. There is, however, certainly a sense that George Eliot hopes this indirection will not attenuate her moral agenda. The ethical gesture of her texts may even help bring into focus the observations of language that she subtly proposes; the extreme contradiction that the duplicity contains – that ethical realism is a paradox – tells us that all language is persuasive and, in this instance, ethical rhetoric through metaphor, direction through indirection.

Middlemarch is given similar duplicitous treatment in its *reductive* realism. Dorothea is beginning to find out that her idealized view of marriage is a false one. She envisioned marrying a John Milton that it would be '… glorious piety to endure'[17]. She does not, however, get her John Milton; instead, she gets Edward Casuabon, the dusty, old, misguided scholar-clergyman. The point George Eliot is labouring to make is that nobody can aim for an idol that does not exist. A key technique of her realist enterprise is this Hegelian, or, perhaps

[17] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Oxford, 1998), 56

more directly to her, Feuerbachian method of reduction or reverse-deification. She ruralizes her characters, which is a strand that perpetuates from the-artist-as-moral-guide idea, possibly inherited from Wordsworth and the Romantics. Nowhere more forcefully advertises this idea than in Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. This artistic manifesto argues that to represent men, as they really are, is the only true 'worthy purpose' of the poet; the poet has to see man as Man,[18] not as a lionized demi-deity, bearing little reflection to the life that surrounds us. The narrator of *Felix Holt* describes Esther as being a type '… verging neither towards the angel or the saint …'[19], and this can be said of all George Eliot's characters. Marxist literary critic and contributor to the arena of theoretical realism, Gyorg Lukács, placed the same moral weight as George Eliot on this reductive realist method. In doing so, he elevated realism to a position of vital cultural importance. To Lukács, the body of realist fiction provides, among other things, valuable socio-cultural records that allow us to learn from the mistakes societies make. This reduction is as much a moral technique as a stylistic one. Edward Casaubon suffers a similar reductive realisation. The failing classicist has a *Madame Bovary* moment, when he wonders why he had won Dorothea but had '… not won delight …'[20], despite the tales he has read in the classics inciting a belief that he would. In other words, the 'reality' within the novel is not what the heroic stories in the classics have prepared us for. The lesson here is to shift the boundaries of your expectations from the extremes of romantic and idealized iconolatry to recognise life in its locality; but, typical to the duplicity, George Eliot recommends a reduction of the boundaries *ethically* at the same time as she effaces them *linguistically.*

Again, this reductionism relies, fundamentally, on the faulty concept of logocentrism; a concept that George Eliot both uses and critiques in the same

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[18] William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)" from *William Wordsworth, The Oxford Authors* (Oxford, 1990), 608

[19] George Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 397

[20] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 79

action and with the same instrument. Moreover, this reductionism is forced upon the characters in the same way it is forced upon the readers. It is used by George Eliot to provoke revelations about the ultimate expression*less* capabilities of language, and the extreme undecidability that meaning has the potential to procure; they are similar revelations that emerge from the poststructuralist and deconstructionist discussion of the late twentieth century. To this end, Dorothea finds herself weeping over her failed marital and educational ambitions. Couched in this section of the novel is the feeling that we all, no matter how hard we try, fail to escape from the prison that language keeps us locked away in, with access neither to reality nor originality:

> *If* we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrels heart beat, and we should die of that roar that lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.[21]

Stress on 'if' in this passage is crucial. The barrier that language builds between the realist writer and access to the 'real' is one that the narrator of *Middlemarch* recognised. It is the same barrier that theorists in the latter half of the twentieth century began to see clearly; it is the same 'if' that confirmed '… the aesthetic and cognitive bankruptcy [of realism] …'[22]. It is also the same 'if' that releases George Eliot from the '… accusation of linguistic and cognitive complacency by demonstrating that [her] writing is covertly proto-poststructuralist, experimental, sceptical and self-reflexive'[23]. *Middlemarch* harbours a large amount of tension in its duplicity because, despite this 'proto-poststructuralist' awareness, it still feels compelled to reach its moral end. Philip Davis discerned the same tension when he argued that 'George Eliot's own books would offer realism, and would struggle inside themselves for a true

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[21] *Ibid.*, 182
[22] Pam Morris, *Realism*, 37
[23] *Ibid.*, 37

relation to the world outside'[24]. *Middlemarch* is the pinnacle of this tension as the dual extremes of literature's moral needs on the one hand, and the *aporia* of meaning on the other, both fold themselves into the structure of the narrative.

George Eliot fictionalised this duplicity she feels as a realist writer. The manuscript suggests that it was originally written as two separate novels that were fused together or written into one another. Presumably, the protagonist of one of the novels was Dorothea Brooke and the other Tertius Lydgate, and, perhaps, a reason for the fusion was that George Eliot saw a coextensive hallmark in the two characters and, thereby, decided to combine them to make *Middlemarch*. Dorothea and Lydgate are similar because they both *perform* like their narrator; they dramatize the tension that their creator felt when creating them. The narrator is reforming fiction in her insistence on representing everyday life that has not had the attention in world literature that it deserves. Society, according to George Eliot, needs the '… unhistoric acts …'[25] of a '… home epic …'[26]. Lydgate sets out grand ambitions to reform the healthcare of the town by rooting out poor practitioners who are paid for negligent drug dispensing, just like the narrator embarks on a grand ambition to alter the anodyne quality of literature. The extremity of Lydgate's goal is to completely revolutionise the medical profession. Similarly, George Eliot wants to redraw the boundaries of literary language and realism as a mode, at the same time as questioning its operational legitimacy. The negligent practitioners that Lydgate sets out to radicalize and deracinate are too firmly rooted in the past, like those writers who slightly modify pre-existing idealised character types; those that were denounced by George Eliot in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (1856). Just as the duplicity of realism renders its original ambition, realistically speaking, a non-starter, Lydgate's ambitions suffer a shortfall because of his aesthetic and classed-based choices.

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[24] Philip Davis, "High Realism" from *The Victorians: Vol. 8 1830-1880* (Oxford, 2004), 385

[25] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 785

[26] *Ibid.*, 779

Dorothea, similarly, behaves like her narrator. Her eager philanthropic push for new cottages for the tenants of Tipton Grange is a fictional dramatization of the narrator's provincial and moral motivation. Dorothea wants to house society in a better way, like George Eliot's narrator wants to house fictional characters in better, less idealised, novels; both to a moral end. We are told just after Dorothea and Casaubon's honeymoon argument, as her mind drifts back to her meeting with Ladislaw, that '… she was alive to anything that gave her an opportunity for *sympathy*'[27]. George Eliot's narrator frequently interjects with her own sympathetic reactions to her character's affairs: when we hear the very personal details of Casaubon's intellectual anxieties, about how his masterpiece in the making, *The Key to All Mythologies*, may be, after all, a pointless pursuit; about how he suspects that none of his contemporaries have even read his one published pamphlet. He is stuck in the hatch he was born in, says the narrator, '… thinking of his wings but never flying'. Importantly, the narrator then adds, '… for my own part I am very sorry for him …'[28]. This interjection of sympathy is a trope used in her other novels and stems from the motivation of her realist enterprise: to kindle sympathy in her readers. This device is folded into the narrative through Dorothea's affections; she is, like the narrator, 'ardently' sympathetic[29], and Dorothea recognises the main aim of the work is to incite an awareness of the '… equivalent centre of self …'[30] in others.

Dorothea, then, expresses an artistic ideology coterminous to the novel she appears in; she criticises Ladislaw's sketch in the garden at Lowick because she fails to see any connection between it and the natural subject it is meant to represent. This is the same relation the novel has to the novel's world. Lydgate and Dorothea go wrong by not seeing the world of the novel as it is, their connection with it fails, like that of the link between the narrator and the

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[27] *Ibid.* etc., 191
[28] *Ibid.* etc., 263
[29] *Ibid.*, 26
[30] *Ibid.*, 198

narrated world. The performance of the ruptured relation is the same. Dorothea's anxiety and sense of isolation, when she is walking around the oppressively pictorial Roman streets and galleries, coheres with the narrator's mythic disenchantment or ideal reductionism. Moreover, George Eliot's narrator behaves like Lydgate, as he too is an inspector of the human body. Lydgate, like the narrator, is trying to find '… hidden facts of structure …'[31] in the field he excels in. We are told of Lydgate, but suspect of the narrator as well, that he tries to offer '… the most direct alliance between intellectual conquest and the social good …'[32], but all he manages to achieve before his premature death is a treatise on Gout; the bathos is palpable. Both characters' attempts are frustrated by the cultural and personal milieu that surrounds them, as the narrator's realist exertions are strained by the medium through which the exertions are executed. In Dorothea and Lydgate, George Eliot saw two characters that best represented her realist ploy. Davis argued along the same lines when he remarked that 'George Eliot builds … self-checking thoughts into her work, always ready as realism is to turn round upon itself and examine its own real status'[33].

It is clear that a close look at George Eliot's career will show that she had an acute awareness of the draw backs and troubling nuances provided by the medium she used to paint 'thinking pictures'. In fact, she manages to take this apparent weakness and turn it to good use by stretching the extremities between ethical realism and realistic impossibility; which amounts to a radicalization of not just literary language but language and discourse in general. If realism is impossible because it uses language, is history impossible for the same reasons? Is our conception of history no more than a montage of fictive narratives that fail with the failure of logocentrism? It is also clear that her realist endeavour abated in heat from her early days as a writer, but this enhanced the complexity and richness of her later work. The duplicity becomes

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[31] *Ibid.*, 135
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] Davis, "High Realism", 391

essential in *Middlemarch*, as it surfaces within the text itself and, regardless of this duplicity, her moral and sympathetic tone still stands firm. The proto-poststructuralist George Eliot reconciled herself with the duplicitous nature of her endeavour by recognising that realism assumed an odd position in the literary world; a position that a writer cannot avoid, yet, cannot attain.

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